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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, April 19, 2021

Day 99

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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New Democrat: 24

Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, April 19, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 52 Recall Act

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

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to speak to second reading of Bill 52, the Recall Act. Albertans put a lot of faith in their elected leaders, and elected representatives have a great responsibility to the very Albertans who elected them. This is why it is incredibly important that anyone elected to office is held accountable if they fail to live up to their duties between elections. Bill 52 would help strengthen democracy by providing a tool to hold elected officials accountable throughout their term and not just at election time. Our government campaigned on delivering voter recall for Albertans, and this is yet another promise made, another promise kept.

In the fall of 2020 the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee held public meetings and accepted written submissions about this legislation. This all-party committee found that Albertans from all backgrounds were very supportive of government pursuing recall legislation. The Recall Act would allow Albertans to start a reasonable process that could lead to removing and replacing elected officials at all levels of government before the end of their term. This includes MLAs, mayors, other elected municipal officials, and school trustees.

Any time between 18 months after an election to six months before an election an Albertan could begin the process to have an MLA recalled. If an Albertan feels that the MLA in their constituency is not upholding their responsibilities, they can apply to the Chief Electoral Officer for a petition to recall them. There will be a fee, but it has not been set yet and will appear in the regulations. The Albertan would then have 60 days to gather signatures from 40 per cent of eligible voters in that constituency. They would then submit the petition to the Chief Electoral Officer, who would ensure that the signatures are valid and the petition reached the 40 per cent threshold required. If the recall petition is successful, a recall vote would then be held in that constituency to determine if the elected official should be recalled. If the recall vote is successful, the elected official would be removed and a by-election would be held to fill the vacant MLA seat.

The process is slightly different to recall municipal officials and school board trustees. To recall an elected official in their municipality, an Albertan would pay a \$500 fee to initiate that petition through their municipality's chief administrative officer. They would then have 60 days to gather signatures from eligible voters that represent 40 per cent of the population of the municipality or ward. The Albertan would then submit the signatures to the chief administrative officer in their municipality, who would ensure that signatures are valid and that the petition reached the 40 per cent threshold. If the recall petition is successful, the chief administrative officer would then make a declaration at the next council meeting, at which time the official would be removed.

If an Albertan feels that an elected official in their school division is not upholding their responsibilities, they can apply to the secretary of the school board for a recall application and pay a \$500 fee. The petitioner would then have 120 days to gather signatures from eligible voters that represent 40 per cent of eligible voters in that school district. If the recall petition is successful, the official is removed and the board would then decide if a by-election is necessary.

Now, keep in mind that there needs to be some stringency and rigour around recall legislation to prevent abuse while ensuring that elected officials remain accountable. This is why we are proposing a two-step process for recalling MLAs, a recall petition and then a recall vote. As I noted earlier, this is to make sure that 40 per cent of voters in an entire constituency agree that there should be a recall vote, an important question worthy of petition. In fact, in B.C., the only Canadian province that has recall legislation, Elections BC recommended the same process as the one we are proposing.

Mr. Speaker, our government was elected on a promise to deliver Albertans a greater say in the democratic system and to be able to hold elected officials accountable between elections. As I have said, this legislation would allow them to do this throughout that official's term. Albertans are now in the driver's seat of their democracy. As elected officials we serve at the pleasure of voters. We cannot forget this. Recall increases the power that voters have over their representatives. This legislation is part of a larger democratic reform package that will provide Alberta's citizens with a greater say in their democratic process. This is another promise made and another promise kept.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to support this important legislation, and I move second reading of Bill 52.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone wishing to speak to the debate this evening? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the Member for Sherwood Park.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and to speak to Bill 52. As a member of the panel that was part of the discussion with the government and the opposition I am very familiar with the process that happened around the creation of this piece of legislation and many of the conversations and dialogues that happened in regard to some of the comments that the minister has made this evening. I think one thing that needs to be very clearly put on the record is that although the government will say that this Recall Act is a promise made, a promise kept, in fact, it is a piece of legislation that is based on a promise that is actually broken. The reason that I say that is that this piece of legislation will never actually be functionally be able to be used. The way that it is currently written, the way that it is to be put into practice creates such a high threshold for citizens of this province to have to rationalize why a recall should occur, and then the process of which they have to go through makes it literally impossible to happen.

For example, I think that one of the pieces that was discussed for an extended period of time was the 40 per cent threshold. It's been already, by some of the stakeholders that attended the Democratic Accountability Committee, experts in this area who have looked at democratic renewal, said explicitly that the 40 per cent threshold was too high. In fact, because of a 40 per cent threshold the likelihood is that a piece of legislation like this would never be used. Yet what we see coming out of that committee is that we ignored the experts or the government ignored the experts, and the very threshold that was said to be too high to be able to make this piece of legislation functional and to actually work was exactly the percentage and the threshold that this government chose to put into a piece of legislation.

Already what we see is that this piece of legislation was designed to fail. It was designed to appear to the citizens of Alberta that they have an opportunity to recall an elected official, but, in fact, it has been created in such a way that it will never be successful. I heard the minister speaking about B.C. Well, what we know for a fact is that B.C.'s legislation in itself has never been successful either. They've never successfully recalled an elected MLA. They've come close. The MLA made the right choice at the time and decided to withdraw their name and resign from their position without going to an actual recall election. Every other initiative that has been taken under the recall legislation in B.C. was unsuccessful. The threshold was never met. To mirror that and to say we're doing this based on what B.C. has done, well, we already know that that wasn't successful. Why would the government propose a piece of legislation in such a way that it could never be used?

7:40

Let's look at some of the facts. Recall legislation was introduced March 15, 2021. Everything is in regulation. We actually don't even know when this piece of legislation would come into force, whether this piece of legislation would come into force prior to the next election, if it would come into force after the next election pending on the outcome of the next election, or if it will come into force at such a point where the bill no longer becomes valid because we are too close to the next election.

If we look at how the legislation is written, what we know and what we see is that there are timelines. This piece of legislation cannot be used 18 months after an election. The first 18 months after the next election all the MLAs in this Chamber would be fine. Then it cannot be used six months prior to the next election. So if we look at it and we look at the fact that that already removes just over a year and a half from after the first election and then you add the six months where you can't use it leading up to the next election, that is two years out of a four-year cycle. Sixty days to gather enough signatures takes another two months out of the process. Then the Chief Electoral Officer would need time to ensure that the petition is done and the signatures are valid, so let's give another month or so, I would think, for them to be able to do that appropriately. Then within the legislation it is at the will of the government and at the will of the Chief Electoral Officer to set the next election date for the recall. As we know – and we've seen this with by-elections – it's at the will of the government to call a by-election. That could be six months. There's a six-month window within that piece of legislation for a by-election.

In fact, with all of these different months and they all add up together, the reality of it is that you may – if everybody lines everything up and is really, really, really tight, there might be two, maybe three months in the whole four-year election period where a recall piece of legislation could actually maybe be used if the 40 per cent threshold is met, if the petition requirements are agreed to and are deemed to be legal by the Chief Electoral Officer. Then there has to be a vote by the citizens to determine whether or not the recall should actually occur, and then you also have to have another by-election. It's actually a three-step process for MLAs, just for MLAs.

Then, of course, this doesn't just speak to provincial elected officials. This piece of legislation also speaks to municipal officials and school board trustees, but of course, as all of us know in this Chamber, school boards and municipal elections do not have the same access to Elections Alberta information as provincial candidates do. So what does that mean? Well, that means that if someone were to do 40 per cent of a municipal election, whether it be a county, city, any of those, or with a school board trustee, they would have to have a census. There is actually requirement where a census may be required to determine whether or not the threshold

is going to be met within the percentage required for those petitions. So now not only is there a \$500 fee to apply to have a petition even enacted, the municipality or the school board would then have to pay a fee to get a census done so that they can ensure that the petition that is being used and the validity of the signatures meet the legal requirements.

Now there becomes a financial burden on municipalities. There becomes a financial burden on school trustees or school boards different than what we would see within municipalities. It's now costing Albertans to be able to hold their elected officials to account. I question why, if the government truly believed that this was a piece of legislation that was to hold elected officials to account, they would have to pay a \$500 fee to have that ability to even have a petition. Why are we expecting Albertans to have to pay to be able to hold their elected officials to account? You know, there are some of those questions.

I think the other piece that we looked at is that if this bill is passed, as the minister did say, most of the regulations and most of the financial contribution limits, whether or not third-party advertising can exist, what those thresholds would look like, who could fund raise, all of the technical issues that were asked of the government – the response that was received was: well, when it comes into force and the regulations are set up, then all of that will be in regulation. So there's no transparency, zero transparency in this piece of legislation to know whether or not there's going to be a cap on fundraising. Who is allowed to fund raise? Are third-party advertisers allowed to have a certain amount? What happens to the money that is used or is left over during these campaign periods? Where does that go? Can a person who is being recalled decide that they're going to run again? Are there issues around running again in a by-election, or can a person just do that? There are many questions in here that are not being answered because they will all be done within regulation.

If we look at the expense, contributions, and advertising limits and the restrictions, it should be in the legislation. It should be specified within the legislation what those contribution limits are, because, again, what we've seen, Mr. Speaker, over the last year are five pieces of legislation, I think we're at now, four – well, there are some that are just amendments to ones that were written a couple of months ago that now have to be changed. When you start adding up how much a person can contribute, it starts to become pretty expensive, not expensive but, like, pretty high contribution limits.

We see this with referenda legislation. Well, we don't see it with recall, so there's a potential that an individual can also donate. We see that with the Senate elections. What we see is that with Senate elections, referenda, potentially recall – but we don't know – the same person could maybe potentially donate \$4,000 to all three plus municipal if, let's say, one of these elections was to be called in conjunction with another election cycle that's happening.

How do we see within this piece of legislation, how will Albertans know within this piece of legislation that, in fact, if something were to be successful or people are fund raising prior to the petition being deemed to be legally binding, there isn't some mechanism for fundraising to be happening? There's nothing in the legislation that determines that. We don't know what the third-party influence could be when it comes to whether or not there would be support for recall legislation for an individual.

We would like to believe that, you know, this wouldn't turn into partisan politics and that third-party groups wouldn't decide that they want to work with a recall group or a petitioner because they would prefer to have a different party representing that area over another party, or with municipal elections they find that someone is too progressive on the city council so they want to do a recall because they'd rather have someone less progressive, or find that

someone is too conservative and they would prefer that someone is less conservative on a city council or a school board. Then we start seeing third-party influences happening, because right now within the legislation there is nothing that prohibits that from occurring.

If we look at some of the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, there's no prohibition on corporation regulations and whether or not corporations can donate. There is nothing here around any type of third party, really, because, again, it's all in regulation.

The other piece about this that I think many Albertans when they come to realize what is going on with this piece of legislation wonder: why is there not a coming-into-force date once it's passed in the Legislature? If it were to pass – because I will not predispose the outcome of this House – would there not be a coming-into-force date effective once passing within the Legislature? What could happen is that it could sit on the Order Paper waiting for Royal Assent and just never ever have Royal Assent, which means it would never come into force. I don't think that that's genuine. If the government is saying that this is about a promise made, a promise kept as they continue to say, then why wouldn't there be an immediate coming-into-force date, as in the day that this passes in the House, the next day someone could recall one of their MLAs.

Mr. Bilous: Because they'll lose their own MLAs.

7:50

Ms Sweet: I mean, there's potential. There's some concern around the way that things are looking in Alberta right now. There's a nervousness around having this piece of legislation coming into force during this session period. I think that there is some legitimacy, probably, in being nervous around that happening given the fact that there are certain things that are not working out well for some of the current MLAs.

But going back to the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee, which in 2020 we all sat around the table together on, it was proposed by the NDP, by the Official Opposition, that the threshold be the number equal to the percentage of eligible voters that the Member of the Legislative Assembly to which the recall petition relates received, the rationale being that 40 per cent is an inaccessible threshold. As we all know in this House as well, many members didn't even get elected with 40 per cent of the vote. If you're basing it on the overall population, many of us in this Chamber, as we all know, didn't actually have 40 per cent of the overall population turn out to the voter's box. That's a problem, absolutely. If 40 per cent is the threshold, then if it's being based on the census numbers of the overall population of the riding how many of these petitions would actually be successful when we know how many MLAs in this very Chamber probably did not have 40 per cent of their overall constituents turn out to vote in the first place?

The threshold in the United States, to be clear, for everyone's knowledge, is 10 per cent for recall to 40 per cent according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. This is one of the validators, the same validator that said 40 per cent was too high and that the success rate is very, very unlikely and, in fact, said that the most common threshold was 25 per cent. If we took the advice of the experts that were called to the committee, the recommendation was 25 per cent, not 40 per cent. There are pieces here where there was a committee that was set up to try to come up with a fair and transparent way that could make this piece of legislation successful, yet this piece of legislation ignored the very experts that came to the committee and gave advice and recommended ways to make this bill actually functional and to be successful to actually do what the intent of the act is supposed to do.

Again, I want to highlight, too, that when we talk about this – if we look at the numbers again, 18 months after an election this piece of legislation cannot be used. Six months before the next general election this cannot be used. That's a huge piece. The Chief Electoral Officer must issue a petition to be used with all the collected signatures. By the time that happens, again, we add up the math – we'll give them a month, we'll say; they're busy people – then Albertans would have 60 days to gather signatures from 40 of the eligible voters in the constituency – 40 per cent of the eligible voters. Again, many constituencies don't even have 40 per cent of their voter turnout.

Applicants and volunteers that are going to help with the recall process must be residents of the constituency, so you couldn't have friends and neighbours from other jurisdictions or other areas outside of the constituency helping out. It would have to be people living within the neighbourhood. Of course, then it would trigger a recall vote with the simple majority. And then, of course, you would have to go and have a by-election on top of that.

If the recall vote is successful, the official ceases to hold the office upon the official results of the vote, and a by-election could then be held six months after that fact. So we could have constituencies within Alberta that would not have representation for up to six months because, again, as we all know with by-elections in this province, it is at the will of the government when they choose to call an election. Recall individuals are eligible to run again if they so choose. However, the question then would be around whether or not they would so choose to do that.

Municipal officials, again, have two steps. They have to have a successful petition. The official then is automatically removed. There's no vote. It's just a petition is signed, and they're automatically removed. And then once that is done, the determination is made about how an election would happen. Again, eligible voters must represent 40 per cent of the population of the municipality or the ward, which means a census would likely have to be done if one had not been done recently already by the city, and then, again, it would be 60 days to gather the signatures. If the petition is successful for municipal councillors, then the next municipal council meeting the official would automatically be removed, and then a by-election would have to be held under section 162 or 163. Again, under the local authorities act anybody could run in those positions, so they would be able to run again if they so choose.

Now, school boards: same thing, a two-step process. A successful petition and then the official is automatically removed, and then an application to the secretary of the school board is made, and there have to be at least 120 days to gather signatures because we recognize that school boards tend to be a little bit larger than what we would consider some of the other boards.

Now, under Bill 22, Reform of Agencies, Boards and Commissions and Government Enterprises Act, 2019, which was also introduced by this government – we know that it terminated the Election Commissioner. The question then becomes that if there were to be concerns around the conduct of some of these recall petitions, who would be responsible in looking at the accountability of those pieces? In fact, because everything is in regulation, how would anybody know whether or not there are issues around how those pieces of legislation are being looked at? Again, until everybody can see the regulations, because it is not explicit within the pieces of legislation, there is a really significant problem, because lots of people will pull up the piece of legislation to see whether or not they're compliant.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise in this House to speak in support of Bill 52, the Recall Act.

Mr. Speaker, how long is the speaking block?

The Speaker: Fifteen minutes.

Mr. Walker: Fifteen minutes. Okay.

Again, it's an honour to rise in support of this bill. I know how important this bill is, Mr. Speaker, for Albertans, including in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. I know it's good for Lacombe-Ponoka. I know it's good for Taber-Warner and all across Alberta. How happy I am to speak.

Mr. Speaker, a fundamental reason why I support this bill and why I ask every member of this House to support this bill is because I believe giving Albertans a more direct role in the democratic process and fundamentally holding all MLAs, all 87, more accountable – who could disagree with that? We might be surprised 24 times, but – you know what? – I think most would agree.

Bill 52 would strengthen democracy by allowing Albertans to hold elected officials accountable through their term, not just during elections. That's fundamentally important. This bill is part, Mr. Speaker, of a bold democratic reform package that significantly enhances Albertan democracy. I believe in giving Henry and Martha a more direct say in Alberta politics, and this bill, Bill 52, the Recall Act, does just that. Henry and Martha control Alberta's destiny, not the politicians in this Chamber and no one else. It's the 4.4 million Albertans who are in charge.

Politicians take orders from Henry and Martha, and the bureaucrats take their directions from the politicians. This is representative democracy at its best. Once more Henry and Martha, my friends in this House, are in charge of Alberta, and Bill 52, the Recall Act, reinforces this through direct democracy legislation, and that is an absolute fact. I know it's resonating in Lacombe-Ponoka, in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, and it's certainly resonating in Sherwood Park.

Now, Mr. Speaker, how did we get here? The Albertan experience and yearning for direct democracy: how did we arrive at Bill 52? Albertans have a unique political creed compared to the rest of Canada. While most Canadians are generally inclined towards big government and centralized decision-making, Albertans believe in limited government, grassroots, bottom-up democracy and decision-making, and Albertans have been campaigning for over a century for recall, for this very bill, Bill 52. As far back as the 20th century farmer, agrarian, and political organizations right here in this great province of Alberta such as the American Society of Equity in 1905, the Non-Partisan League in 1917, and the United Farmers of Alberta from 1909 on all had members that were advocating for more direct democracy legislation, including the recall of public officials. In fact, Mr. Speaker, a historical constituent from your great constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, the American-born – it's okay to be American born; I know some members in this House think that's a nasty word; anyway, lots of Albertans have American heritage, and that's okay – Henry Wise Wood from Carstairs, was a key figure at this time advocating for more direct democracy.

8:00

The palpable Albertan yearning for more direct democracy, including recall, this very bill, Bill 52, goes back more than a century, and I'm so glad to state that and record it forever on *Hansard* in this great House, Mr. Speaker. Prairie populism continued over the course of Alberta's history, with Albertans advocating for referenda, recall, and a more equal Senate. We thank all Albertans, past and present, who have politically fought to

strengthen our democracy through more direct democracy. I am so proud, with the relevant Albertan history recorded, to speak specifically to what I support so strongly in Bill 52 as it achieves critical, century-long direct democracy advocacy efforts.

The key aspects, Mr. Speaker, of Bill 52 that I like the most. Now, I support the nuts and bolts of this bill because it's been thoroughly researched and fleshed out policy-wise. There's been some great work done here; that much is clear. Let me note and thank the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee for the work they did in relation to recall in the fall of 2020. I thank the chair, the Minister of Justice. And how about the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon? He's been campaigning for so long for recall. What a powerful advocate. My political compass, guiding light, Mr. Speaker, has always been that if it's good for Drayton Valley-Devon, by golly, it's good for Alberta. God bless that man. Cypress-Medicine Hat as well has been a recall advocate.

This bill reasonably lays out a thoughtful and fair process of recall initiation – that's another thing I like about this bill – through a petition process and a threshold for such petitions to make a petition eligible for recall. I believe this bill strikes a fair balance while ensuring that Albertans may consider this political process while also ensuring the balance, Mr. Speaker, that Albertan democracy is not overwhelmed with frivolous, partisan, or parochial recall attempts.

We have a model in B.C. Since 1995 only 26 recall petitions were approved by Elections BC, and only one made it to the signature verification stage. Fundamental parts of this bill were understandably modelled on the B.C. model. For something as consequential as recall, Mr. Speaker, I say through you to all members present and the millions watching at home that I strongly support Bill 52's requirement of a threshold for petition support of voters. This is common sense for the common people: balance the passions of the democracy.

Now, Mr. Speaker, finally, on the mechanics of the bill itself and what I'm specifically supporting in this wonderful bill, I would say that I support the identity verification process. I know that might be a bit controversial with the opposition, but I do support that you've kind of got to know who the voters are. It's really important. I know the left doesn't like that, but I really support that. This would be overseen by the Chief Electoral Officer, whereby they would review all signatures collected in the petition to ensure that all signatures are, in fact, from Albertan voters. Makes sense to me. I think that's fair and reasonable. This is a responsible, fair, and well-balanced piece of legislation.

Now, I also support Bill 52, Mr. Speaker, from a comparative perspective of improving our Westminster democracy and with a mind, a view to other jurisdictions that successfully have recall.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I'm pretty confident that most members in this Chamber support this great bill, as they should, and Albertans do as well. Oddly, it's never clear to me where the NDP stands on these important direct democracy measures. Now, judging from their socialist, top-down political ideology, it's doubtful. They seem to, at the end of the day, take their decisions top down from Gil McGowan and other big union bosses. Well, with that said, I know that most Albertans support direct democracy. The Member for Sherwood Park sure does, Mr. Speaker.

With that said, I support Bill 52 for the reason that I believe it strengthens our Westminster parliamentary democracy by empowering Albertans through direct democracy as a tool to hold their elected officials accountable. It is fundamentally important. I know that it goes down well in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. The Westminster system that we have will benefit from more direct democracy. The executive branch in our system, of course, is enmeshed with the legislative branch, unlike the American, and I

think that this will be a proper balance. This will be great and actually enhance all aspects of the Westminster democracy.

Furthermore, no one needs to fear this bill. If you look at other jurisdictions, it will lead to greater civic engagement, more robust debate, and more informed and passionate democracy. Mr. Speaker, you need look no further than mature, prosperous democracies such as British Columbia and Wisconsin, which have had their own versions of citizen initiative referenda since 1995 in the case of B.C. and 1926, almost 100 years, in Wisconsin. There's a record here. This works. It's good for democracy. These two jurisdictions are still standing and, in fact, thriving. After more than a century, my friends in this House, I would say, of experiencing recall, that no one needs to worry. Everyone in this House should support this bill. There are templates. There's proof. Come on, everyone. Get behind it. It's fundamentally important.

As I begin to wrap things up – but I'm really enjoying myself. You know, I know that Lacombe-Ponoka is loving it, Taber-Warner, Red Deer-South, everyone in this House, but I'm going to wrap up. In conclusion, I strongly support this bill, Bill 52, the Recall Act, because it's a bold bill. It's part of the UCP, the United Conservative government's broader package of democratic reforms to strengthen our Westminster parliamentary democracy and would significantly enhance Albertan democracy. I believe in Albertan exceptionalism, Mr. Speaker, and we need to lead the way, as we always have, on democratic reforms within Canada. We are a beacon of hope and opportunity for others to be inspired by, and Bill 52, I believe, will inspire Canadians across our great country. I'm so happy to support this legislation.

Alberta's exceptional political culture showcases beliefs in individual liberty, grassroots democracy, market capitalism – sorry to the opposition, but that's the truth: market capitalism – equality of opportunity, and a ferocious hostility towards centralized power and socialism. That's the truth: a ferocious hostility towards centralized power and socialism. Bill 52, with a view to history, I firmly believe is a legislative manifestation of Albertans' long desire, a yearning, in fact, a palpable yearning for more direct democracy to ensure that Henry and Martha – we're back at the beginning here, Mr. Speaker – are always in charge. That's what's fundamentally important, not people in ivory towers in downtown urban centres making decisions for Lacombe-Ponoka, Red Deer-South, Taber-Warner, Sherwood Park. Henry and Martha are in charge of Alberta's destiny, and this bill helps ensure that.

Today I am proud to say that this bill achieves all that and more, Mr. Speaker, and that is why I so strongly and proudly support this bill. I stand in the House as the privileged 951st member of this Legislature, the fifth or sixth Walker. It is an incredible privilege to speak to this bill. I strongly support it, and, my goodness, like I said at the very beginning, my friends in this sacred House, if a bill is good for Drayton Valley-Devon, it is good for all of Alberta. I fundamentally, sincerely believe that. I ask this entire House, the government caucus and the opposition, to support this tremendous bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your time.

8:10

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or a comment. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning has one.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There's so much to unpack in that statement. I guess I just have one question for the hon. member as he was standing up speaking about the importance of Bill 52 and what it really stands for, which is a fight against socialism. Is that what the member is saying, that this whole bill is

intended to fight socialism and that's why the government has introduced recall legislation?

Mr. Walker: Mr. Speaker, I would just say that this bill was intended to hold public officials to account. We heard loud and clear, especially in the last Legislature, that they felt that the former government was not listening to Albertans. They believed in top-down decision-making. Let's hold Albertans to account. That's what this bill is about. I'm so proud to support this bill.

The Speaker: Are there others under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Shepherd: Well, Mr. Speaker, I perhaps hesitate to speak as the representative of a downtown urban centre for fear the member might mistake me for a member of the elite. However, I found it interesting, listening to his remarks and his insistence on many occasions talking about how this is a bill that he's putting in place for Martha and Henry, putting Martha and Henry in charge of Alberta. Martha and Henry will be steering this province. Well, Mr. Speaker, there is more to this province than Martha and Henry. There is Ahmed. There is Jean-Jacques. There is Manpreet. There is Nasrin. There is a wide diversity of Albertans who want to participate in our democracy.

I would note that this member went out of his way to mock progressives who have raised concerns in other jurisdictions about voter identification legislation. Now, let's be clear. Voter identification legislation has been overwhelmingly used by right-wing, conservative parties, primarily in the U.S., which is where indeed many progressive candidates stand against it because it disenfranchises people of colour, as we have recently seen in Georgia, as we have seen in so many U.S. states, as we have seen become rampant by conservative parties in the U.S. as they begin to realize how badly out of date they are and the fact that they are unable to win on their merits and instead have to monkey with legislation to manipulate the democratic process.

Now, I recognize that this member was on quite a roll tonight and largely grandstanding for whatever effect he's seeking here tonight, despite the fact that we just heard from the Member for Cardston-Siksika today about how concerned this government is about that very practice and how they want to raise the level of decorum in debate. That's certainly not what we just saw from the Member for Sherwood Park. But I will say to that – I'm going to have much more to say on this bill later.

But let's be clear. What this government says it wants to do for democracy in this province and what it is actually doing are two very separate things. If this government actually wanted to accomplish more democracy, if it actually wanted to empower Albertans with this legislation as opposed to making a grandstand on the floor of the Legislature with a lot of boom and bombast, we would see a very different threshold here. We would see a lot less red tape. We would see the same standard for MLAs as they're putting in for trustees and municipal officials as opposed to the continuation of the kind of condescension we continue to see from this government towards other elected officials in this province.

This member talked about ferocious hostility. I'd say that he has a ferocious hostility to anything resembling the facts, Mr. Speaker. He talked about having a more informed and passionate democracy. I'll tell you that there was precious little information in that speech he just gave to Albertans about the actual functioning of this piece of legislation, as there has been very little actual information from this government on so many of the steps it's taken to change election laws in the province of Alberta. This member said nothing about the fact that we know nothing about how this is actually going to function in terms of how the money is going to work in this

system when his government has jammed big money back into the electoral process in so many other ways. I'll have much more to say about that later.

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

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to hear from my colleague the Member for Edmonton-City Centre with a number of very well-articulated points regarding the previous UCP speaker, who I will quote in my speech as we debate Bill 52, the Recall Act. Now, I'll begin by saying that if this bill actually ever had any chance of recalling any MLA, I'd be all for it. You have a better chance of winning the western lottery than you do recalling an MLA through this piece of legislation. You know, my frustration is that government members will beat their chests about direct democracy and how this provides Albertans with an ability to recall their members. No, it doesn't. It's smoke and mirrors. My question to the Minister of Justice is: what are you scared of? Bring in a bill that'll actually recall a member. You know why the minister is not bringing that in? He's scared of losing his own seat, let alone a number of MLAs on the other side.

This bill will never actually successfully recall an MLA, and I'll go through why. If we want to talk about British Columbia, the fact is that in the province of B.C. their recall legislation has never actually recalled an MLA, and they have a much lower threshold than Alberta. In fact, there are a number of jurisdictions in the United States that have a 25 per cent recall threshold, or 25 per cent of the electorate that needs to sign a petition, that have in fact recalled elected officials. What's being proposed in this bill is 40 per cent. As the Member for Edmonton-Manning brought up, many members in this Chamber are elected during an election, a general election, with less than 40 per cent of the vote.

This legislation: if it actually was going to do what it said it was going to do, then we'd be talking about something here, but the fact of the matter is that you can take a piece of legislation that will never, ever successfully do what it claims it'll do. We'll hear from members this evening and the next time we debate this bill and the next time, talking about how they've kept a promise and how incredible it is. Well, I wish you would've told Albertans that you're going to bring in recall legislation that'll never actually recall a member. That would've been honest.

My other frustration with this bill is the fact that there are double standards. The MLAs are protected by a three-step process, yet municipal officials and school board trustees have a two-step process. That's democracy, isn't it? That's fair. I mean, you're the province, and I'm sure members on the other side believe that municipalities are lucky to exist because they exist through legislation, so why shouldn't the government of Alberta have a heavy hand over those other orders of government? If you don't believe that, then I look forward to the minister explaining to the Chamber why municipalities have a two-step process and MLAs have a three-step process. It's that much harder to remove an MLA than it is a city councillor, a mayor, or a school board trustee.

This bill or bills like this have existed in other jurisdictions and, again, in several states in the U.S. have been successful, but in Alberta this bill will not be successful in recalling MLAs. It's not just the threshold, Mr. Speaker. The fact of the matter is this bill has a number of caveats in it that, first of all, protect every single UCP MLA and, I guess, you could say every MLA from being recalled in this term. Those are interesting provisions put into a bill and ones that scream of fear and desperation.

8:20

The bill cannot be used to initiate the process to remove an MLA 18 months after an election or six months until the next general election. This bill also does not come into force if it's passed in this Chamber. You know, I'm sure there are people thinking: I wonder when the government will proclaim this bill should it pass in the Chamber. I'm going to throw out a guess. Sometime around six months before the next election it'll come into force. "Oh, whoops, well, we can't recall anyone now, so we're going to have to wait until the next general election and then another year and a half after that, and then maybe people can start the process."

My frustration with this bill is it is completely disingenuous. If you're going to bring in recall legislation, then do it. Have the courage to do it. You don't. You're hiding behind smoke and mirrors. It's a bill that says it will do that, but if you read the fine print and you look at other jurisdictions, like I said, an Albertan has a better chance of winning the lottery than getting an MLA recalled.

Now, my other frustration, Mr. Speaker, is if this bill will never actually do what it's claiming to do, then the members of the government are wasting our time. They're wasting taxpayer dollars by making us debate this bill. Bring forward a bill that will actually do what you're claiming it will do, without the caveats, the collars, and the protections that you've written for your own members.

Let's be clear. There's a reason that the government has put these in place. I'm not even talking about current popularity or election polls. I'm talking about the fact that a number of government members, after telling Albertans in month 10 not to travel, not to leave the province, did exactly that. Poor judgment is an understatement. The fact of the matter is if this bill could actually recall a member and come into effect tomorrow, I'm pretty confident there are a number of MLAs that would be on the chopping block, so to speak, if we were talking in a cooking show's metaphors, just to ensure that no member misinterprets what I'm saying. They'd be in danger of losing their seat.

Now, the other thing this bill is missing, which I find really rich coming from this government and their claims about finances, is the fact that there's no price tag on this. I asked the minister. How much does recall legislation, holding referendums, and then a by-election – what's the price tag to Albertans? How much is that costing taxpayers? If we're proposing a bill that has significant financial implications for Albertans, Albertans deserve to know. I'm looking to the accountants in the UCP to acknowledge that there is a cost for this type of legislation, just like there is a cost for the never-ending referendums that this government wants to introduce in the province. Now, I'm not saying that I'm opposed to all referendums. I'm saying that they come with a cost, and Albertans deserve to know what that cost will be. Nowhere in this legislation does it talk about that.

I'm hoping, Mr. Speaker, that during Committee of the Whole the minister who introduced this bill will be able to answer a number of questions. One: why is it that MLAs have a three-step process, ensuring that they will never be removed through this current piece of legislation? For the viewers at home "never be removed" is finite language. I apologize. It is so unlikely that Albertans will ever meet the thresholds laid out in this bill, I'm confident we will not see an MLA removed through this current piece of legislation. But, again, why is it that municipal leaders and school board trustees have a much more streamlined, a much simpler process for removing them? Can the minister speak to that? Is it coincidence? Is it that this current government wants authority? Is it that this current government wants to be able to hold this over elected officials at the municipal level or the school board trustee level?

We've heard from Alberta's two largest municipal organizations, the AUMA and the RMA, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, who are opposed to this legislation. I think that part of the reason, quite frankly, is because there's a double standard. I don't blame them. Some might call that hypocritical; I call it a double standard. Either way, I'm sure that Albertans will want to know: why is it that there are two different thresholds for locally elected officials and for provincially elected officials?

You know, the Member for Sherwood Park in his energetic speech, impassioned, said that no one needs to fear this bill. Well, that's very true. Nobody needs to fear this bill because it'll never actually do what it claims.

Mr. Carson: At least for MLAs.

Mr. Bilous: For MLAs. That's a very good point. Now, for municipal leaders and for school board trustees it's a different story.

But, again, my question to the Minister of Justice and his caucus is: why wouldn't you introduce a bill that can actually recall MLAs and do it this term, proclaim it upon passage in this Chamber? What are you scared of?

As you can probably guess, Mr. Speaker, I have significant issues with this piece of legislation as it's currently written. Again, as I stated at the onset, I'm not opposed to the concept of recall legislation. I do think that Albertans should be aware of the costs that'll be incurred because that will be part of, I'm sure, their gauge on whether they're supportive of recall legislation or not. I mean, I don't have it in front of me, but it'd be interesting to look at the province of British Columbia. There have been a number of initiations of the process to remove an MLA. It's never been successful, but I'm really curious how many public dollars were spent if you add it up cumulatively. Again, would that influence whether or not Albertans support this type of legislation?

Mr. Speaker, I'll bring my comments to a close and allow other members of the Chamber to weigh in on this bill. I do believe in direct democracy, but this bill does not meet that objective at all.

8:30

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

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was listening to the hon. member speak, I was thinking about the last term that I was here in the House as an opposition member. One of the first bills that that government decided to bring forward, Bill 6, the notorious Bill 6, basically harmed our farmers and ranchers in Alberta to the point where they decided they were going to take direct democracy into their own hands, and they scared the NDP, actually.

I talked to one of the NDP members in the Labour department there. They said: you know, we're the ones used to going out and picketing and protesting, and this happened to us, and it really scared us, so we've kind of slowed down what we're doing. And I remember thinking: you know, that is exactly what the farmers and ranchers needed to do. They needed to be able to send a message. The nice thing about the recall legislation is that if we would have had it back then, I would imagine that the NDP would not have gotten four years in this House, that their fluke in being able to receive election in 2015 would have lasted a couple of years.

But the hon. member just spoke about how poor this piece of legislation is. There's a saying that says: don't cast stones in a glass house. These members did not have the courage. As he said: have the courage to do something, Minister of Justice and Solicitor General. Well, I take my hat off to the Minister of Justice and

Solicitor General. In a time of pandemic, when most everybody is upset with governments, we have the courage to be able to come forward and bring forward recall legislation, yet the members opposite have the audacity to say that we don't have the courage. They had the opportunity for four years to bring forward this type of legislation. How many times have you heard that, Mr. Speaker, where they would have done it better? But they didn't.

Let's talk about red tape reduction, Mr. Speaker. We've cut over 107,000 pieces, pinch points, hoops that Albertans had to jump through, strings that were keeping our business and job creators out of this province and keeping Albertans down. We did that in two years. The hon. members can talk all they want about how they could have done better, but they didn't. They did not do anything when it came to red tape reduction.

In fact, I remember speaking to the hon. member that just spoke about red tape reduction. Do you know what his response was, Mr. Speaker? We absolutely don't care. We do not care, and we are not really going to be doing anything about it.

Mr. Bilous: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is called. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Under 23(h), (i), (j), Mr. Speaker. The member knows that he is misrepresenting the facts as he speaks in this Chamber. He has named me as the member. Never did I say that I do not care about red tape. His comments are meant to incite disorder.

In fact, I'll clarify for the House what I said – and it was very clear, Mr. Speaker – that we review and look at every regulation as it comes before cabinet with a lens to eliminate or reduce any kind of redundant regulations that may impede business or be unnecessary. Never ever was it stated that we don't care. I appreciate that the member will probably say that it's a difference of opinion. I'd like it on the record, which is why I'm standing, that what he has said is completely and patently false, and the member knows that. I'd like him to retract his comment and rephrase.

Thank you.

Mr. Hunter: I'm not sure if the member actually quoted what standing order he was actually doing the point of order on. [interjections] I'm sorry. I didn't hear him say that, but if he did – Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the member's actions spoke louder than what he spoke to me, and this is the reason why . . .

The Speaker: I'm sorry. Are you arguing the point of order, or are you continuing your . . .

Mr. Hunter: Sure. Yeah.

The Speaker: Okay.

Mr. Hunter: Mr. Speaker, I spoke to the hon. member about this. He had zero interest in doing anything about that. You can call this as a point of order if you want, but the truth is that he knows exactly what he did say and what he represented to Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. government whip.

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Speaker, I just want to acknowledge that the members opposite are always quick to talk about a person's truth. Well, I believe that the hon. member was giving his truth and

recollection of the conversation that he had with the other hon. member, so I would argue that this is a matter of debate.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. May I say, first and foremost, that we are talking about an entirely different topic here, which is in regard to recall legislation. Respectfully, the Member for Taber-Warner strayed from the topic and then specifically said that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview said a number of words, disparaging words, about red tape that he simply didn't say. It's best – you know, a little bit of advice – to retract, and we can move on with the orders of business for this evening.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I am prepared to rule unless there are other submissions. I think the advice about staying on the topic at hand is often the best advice that the Speaker can provide with respect to these points of order. From time to time, when members stray into a wide array of expressing their opinion as opposed to the matters that are before the Assembly to debate, I think that this is often where we end up.

I would provide the strongest caution possible to the hon. the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction, that while this may be a matter of debate as to what the member may or may not have said, I have spoken at some length about specifically making accusations about individuals or otherwise inside the Assembly. I won't find or rule that this is a point of order at this point in time, but I could not provide a stronger caution without finding a point of order on this matter. I'll consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

The hon. member has a minute and 55 seconds to go. In the name of good decorum, he may want to withdraw and apologize.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hunter: Mr. Speaker, I understand that I have offended the good sensitivities of the hon. member. I was not trying to create disorder in the House. I was trying to merely state that it is very difficult for us to sit on this side of the House and listen to the hon. members talk about how they would have done it so much better whereas in four years they had the opportunity and they just failed to do it. The hypocrisy of it was what I was trying to speak to.

I would like to talk specifically about the concept of recall. Mr. Speaker, obviously, being able to bring forward recall during a pandemic, a world-wide pandemic, where most governments in the world are struggling to just be able to keep moving forward: I would say that that is very courageous, and I couldn't be more proud of the hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General for bringing forward this bill to show to Albertans that we are committed to the democratic process, that it doesn't have to just take every four years to be able to determine whether or not you're happy with your government officials or not but that we will be representative for the full four years.

We know, at the end of the day, that it is Albertans that are fully in charge and fully in control of their government and their Legislative Assembly. We know who the bosses are, Mr. Speaker. On this side of the House we are trying to make sure that we represent them the best that we can and that we can provide them with a place where they can have a wonderful business of opportunities to grow and progress.

8:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to express my support for this significant bill that will strengthen Alberta's exercise of democracy, Bill 52, the Recall Act. First of all, I applaud the minister for taking the initiative to introduce this democratic mechanism which will be available to Albertans and increase public accountability of elected officials, including Members of the Legislative Assembly, MLAs, municipal officials, and school trustees, during their term.

Also, I want to express my appreciation to all the Albertans who participated during the public meetings last fall and to those who submitted written submissions about their thoughts on recall legislation which were accepted by the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee. My appreciation goes as well to all the committee members, who have made recommendations that were made the basis in the crafting of this bill.

In 2019 the United Conservative Party campaigned on the promise to bring in recall legislation while the February 2020 Speech from the Throne promised recall. Among other democratic reforms, this is a promise made, a promise kept, Mr. Speaker.

[Ms Glasgo in the chair]

If we are to look into the beginning of this recall process, we can trace it back as far as during the time of the ancient Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic, and it can be found in the laws of the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony of 1631 and again in the Massachusetts Charter of 1691. Presently a recall process has been adopted by different countries and jurisdictions around the world, including the United Kingdom, where it was introduced in 2015, allowing the recall of a Member of Parliament and the calling of a by-election. In Canada recall legislation was first introduced in Alberta during the 1936 Social Credit government but was repealed over a year later. Currently it is only the province of British Columbia that has recall legislation, which took effect in 1995 although it is only applicable to recall their Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Madam Speaker, if passed, Bill 52 will not only provide for the process of recall of a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta but also recall of an elected municipal official, which includes the mayor, councillors as well as elected school board officials or elected trustees in school divisions. This will ensure that elected officials are properly executing their mandate as the chosen representative of their respective constituencies. These officials were voted for and entrusted by their constituents to serve and to champion their interests for the progress of the constituency. Therefore, it is just and fitting that the same constituents must also have the power to revoke their trust through a recall process in case the official does not appropriately promote the interests of the constituency. It is a democratic process exercised by the electorate to reconfirm or withdraw the confidence they entrusted during the regular election to the elected official being sought to be recalled.

All elected officials have the responsibility and franchise given to them by the electorate, which must remain all throughout their term of office. The moment the responsibility is not exercised while resulting in the disregard of the interests of the people, they should have the right to remove and replace the governing power so that the public interest remains as the most significant factor in the pursuit of a successful future.

Madam Speaker, this bill will champion the power of the people, a power to scrutinize, regularly check the performance and dealings of their elected officials by particularly providing the direct right to initiate and remove elected local officials through a recall process. The absence of this process will just leave Albertans without

recourse but to undo the term of the elected officials that, for them, have not been meeting their expectations.

Generally the right to vote for a representative comes with the power to remove, and under the UN universal declaration of human rights – it provides that “the will of the [power] shall be the basis of the authority of government.” This explicitly mentions that government authority originates from the people, and without the express approval of the people through the election process, the official cannot govern. Having said that, Madam Speaker, elected officials should always be accountable to their constituents, provide service with the highest regard to responsibility, efficacy, and royalty. Bill 52, Madam Speaker, respects and supports the rights of Albertans.

In order that the recall process will not be utilized unreasonably, Bill 52 provides for the boundaries to be taken up. It would be unwise to launch a recall just to gain a political interest. That is why Albertans will have the ultimate say in the democratic process. The purpose of a recall as a direct remedy of the constituents would not be met if you would not resort to it by the ill motive of a few who could not take the result of the imminent election, thereby resulting to undermine the community and totally disrupt the running of the government.

Madam Speaker, this bill empowers Albertans to initiate the recall of an MLA in their constituency provided that 40 per cent of eligible voters in that constituency signify support in the petition within 60 days from the issuance of said petition by the Chief Electoral Officer. If submitted within the regulatory period, the Chief Electoral Officer will then verify the validity of the signatures and ensure that the threshold of 40 per cent is reached. When these requirements are met, a recall vote will then follow to determine if the elected official should be recalled. Upon a successful recall vote, the official will be then recalled and removed, and a by-election shall be held.

Similar processes apply to municipal officials and school board officials, differing only in the office where the application can be submitted, which is the chief administrative officer in the municipality and the secretary of the school board respectively. Also, for both municipal and school board recall petitions there will be no recall vote as upon the determination of a successful petition the official would be removed. As school board trustees may have a wider scope of constituents, the gathering of signatures for the recall petition is longer, which is 120 days. If the recall petition for an elected municipal official is successful, the elected official is removed once the petition is presented to the next council meeting. If the recall petition for the school board trustee is successful, they would be removed from the board, and the board would then decide if a by-election is necessary.

The petitioner of the recall will be responsible for all costs associated with gathering the required number of signatures; however, they can accept contributions towards their petition. There will be limits on how much Albertans and third parties like political action committees can spend on promoting or arguing against the petition to recall an MLA and guidelines on how the donated money must be spent. These limits and guidelines will be included in the regulations.

Madam Speaker, Bill 52 also provides that the recall petition can be applied for by an eligible Albertan 18 months after an election or more than six months before the next scheduled election. This is similar to recall legislation in British Columbia. It thus gives the elected official an ample amount of time to perform the function of the office, at the same time removing the possibility of having two elections within a six-month period, which would be costly to public funds. It is also to avoid an early action being launched with

the purpose of removing a newly elected official without a significant time to evaluate the worthiness of his acts and decisions.

8:50

Although the bill will be providing a right to the people to recall, the guidelines set with it will avoid the possibility of the abuse of the process by a small number of disappointed persons whose political ambition did not gather the support it needed. Some might say that this guideline's time frame or the threshold is way too much and it makes recall unachievable. I say to them that nothing is impossible.

As we all know and understand the efforts and hard work that every candidate to the electoral office has gone through – the door-knocking, the debates, and the commitment to serve people – we cannot just open to a few disenchanted or unhappy political opposers of the one elected to make use of the recall process to gain the office without the support of the concerned constituents. The requirement of at least 40 per cent of an electorate to sign the petition for recall implies that recall is a serious process that entails not just a voice from a few, and the 60- or 120-day time frame would be sufficient if indeed the move to have an elected official be recalled is near consensual within the constituency.

As experienced in B.C. since their recall law took effect, there have been 26 recall petitions approved by their Chief Electoral Officer, but only six were retained for verification. Five of those did not have the required number of signatures while one was halted during the verification stage due to the resignation of the member subject to the recall.

As I mentioned a while ago, there is no legislation in Canada that allows citizens to petition for recall of mayors, councillors, school board trustees. Bill 52 will give Albertans the most comprehensive recall regime in the country. By doing this, Madam Speaker, Alberta is taking a wider scope in ensuring that public officials that have been voted upon to promote the interest and welfare of the people must fulfill their task in the public service. This does not mean that elected officials do not perform their responsibilities, but it is an important process that the people would utilize when an elected official chooses their own interest over the interest of their constituents.

To conclude, Madam Speaker, let me state that trust and confidence are embodied in the public service in a jurisdiction governed by democracy. The leaders are chosen by the people, and the government will not exist without the consent of the people. Accountability does not start and stop during elections. Accountability should be maintained at all times during the term of office of an elected leader. We are taking the lead by ensuring accountability in the provincial level, municipal level, and in school divisions.

I again applaud the minister for taking the necessary steps and introducing this legislation to empower Albertans, our democratic process, to hold elected officials accountable throughout their term of office. I encourage all the members of this House to support Bill 52 as we assure Albertans, as their elected representatives, to be responsible at all times by promoting, prioritizing their interest, and making our democratic system stronger.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Seeing none, are there any other members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening and speak to Bill 52. As has been my standard practice, as it's the first time speaking in the Chamber, I would just like to

do an acknowledgement and express my appreciation for all of those that are working the front line in the province, in the country, and around the world, that are fighting COVID-19: our first responders, our health care workers, our essential workers. A big shout-out and sincere gratitude.

This evening we're debating Bill 52, the Recall Act. I've heard many statements tonight about this piece of legislation. I have to say that I'm very grateful for the insight and feedback that I've heard from my colleagues from Edmonton-Manning, from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, and Edmonton-City Centre. I think that their opinions and some of the points that they raised for this legislation are very important. When the Minister of Justice got up and spoke to this, we heard, like we do from many of their ministers – when they get up and talk about a piece of legislation, they go back to the platform, and they say the common phrase: promise made, promise kept.

I also recall a promise that was made from this government, being the creation of jobs. That is simply something that we are not seeing. We saw incredible, significant job loss pre pandemic. Now we are in the middle of a pandemic, and instead of introducing legislation that actually helps Albertans get back to work, they're introducing legislation based on a promise made, a promise kept, ignoring the fact that we're in the midst of a global pandemic, that Albertans are suffering. Albertans need support, and they need to get back to work. This piece of legislation, Recall Act, does none of that. We have a government that is so fixated on their platform that they're simply ignoring the reality of what is happening in the province.

I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that if this piece of legislation did what they claim it does, this would be something that Albertans are definitely asking for. We're hearing loud and clear that Albertans are fed up with this government. They want this government out. This piece of legislation, if it actually did what they claimed it did, perhaps could do that. But what we have here is a piece of legislation that has a whole bunch of checks and balances in place that don't actually equal the ability to remove an MLA. We have a minister standing up and reciting the words "promise made, promise kept." If that means that they say the words "Bill 52, Recall Act" in the Legislature, well, I guess that's a promise made.

But they're not actually doing what they promised Albertans they would be doing, which is introducing legislation that actually gives Albertans the ability to remove an MLA. This piece of legislation doesn't do that. They have two sets of standards, one for MLAs and a different set of standards for municipal elected officials and school trustees. So when it comes to Albertans wanting to recall their Member of the Legislative Assembly – we heard the Member for Edmonton-Manning talk about her experience with the group that was involved with reviewing this piece of legislation, listening to experts, and we heard that the 40 per cent threshold was too high. The government heard that the 40 per cent threshold was too high. So what does this government do? They go against what the experts are saying. They go against what other jurisdictions have seen no success in, and they put the threshold at 40 per cent. What does this mean? It means it's very unlikely to be successful in recalling an elected official.

We heard the Member for Sherwood Park stand up in this Chamber and talk a lot, unfortunately not a lot about this legislation. But one of the things that he said that is concerning is that he said, "No one needs to fear this bill." I'm curious what that means, Madam Speaker. He was asked under 29(2)(a) some clarifying questions. He chose not to respond. When we have a member on the government side saying, "No need to fear this," that makes me a little bit concerned because we've seen legislation come forward where this government says: there's no need to fear; we promised

that we would do this, Alberta, and we're doing it. But this piece of legislation isn't actually doing what they say it's doing. You would think a recall act would do that, but instead it has all of these different criteria that are set in place to actually be able to successfully recall your member from the Legislative Assembly. A 40 per cent threshold is quite significant.

[The Speaker in the chair]

9:00

Now, I spoke about the two different criteria for the three different elected officials. When we look at the MLAs, there's a 60-day time period. When we look at the municipal representatives: a 60-day time period. When we look at the school trustees, there's a 120-day period. I'm curious what the difference is and why there's the discrepancy between the three different time periods and what the purpose of that is. We've seen elected officials from different municipalities asking some of those similar questions.

Unfortunately, this is a piece of legislation that they're claiming they promised. The title, I'm sure, is what they promised, but what this legislation actually does is quite misleading. It doesn't actually allow Albertans in this time period, in this four years that this UCP government is elected, to actually recall an MLA. When asked when this piece of legislation will be proclaimed, it doesn't say in the legislation. It doesn't have a date. It doesn't say: at the end of third reading. It's something that's simply going to be proclaimed at a later date. So I agree with the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview when he says, "Perhaps six months before the next election," which would then put this piece of legislation unavailable to Albertans because part of the requirements for it is that it can't be six months before the next election.

When we talk about being transparent and we talk about a government that is fulfilling their promises, I think it's very interesting that they're picking and choosing how that promise is actually kept. If they were being true to what they were talking about and what Albertans are asking for, there would be no hesitancy in proclaiming this bill should this bill proceed through debate in this Chamber. I look forward to Committee of the Whole, where we can perhaps get some back and forth with some of the ministers to talk about the intentions of this piece of legislation, but until then, Mr. Speaker, I think I will wrap up my comments and adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 64

Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021

[Adjourned debate April 14: Mr. Dang]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has the call.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. Despite the fact that I represent an urban centre with all of its towers and attendant elites, I have a deep history and roots in public lands, in the backcountry of Alberta's Rocky Mountains. I spent many summers with my family – that was the family vacation for many years, driving down to camp in the Rocky Mountains. At the age of 13 I had the opportunity to attend Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp in southern Alberta in the Crowsnest Pass. That's the first time I had been in that part of Alberta. At Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp one of the big and famous features is the camp out-trip.

The out-trip consists of taking a hike several hours out into the backcountry, various parts of the Rocky Mountains in that area, carrying a pack with all your food and everything on your back. We slept under tarps on plastic groundsheets. We cooked over an open fire. We had the opportunity to climb many of the local peaks and ridges, swim in the creeks, and see some incredible sights – Andy Good falls, the Ptolemy bathtubs – boot ski down snow patches. It was an amazing opportunity, and it is something that I fell in love with, Mr. Speaker. A part of my heart will always be there. I deeply value the opportunity to spend time in the wilderness, to spend time in the backcountry and the opportunity that all Albertans have had to do that.

Now, with this bill, Bill 64, we have the government putting a new price on that access. We have the government doing something that they did not promise they would do, something that was not in their election platform. They're introducing this new cost for Albertans to be able to access the backcountry and to have the opportunity to camp on public lands. A number of government members have spoken to this bill. The last time I was here, the Member for Calgary-Glenmore was having a conversation about this bill. She talked about one of the points of concern we've raised in that there is nothing in this bill which requires this government to actually use the funds they are collecting from Albertans for the use of the backcountry, for the purpose that they say they will. They're leaving it open-ended. There's nothing in this legislation that compels them to follow through on that promise.

The Member for Calgary-Glenmore talked about this. She said: "Well, you know, it's just like the household piggy bank. The household: they hold all the funds in common. They know when it needs to go here and when it needs to go there. They don't have to actually set it up." Of course, Mr. Speaker, many households do in fact have budgets that are agreed on by the partners who bring in the income. They discuss that, and they are transparent with each other about where the money goes. Let's be clear. The government of Alberta is not like a household in that respect. The dollars that the government is collecting and then spending are not its money. That's interesting because that's what these members on the government side like to keep telling everybody. But in this case they're saying: "You know what? We don't need to be accountable to Albertans for how we spend these dollars. Albertans should simply trust us. Albertans should simply trust us when we charge them for the opportunity to go out and use the backcountry that belongs to all Albertans. The dollars we collect: just trust us that – we swear to God, pinky swear – that money will go back to that."

Let's be clear, Mr. Speaker. On many fronts what this government has done when it has told Albertans they should just simply trust them – think about the folks on AISH who were left to trust this government, who then went ahead and simply decided that they would shift the payment date for AISH with no consultation of the individuals that were involved, with very little notice of that fact, causing severe disruption for thousands of vulnerable Albertans. That was just to improve their bottom line just a little bit, a fraction, on their next budget. The Auditor General had to call them out for that one. That's the government that says: "Trust us. We don't have to put it in the legislation what we're going to do with those dollars. Just trust us. They'll go to the right place."

9:10

This is the government, Mr. Speaker, that was voted the most secretive in Canada, which made unprecedented manipulation of the standing orders last year to avoid scrutiny in its budget. This is a government who, when they created their \$30 million a year war room, went out of their way to, again, in an unprecedented manner, set up that corporation so that Albertans cannot see where a single

dollar of that spending goes. That is the government who is telling Albertans: "When it comes to this, trust us. The dollars we charge you for this campsite: just trust us. We're not going to use that for anything other than the maintenance of that campsite or the enforcement. Trust us. We won't be accountable for it. There's nothing to actually make sure that we do it, but just based on our record."

And let's be clear on what the record of this government is, Mr. Speaker. Let's look at their COVID contingency fund, again, with this budget, setting aside \$2 billion. "Well, it may go here. It may go there. We'll kind of figure that out as we go along." That is the government that is telling Albertans: trust us.

Now, it's a simple gesture, Mr. Speaker, for this government to actually just put in the legislation that the dollars that are collected under this levy, under this tax on camping would go back into the same area from which they have been taken, that they would go back into maintaining the backcountry, that they would go back into maintaining the lands that Albertans have the privilege of enjoying. That is what this government says; they say that is the only reason they are levying this amount is in order to do that. And if that is, in fact, true, then this government could put their money where their mouth is and show their good faith to Albertans and enshrine that in the legislation, but they are choosing not to do so. I think Albertans have good reason to question why that is. They have good reason to question what it is this government is trying to accomplish.

Now, again, Mr. Speaker, I have great respect for the backcountry. I've had many wonderful summers. I haven't been able to backpack and camp in the wilderness as much due to my food intolerance as it makes it difficult for me to be able to cook out in the backcountry. No refrigeration makes it a challenge for me. But certainly I had the chance to return to the Crownsnest Pass, I think, in the summer of 2018. First visit to Waterton, a beautiful part of the province. I had the chance to climb Vimy Peak; incredible view from up top there down over Waterton Lake. So I appreciate wanting to protect that land. I appreciate wanting to ensure that it's available for others.

You know, other government members have spoken. The Member for Drayton Valley-Devon was talking about how the ATVers he knows are some of the most disciplined regarding respecting the rules. I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Speaker. I can tell you that in my time hiking in the Crownsnest Past – now, admittedly, this was back in the '90s in the early aughts, but I can tell you that we often made a game of carrying a garbage bag with us to pick up the beer cans along the way from snowmobilers who'd come through in the winter, and we had to clear the burnt logs off the path where they'd lit their fire. So I recognize that not all users of the wilderness areas are treating it with respect, but certainly I appreciate that there are many that are. I can appreciate, again, that we want to take what steps we can to ensure that we are preserving that land and preserving that country for all Albertans.

Indeed, if that is where these dollars are going, and if the government would give that guarantee to Albertans, perhaps they would not chafe as much about being levied with another charge, particularly in the summer when this may be one of the chief activities that is available to Albertans. As we are still working through vaccinations, as we are still coming through this global pandemic and we are still looking at very limited travel, the opportunity to enjoy the backcountry and the wilderness here in Alberta is one of the few options available to Albertans, and this government is putting a premium on it. That might go down a little easier for Albertans if this government would in good faith show in legislation that those dollars will only go back to the protection and maintenance of that land.

Because, to be clear, Mr. Speaker, this government's record is not a good one so far when it comes to protecting our backcountry and our land. You know, the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction was speaking earlier about: we know who our bosses are, and we listen to them. That is certainly not the case when it comes to coal mining in the eastern slopes of the Rockies, where many Albertans would typically go and enjoy the wilderness. Thousands, I'd say tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Albertans have spoken out quite clearly about their position on that, Mr. Speaker.

These MLAs, this government, are not listening to them but will charge them a premium when they want to go out and enjoy the wilderness, which this government is willing to put in jeopardy and willing to risk for a pittance in coal royalties, that Albertans have been absolutely clear they do not consider to be fair pay for the risk and the damage that this government is willing to do to satisfy a few coal companies from Australia. It seems that when it comes to that, Albertans are not the bosses, Mr. Speaker. This government very much likes to pick and choose when it's going to listen to Albertans, what it's going to listen to Albertans about, and what it's actually going to do or what it likes to say that it is doing while doing something else.

The other question we would have, I suppose, then, is: given that this is a government which insists Albertans should trust them but has already betrayed that trust on so many different levels, are there any limitations in this legislation as to what other fees the minister could choose to impose? Let's remember, Mr. Speaker, that this is a government that promised that it would not raise taxes on Albertans, but it did very sneakily by removing the brackets on income tax. They allowed bracket creep, something that the Premier himself, of course, condemned roundly many years ago, but as is so often the case, what the Premier says and what the Premier does are very often two very different and diametrically opposed things. This is a Premier whose words are barely worth the air in which they are expelled, the paper they are printed on, as it were.

In this case, we ask, then: with a government that has so little respect for Albertans in terms of its decisions, on going back on its word, or in doing so sneakily, is this a government we can trust, is this a minister, frankly, we can trust with the ability to simply continue to impose and create new fees and new levies and continue to find other ways to nickel and dime Albertans, particularly, Mr. Speaker, when there may be corporate interests involved? We have seen time and again how this government far values people who sit in the boardroom versus the people that live on the streets of Alberta and in our homes and our neighbourhoods: Martha, Henry, Ahmed, Nasrin, Jean-Jacques, Manpreet, the full diversity of Albertans, which I think we would do well to remember more often in this House.

Is there any limitation on what kind of fees this minister could impose? Is there any limitation on how high those fees can go? Are there any limitations on how often he can choose to raise them? These are the sorts of questions I used to hear from many of these members when they sat in opposition, but they seem to have forgotten now that they are in government.

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

Seeing none, the hon. member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a privilege to rise today and express my support for Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. I appreciate the minister for introducing these changes to the act that will help conserve public lands, protect public safety,

and ensure Alberta's landscapes are protected now and into the future. The ability to use and enjoy public land is something that many Albertans take advantage of every year, often throughout the year, for various activities. I, too, enjoy the time of going out for a walk or a hike.

9:20

Some of this happens in designated parks, where fees are already collected appropriately. Others, however, enjoy the ability to do what is referred to as random camping. Random camping is when you head into the woods and camp in otherwise nondesignated areas. For many, this more often has a genuine camping feel to it. It is often more sheltered than in a national park site.

The rules for camping in this way are strict. You cannot do this inside of or within one kilometre of a provincial or national park. You are required to take steps to minimize your impact. For example, you cannot camp near abundant vegetation and must find a place with either minimal vegetation or sand or gravel. You are encouraged to use a compact camping stove so scars are not left on the landscape. When that is not possible, rules are in place for building a proper firepit that must be attended at all times. Garbage must be disposed of appropriately, and washing cannot occur in waterways.

Why do I mention these rules, Mr. Speaker? I think it is important to note that the government has rules in place for the protection of our backcountry, but also, sadly, there are many that do not follow them. Many Albertans who go to enjoy random camping every year are saddened to find that these rules and guidelines have not been followed by others. There could be some that would camp on public lands with abundant vegetation while others see a pile of garbage left behind. This situation is unacceptable. Alberta's public lands and even those in Canada are treasures for people to enjoy. A balance must be held for both enjoyment and protection.

It is agreed by many, Mr. Speaker, that enforcement is required to maintain the rules and regulations that exist. That's why this bill has come forward to address this concern. It is necessary to increase enforcement and administration. As everyone here is aware, enforcement comes with increased cost. In order to keep general taxes low, like income tax, Alberta has historically adopted user-pay systems in many respects for things that are not necessities of life, and while camping in the great outdoors is a wonderful experience that I encourage all to enjoy responsibly, we cannot consider it as a requirement for everyone to practise.

Mr. Speaker, this bill introduces the public land camping pass, which could be required by individuals 18 years and over when random camping on public land regardless of the types of camping shelter – either trailer, tent, tarp – in the eastern slopes of Alberta and areas east of the Rocky Mountains south of Grande Prairie to Waterton national park. The proposed \$20-per-person pass for three nights or the \$30-per-person pass for all year is fair enough to better preserve and protect our significant treasures. This is only meant to offset the cost involved with enforcing current rules and enhancing our public lands. These fees are in no way different than the purpose of collecting fees for camping in our provincial and national parks and remain a far more affordable option.

More than that, Albertans told us that they would be willing to pay a fee such as this in order to enjoy our outdoors in exchange for what we'll provide to limit or remove the incidence of seeing improper use and unwanted belongings out there. We asked Albertans this past winter to provide us with feedback on this issue. Of the 8,194 people that responded, 53 per cent were in favour of a nominal fee such as this, and 13 per cent were neutral on the matter. This means that only a minority of one-third of respondents were not in favour of this. We are a democracy, and once again the government followed the majority.

So what specifically will this fund be used for? I have already mentioned enforcement and administration, but I would like to say a few more words here. Every year Alberta has to deal with tragedies such as wildfires, Mr. Speaker. Many of these come from a small number of individuals that do not follow the guidelines that are set out for fires. It is my hope and, I believe, an intention of this bill that by increasing enforcement, we can minimize such disasters from occurring. This not only protects our forests but could also see savings when it comes to fighting forest fires. Additionally, maintaining proper administration and continued enforcement will ensure that people think twice about leaving lasting and damaging scars on our backcountry. It will also provide proper legal restorative remedies for those that are found to not have followed the guidelines.

The enjoyment of random camping has been a growing trend in recent years. The means by which people enjoy our outdoors have also evolved. These fees will also be used for enhancement of our public lands. Increasing infrastructure will ensure that a balance is struck between conservation and enjoyment. Making sure that trails are properly marked and sustainably kept is a big part of the vision we have for our public lands.

Another point here, that is not fun to talk about, is the improper management of garbage and waste on our public lands. We have guidelines clearly posted on our sites. However, it remains an issue. We must be careful not to disturb nature's balance. For some, I think that they sometimes forget how disturbing and invasive they can be in this regard. As such, these fees will be used to increase environmental and waste management.

Education will be the focus for enforcement as Environment and Parks staff will interact with random campers. Anyone found to be noncompliant would be first encouraged to purchase the pass online, with additional enforcement measures when required. Individuals 18 years of age or older camping overnight in the camping pass area would be asked to demonstrate proof of purchase through either a printed camping pass or via the mobile AlbertaRELM app on a mobile device. Both of these options are currently available for hunting and fishing licences.

In 2020, Mr. Speaker, more than \$43 million was allocated to improving infrastructure in parks and public lands. This investment creates good jobs and enhances the recreation experiences for users. Also in 2020 a ministerial order was implemented to increase awareness and enforcement to support safe and responsible behaviour on public lands in the eastern slopes. The bill brings in important support to maintain our well-balanced and safe ecology.

As I prepare to close my remarks, I also want to acknowledge that this will in no way impact our First Nations here in Alberta and the rights that they have to the land. Our First Nations have a deep respect for the land and hold its conservation in high esteem. They have a deep spiritual connection to it, and I believe that we can learn a lot from them when it comes to this.

9:30

Consultations included First Nations and Métis communities across Alberta. This included 50 status First Nations, one nonstatus community, eight Métis settlements, and one credibly asserted Métis community, Fort McKay Métis Nation. Engagement also occurred with 39 Métis groups not currently recognized for consultation. Indigenous communities were informed about the engagement on sustainable outdoor recreation and the proposed exemptions for status First Nations and recognized Métis harvesters on new fees for recreation on provincial Crown land.

Mr. Speaker, it is vital that we protect our public lands, and it is necessary that fees be collected, just as they were in our provincial and national parks, to help enforcement efforts. Like I mentioned a

while ago, I enjoy our outdoors, as I'm sure most of the members here do also. Going out for a walk, hiking, or camping improves our health by increasing our activity while appreciating the wonders our public lands have to offer. It will also increase positivity and boost one's mental health by being closer to nature, enjoying the calmness, engaging with the beauty of our province's landscape. I also want our public lands to not just be available and enjoyable for myself and my children but also for the future generations to come. That is why it is important to preserve and maintain the protection of our environment and public lands for them to enjoy in the days to come.

We must accept that people use these lands and that they have a right to do so. This bill paves the way to mark that reality by providing resources, education, and boots on the ground and will ensure that our public lands are sustainably used and that that use has been properly exercised.

Let me just again emphasize, Mr. Speaker: the fees collected will go back into supporting directly the visitor experience through infrastructure upgrades, education, enforcement, public safety, and environmental and waste management. I again express my appreciation to the minister, the ministry staff, and all Albertan stakeholders who have expressed support to enable sustainable outdoor recreation. I encourage all members of this Chamber to support it as well, as it means to protect public lands when it comes to random camping and the enjoyment of all our outdoors.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the hon. Member for Calgary-East. The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am hopeful to be short under 29(2)(a). Of course, always happy to listen to the member speak, and I appreciate his willingness to rise on many occasions, in this instance on Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021.

While I appreciated the comments, there was one comment that kind of caught me off guard, I guess I would say. The government member said that the funds that will be collected through this legislation and through these fees would be specifically used for enforcement, but of course, as many members on this side of the House and the NDP Official Opposition have raised concerns and questions about, there is nothing in this legislation that actually ensures that that funding would be dedicated to such things as enforcement and maintenance.

Once again, I appreciate the comments, but I'm hopeful that the member might be able to rise and provide some clarity on exactly where that line of comments came from when, in fact, once again, the government had the opportunity to ensure that there were dedicated revenue funds put towards those specific issues but we see no such thing in this legislation. Hopefully, he or someone else on the government side could answer that.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East if he chooses to do so.

The hon. Minister of Justice? No?

Are there others under 29(2)(a)?

Okay. We are back on the main bill. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to contribute to the debate on Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. Again, this is a piece of legislation that the

government is claiming Albertans have asked for. I heard the minister speak specifically to this, saying that this was a campaign commitment. I heard other members of the government say that Albertans are asking for this. I can tell you that from listening to Albertans, they are definitely not asking for more fees. When we're looking at campaign commitments in the time of a global pandemic, that, to me, says that they're focusing on their politics before putting the needs of Albertans first.

If this government was truly listening to what Albertans were asking for, we wouldn't see Bill 64 come into play, because Albertans are struggling, Mr. Speaker. We are in the middle of the third wave of a pandemic that has so many restrictions on individuals. We have so many that are struggling with finances, with their mental health, with trying to determine how they cope, quite frankly. We can't see loved ones that are outside of our households. We can't rely on the important things that we as human beings rely on, and that's being social, and that's being able to connect with people. We heard this Premier say that we're going to have the best summer in Alberta's history. Well, that, to me, is deeply concerning. That is very disconnected from the reality of what Albertans are facing.

Seeing that the government is now putting in a piece of legislation, Bill 64, that introduces fees for access to public lands is very concerning. I know this should be a time where – we're in a recession. We're in a pandemic. People are struggling financially, emotionally. The weather is warming up. We should be in a place where we're encouraging Albertans to get outside, to be able to access this beautiful province without these new fees that this government is proposing.

It just feels like, again, this UCP government is hammering Alberta household budgets. We're asking Albertans to stay safe. We're asking Albertans to take care of each other. We're telling them that we're in this together. By introducing new fees that just don't make sense, it's very confusing to me, Mr. Speaker. We have this government saying: just trust us with what we're going to do with the fees. They're saying that it's going to go into general revenue and that we're just supposed to trust this government with how they determine to spend that money.

Now, the Member for Edmonton-West Henday asked a clarifying question of the previous member that spoke from the government. He had referenced that this government was going to be putting fees towards reinvesting in the public lands. Nowhere in this legislation does it say that, and when the Member for Edmonton-West Henday asked for clarification from that member, he didn't respond. We've been asking this government: where in this legislation does it say where the fees are going to go? There's nowhere – there's absolutely nowhere – in this legislation that dictates where the fees will be spent.

We hear them talking about cleaning up the parks. We hear them talking about making sure that the places that Albertans are accessing are kept clean and tidy. I agree. They should be kept clean and tidy, but I believe that if you're asking Albertans to spend money to access those parks and these lands, then it should be written in the legislation where those fees are going to actually go. We don't see that with this.

9:40

This is a government that is saying: trust us. Well, time and again we have seen that this is a government that can't use that statement and expect Albertans to believe it.

I'm curious if this government has done any sort of study on what this fee impact actually means to Albertans. Do they have an understanding of who is accessing these public lands, of what these fees actually mean? When they came up with this \$20 fee for three

days or a \$30 fee for a season, where did that amount come from? Was there a socioeconomic assessment done to determine the average use, the average income of those that are using these parks and lands and what a fee would look like? I haven't seen any such data if that's true, if that has happened.

I think that this government is doing these increases in so many different areas. It feels, to me, like they're not talking to each other. We see insurance rates skyrocketing. We see electricity rates skyrocketing. We see businesses closing, community leagues, community centres closing, charities closing. All of the things that Albertans rely on are slowly decreasing. The services that they need: the funds are being cut by this government. Yet we're seeing the costs put on Albertans increase.

It's just very concerning to me. When I was a young mom, I had a very, very limited income, and one of the things that I prided myself on was being able to take my family on road trips. And what did we do? We travelled the province of Alberta. We went to all of the different beautiful parks and communities, and, yeah, we paid for fishing licences so that we could get out there and fish. You know, that was something that we budgeted for. That was something that I knew was going to be there. But with this government, who knows what fees are going to be increased? It just seems like it's never-ending.

When the Minister of Environment and Parks was in estimates this year, he said, "Depending on user access and what the numbers are, the Alberta government will continue to look at user fees, including new user fees that I haven't identified today, to be able to make sure that our parks system can operate fully." That, to me, says that they're not done increasing fees. What this legislation does is that it allows this government to arbitrarily increase fees, determine what fees are going to be set out, and then just up the fee and have no accountability on where that money goes. It goes into general revenue.

So when someone is in a park or accessing public land and they are under the impression that they're going to be contributing to the upkeep of that space by having appropriate garbages, by having appropriate washrooms and amenities, they're mistaken. This legislation doesn't actually say that it's going to do that. I know that there were tons of concerns over last summer, when Albertans were out and about accessing public lands. There were concerns about garbage. There were concerns about insufficient washrooms.

To me, that should be part of this legislation. When we're asking for a fee, you should know where that money is going, not a government saying: trust us; this is going into general revenue, and we're going to make sure that that money is spent where it should be. Well, there's nothing in this legislation actually tying the fee to how it's spent.

I know that we have a government that introduced a budget that did nothing to increase jobs, did nothing to support communities but talked about increasing travel and tourism to the province. To me, when we're looking at having a province that is in the third wave of a pandemic, we see other provinces in this country restrict travel. We have a recommendation that nonessential travel not occur, but we have government members that don't take that seriously, where they're travelling outside of Canada despite the travel expectations. We're trying to encourage Albertans to stay within the province and enjoy our beautiful province. We have a government that's talking about wanting to increase travel and tourism in the province, yet they're introducing fees. They're introducing barriers to actually access the beautiful province that we have.

That, to me, just doesn't make sense. I know there are so many beautiful places here where Albertans can go: sometimes it's simply in your backyard; sometimes it's a quick road trip. But if we're

trying to encourage Albertans to stay safe and to comply with the health restrictions, why are we putting in a financial expectation on that and a new fee at a time when we know camping numbers are going up, people accessing the outdoors are going up?

For me to go and purchase a bike for one of my kids last summer was almost impossible. There was nowhere in the city or outlying area where we could find a bike. I eventually found a bike, and then it needed a tire. Trying to get a tire was impossible. Now, two summers ago I don't suspect that that would be a problem.

Because we're in a pandemic and so many Albertans are looking for outdoor activities because there are restrictions on indoor activities, because there are restrictions on travel – it's incredible that so many people in the province are accessing the beautiful scenery that this province has. But to look at implementing fees to access those lands just doesn't make sense to me, Mr. Speaker.

I know that there are questions about: when does it stop? When does this government stop increasing fees? Are there any limitations about the fees that this government or this minister could impose? How high could the fees go? He's saying that depending on usage, the fees could go up. Well, that sounds like a cash cow. When we see that Albertans are accessing these public lands, what's stopping this government from continuing to increase fees or creating new fees for people to be able to get out and enjoy the outdoors? We've seen this government increase camping fees two years in a row. We've seen and heard this minister talking about additional fees. Where does it end, Mr. Speaker?

I know I'm hearing from Albertans that are struggling, Albertans that are having a hard time being able to afford the basic necessities, healthy groceries, parents that aren't able to have two incomes because they can't afford child care. Their hours at one of their jobs are so reduced because of COVID, and now we're asking them to just pay a little bit more. What happens to those people that are on a fixed income, limited income? They don't have it in their budget to be able to afford something that they've relied on for their activity for years. Being able to access public lands is something that I would say the majority of Albertans do and don't budget that. They budget what it's going to cost for gas. They're going to budget what foods they're going to take, but actually accessing the land isn't something that the average family anticipates.

I'm curious how this is going to be monitored within this government. We hear the government members stand up and talk about how wonderful this is, how Albertans have asked for it, and how the fees are going to maintain the parks. If only that were true, Mr. Speaker. I can say that when I'm out accessing public lands and I'm taking my kids camping and we're doing water sports, we're very, very vigilant in how we ensure that we leave the space the way we found it. We make sure we pick up our garbage. We make sure that there's very limited impact on the land that we're accessing, because I grew up with a family of hunters that were very, very respectful of the land. I know that that's not the case in all of the parts of the province. I think that when we're looking at increasing fees, it needs to be tied into the legislation that that money goes directly to supporting the cleanliness of that park.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

9:50

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Municipal Affairs has risen.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise under 29(2)(a) and make some comments. I was trying to listen carefully to the hon. member talk about how she's concerned about fees, which can be a fair comment. But I also heard her say that this

bill wasn't important enough, that only a bill about COVID should be done and anything else was bad.

On the other hand, during her comment she actually commented that while she's been out with her family, presumably, or whoever she travels with, there were issues when she was at the beautiful places. I think she said there were concerns about the condition of the bathrooms, about the garbage. You know what, Mr. Speaker? I believe the hon. member. I believe those concerns are there because we've heard those from Albertans. One of the things that I think the hon. Minister of Environment and Parks has heard is that people said: we want better. Not all of them, but many of them, I believe, told the minister that if we have to pay a little bit to make it better, then for goodness' sake, make it better. I think that's fair comment, too.

I would say to the folks there, I mean – listen, I know. I grew up in Ontario, a beautiful place, but the record would show I chose Alberta 40 years ago and stayed here. It will be 40 years this year as a matter of fact. But I remember that it was seven kids going to the provincial park, to the beach pretty much every weekend and always having to stop at the gate and pay a toll, a fee, a park fee, a park pass, whatever you want to call it. I suppose that is probably what paid to have the garbage cans emptied, probably what paid to have the roads and the parking lot maintained. I expect, because that's what the minister said, that that's what will happen with this money. The minister said that that's what will happen with this money.

But remember, Mr. Speaker. I've heard several members from both sides, from the other side say that they like to use the outdoor spaces. Well, thank goodness they got thrown out of government because the environment minister they had was restricting the use of many parks in Alberta. I think of the Castle. I think of the Castle. Many of the activities that had gone on for years in the Castle: the previous environment minister from the NDP was severely limiting or cutting off a lot of those usages. Most people believed that the minister was about to cut off the same usages in the west country. We've heard the environment minister say this many times in this House. [interjections]

See, Mr. Speaker? The truth is troubling them. We listened carefully while they said all the things that they said, but when they are confronted with the facts, they cannot be quiet because they know they're wrong. They know that when they were in government, their environment minister's plan included cutting off many activities from public lands. Maybe that was because the minister didn't know how to pay to look after, or maybe the minister just doesn't like people being out in nature. I don't know. You'd have to ask the minister that. The fact is that the NDP, when they were in power, was cutting off systematically access to the backcountry.

Our government is doing the opposite. We're looking for ways to provide access to the backcountry so that those experiences we've heard members from all sides of the House talk about – camping, hiking, spending time in nature with their friends and their family and having fun – can be done. Mr. Speaker, I would say that the smarter thing would be for the other side to say: "Well, what is the plan to pick up the garbage? What is the plan to provide access?" The Minister of Environment and Parks has made it clear that that is included in what he's planning on doing, and that's what the fees will go towards. I believe him.

I also heard that other side say: well, how do we know it will happen? Well, about 4 million Albertans: they don't all use the backcountry, and they don't all use the parks; the ones that do will surely hold the government of the day accountable. As long as this government is here, unlike the last government, they'll actually get a chance to use that backcountry, because the NDP was

systematically cutting off access to public lands in the backcountry to Albertans, and our government is not.

Mr. Speaker, that's what this is about. I heard concerns about other things, about costs, but when they introduced the carbon tax, they didn't seem to care at all about what things cost. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod is next.

Mr. Reid: Thank you very much. It's absolutely my pleasure to rise this evening in support of Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. My thanks to the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre for highlighting two of the fantastic parts of my riding, that I'm proud to call home. They are truly beautiful. Mr. Speaker, when public health regulations allow, I invite you to come down and visit Livingstone-Macleod. We'll sear it into your brain with some of the amazing sights that I'm privileged to call home. I would also like to thank the Minister of Environment and Parks for this legislation, which I would believe will allow current and future generations of Albertans to continue to enjoy our beautiful public lands in this province.

As many of you know, Livingstone-Macleod has some of the most beautiful and scenic public lands and parks in the entire world. The eastern slopes, nestled between the Rocky Mountains and the foothills and Porcupine Hills, are breathtaking, absolutely breathtaking, and I encourage Albertans this summer who are vacationing locally to check out the fantastic hiking paths, the camping spots, the historic sites, and other areas of interest within Livingstone-Macleod. I myself grew up camping, enjoying these public lands, and it was common for my family as well as many rural Albertan families to do random camping out in the eastern slopes. It's a beautiful and enriching experience to be in nature with no amenities beyond what you bring along. Perhaps that's even what we would call real camping.

Just like many Albertans that enjoy these fantastic public lands, I also want these lands to be maintained and protected, but the reality is this. Funds to maintain and protect these precious areas are not entirely there. The eastern slopes are massive in size, they are diverse in terrain, and they require a lot of attention. The meagre fees acquired through the activities on the public land recreation areas or public land recreation trails simply are not enough to ensure the quality of maintenance and protection of these lands, especially as we've seen the strong demand we've seen in the last two years for camping in these areas. This has been a concern for the government, and it's why the government allocated more than \$43 million to improving infrastructure in parks and on public lands in 2020, which I was very happy to see. A fee for random camping was one of the commitments that our government made during the election, and it's part of the government's long-term, common-sense conservation plan for environmental stewardship of our parks.

Bill 64 would require individuals 18 and over to have a public land camping pass when they are random camping in the public lands in the eastern slopes of Alberta. If passed, the public land camping pass would be \$20 per person for a three-day pass and \$30 per person for an annual pass, with \$3.25 for a GST system transaction fee. Once a camping pass is bought, the individual will need to either have the printed copy on them when they're camping, or they can have the pass on their mobile device through the AlbertaRELM app, which will be available free. These passes will be available for purchase online at albertarelm.com or at the very same locations where Albertans pick up their fishing and hunting licences already. If passed, this legislation would take effect on June 1, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, I want to make one thing crystal clear before I move on. The public land camping pass will not apply to indigenous Albertans who are exercising their right to be on the land for traditional uses and activities. The exercise of rights and traditional uses of public lands by our First Nations, Métis communities is exempt from this legislation, and I cannot stress this enough. In my own constituency of Livingstone-Macleod the Piikani have lived on the land for over 10,000 years, and in fact recently some researchers believe that it may be as long as 15,000 years. It's absolutely fundamental that the Piikani and other indigenous peoples continue to exercise their constitutional rights, which include engaging in their traditional activities on Alberta's public lands.

The public land camping pass will also not apply to lands under the Provincial Parks Act, which includes our provincial parks, our wildland provincial parks, and provincial recreation areas. It will also not apply to wilderness areas, ecological reserves, heritage rangelands, natural areas, or private, municipal, and federal titled lands.

10:00

Consultations for this legislation occurred between November 26, 2020, and January 15, 2021, through a survey and targeted discussion with key stakeholders and in consultation with our indigenous peoples. A majority of respondents to the survey were very supportive of the user-based fees to ensure that conservation, protection, and maintenance of these public lands occurred. If you are an avid backcountry camper who regularly enjoys and appreciates the beauty of our public lands, like many in my riding of Livingstone-Macleod, paying the \$33.25, including GST, for the annual pass and the transaction fee is a small amount to be able to enjoy and protect our public lands for generations.

As demand for camping on public land increases, the government continues to invest in more conservation officers and capital projects. We've seen this in Budget 2021. The revenue from public land camping passes will go to support public safety on public lands. With more boots on the ground, it is anticipated that this pass will generate approximately \$1.7 million in its first year and an estimated \$2.7 million in subsequent years. If Bill 64 passes, the public land camping pass will also allow these conservation and protection efforts to have a more sustainable source of annual funding, which is great news for our environment, our quality of life, and for future generations to be able to enjoy the incredible lands that we are fortunate to call home.

Tonight I encourage all members of this House to join me in voting in favour of Bill 64. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. It's unfortunate that at a time when Albertans are struggling to make ends meet, at a time when they are not able to travel anywhere else, the government seizes this opportunity to put a new tax, a new fee on outdoor parks instead of encouraging Albertans to use those outdoor sites and incentivizing them to use those.

Members on the other side do argue that it's a small fee to be paid for these parks and for their maintenance. I do not believe that this bill creates a dedicated revenue or that anyone from that side will get up and guarantee us that every single penny raised from this fund will go back to providing those services that they're talking about in our public spaces. It's just another tax, another fee that they never promised Albertans, and now they see that as an opportunity

to raise some funds to pay for their corporate handouts, pay for their bad deals, and pay for their financial mismanagement.

When we look at these fees in the context of other policies that this government has brought forward, then we are able to see the cumulative impact of these fees. The government came to power on a promise to create jobs, to build pipelines, to help improve the economy. What we have seen, even before the pandemic, is that this government lost 50,000 jobs, and their successive budgets do not include any plan to create jobs.

They handed out \$4.7 billion to the richest corporations and assured Albertans that jobs will be created, that the economy will get better. Mr. Speaker, we have evidence that that didn't happen. Those corporations that benefited from that handout: they got millions of dollars from that handout. Not only did that not create any jobs, but Albertans were handed pink slips, and they moved to jurisdictions with even higher taxes. Here members from the other side get up and they make arguments that, "Oh, it's a very small increase, and Albertans should be able to pay that," but on the other hand, when they were handing out billions of dollars to corporations, they were telling Albertans: "No, no. Corporations are struggling. They can't pay even a little bit more."

That was one thing, Mr. Speaker. Then insurance. For pretty much every one of us in this House, it's a kind of pain that impacts every Albertan. The first thing they did was that they removed the cap from insurance. At that time, again, the argument was that without them removing that cap, the insurance business was not profitable. They were more worried about those companies than Albertans, and as a result of that decision, insurance companies made millions during this pandemic while Albertans have to pay more for their profits.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Similarly, they brought in the bracket creep that this Premier, when in Ottawa, used to speak out against, costing everyday Albertans, again, millions of dollars. Now we are seeing this bill that, again, will cost everyday Albertans millions of dollars. When we look at the cumulative impact of government changes, Albertans are paying more to get less, and this adds up to the variety of costs, fees, and new taxes that this government has imposed on Albertans.

With that, Madam Speaker, I would like to move an amendment. I have the requisite number of copies. Once you have the copy, I will read that into the record.

10:10

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, this will be known as amendment REF1.

Hon. member, please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, 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.

It's a pretty straightforward amendment, Madam Speaker. As I indicated, the fees that the government is trying to impose on Albertans through this piece of legislation need to be looked at in conjunction with the wide variety of costs and fees that this government has downloaded onto Albertans. Even during the estimates the minister also indicated that they will potentially be looking at additional fees as well. This bill enables the minister to increase and charge those kinds of fees on the public lands.

The lands that we are talking about: they are called public lands; they belong to the public. If there is some serious concern about their management, I think the government should be consulting with the public. It doesn't seem so, the way the legislation is drafted, because this fund collected from the public is not going into a dedicated revenue fund. It's going into general revenues, that the government may use to pay for corporate handouts and the kind of deals that they have been doing.

I don't think it's fair to the public at this time, when they are struggling because of the pandemic, because of this government's failed policies, and because of the slowing economy – there is so much going on. I don't think that at this time it's fair for the government to impose additional fees, additional burdens onto Albertans. It's reasonable that this bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship, that can look into ways that we can best manage the public land, get input from the public. Often that side talks about citizen engagement and accountability and all those things. I think all those goals can be achieved by engaging the public and can be realized when this bill is before the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship.

With that, I urge all members of this House to support this amendment, and let's send this bill to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship, where we can look at the fees that are charged through this bill along with the need for proper management of public lands and in the context of the ongoing pandemic, economic circumstances, and other fees and taxes imposed on Albertans by this UCP government.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Ms Rosin: I will be brief speaking to this under 29(2)(a). The member across the aisle spoke about the need to refer this to committee so that we could do public consultation on the fee and whether or not Albertans are looking to have a small fee imposed for random camping. I actually thought that I would just put on the record that we're a step ahead of them on this matter.

Within my beautiful constituency of Banff-Kananaskis, the number one most beautiful constituency in the province, I will add, I have the Ghost watershed. Ghost watershed encompasses Waiparous, which is an area that I'm sure lots of us in this Chamber have been camping to. It's one of the most popular near Devils Head, through the Bow and Elbow rivers. I have the Ghost watershed within my constituency, and I have met with the Ghost Watershed Alliance Society numerous times in my capacity as the MLA.

The people who are in the Ghost Watershed Alliance Society are not what the opposition members may consider far-right radicals. I wouldn't even necessarily be able to say if they vote on conservative principles normally at all or how they would lean politically. But what I do know is one thing, that the people on the Ghost Watershed Alliance are, first and foremost, environmentalists to their core. These are the people who are out there day and night picking up garbage, taking care of the watershed, and lobbying myself as the MLA, our government, and the Minister of Environment and Parks to continue protecting our environment and to continue protecting our watershed so that every Albertan can come out to the Ghost area, to Waiparous and camp and enjoy the beautiful landscape and not have to worry about the condition of that area that they want to camp in.

Actually, the first time I met with the Ghost watershed group, they provided me with a 27-page document, and I'll be sure I can table the page from which I will read in the House tomorrow. Based

on their experience as managers of the watershed and the environment in that area and dealing with random campers and those who recreate in our amazing backcountry, they issued this 27-page document to our Minister of Environment and Parks about the situation and how dire it's becoming and how much garbage is left behind.

They actually state in their closing sentence that they suggest – they have short, medium, and long-term solutions, and in their proposed medium-term solution they state, “We understand the Alberta Government is currently developing a trail fee system. We think this approach has merit and believe it could potentially be expanded to include a random camping user fee component.” This is coming from the very environmentalists who manage our watershed in the Ghost area.

Interestingly enough, the opposition are talking about how beautiful the landscape is and how we need to maintain that. Well, interestingly, last year alone we hauled out 62 truckloads of human feces from Waiparous left behind by random campers. This was not human feces that we pulled out of the porta-potties and transported; this was 62 truckloads of human feces quite literally laying on the ground because random campers had nowhere else to go. There weren't any services or amenities or porta-potties to take their dump in, so they just did it on the top of the ground.

It may be easy to talk about how we need to preserve our beautiful landscapes, but at this point we cannot afford to preserve those and to take care of those landscapes. The very environmentalists who are trying to protect these landscapes are the very ones who've come to us and asked for this fee. I am proud to say that our government has listened. We've taken the advice not of political or lobby groups but of the very environmentalists who are tasked with and spend their life's work volunteering for no benefit of their own other than for good will and to take care of the place that they love and call home. We've taken the very advice of those environmentalists and those who have studied biology, who've asked us to implement this random camping fee so that they can better manage the environment and make sure that when Albertans go camping they're not laying their sleeping bag down beside a heap of turds and some toilet paper.

I'm actually proud to say that I support this legislation, and I don't think we need to refer it to a committee because the very people – the public consultation has been done, and this is actually a response to what has been asked of us as legislators.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to join debate? There are 20 seconds under 29(2)(a).

Seeing none, to speak to the main bill, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

10:20

Mr. Bilous: To the referral motion, Madam Speaker. With pleasure, it's my honour to rise and speak to the amendment of this bill. I will briefly respond to comments by the previous speaker. You know, I appreciate the fact that there are a number of groups in Alberta that are sounding the alarm on the challenges, the costs of random campers, and some of the state – I won't say all, because there are some people that random camp that pack everything in, pack everything out. I used to do backcountry camping and did the exact same thing, but there are folks who take advantage of our beautiful locations in the province and who unfortunately do leave waste behind. I recognize that this is an issue that needs to be addressed. I think the fundamental difference between the government caucus and the opposition is that our position is that costs to either remediate or enforce or ensure that our lands are well kept are costs that the government should be using from our general taxes.

You see, the irony, Madam Speaker, is that the UCP government allegedly are about protecting Albertans' pocketbooks, but the reality is that they're not. The government, the Finance minister day after day talks about how this budget didn't increase taxes. Yes it did. Let me go through them. Taxes have been increased on every Albertan on their personal income taxes. It's called bracket creep. For Albertans who don't know, necessarily, what bracket creep is: essentially, if you get a cost-of-living increase, which most contracts allow for, and it bumps you into the next tax bracket, your taxes go up. This is something the very Premier fought vehemently against when he was the head of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, claiming it was a tax, but I guess 20 years later he's done a one-eighty, and now it's not considered a tax. Somehow – I don't know how – this side justifies that.

An increase on personal income taxes is an increase on taxes, so the government cannot say that they're not increasing taxes. As well, costs have gone up on insurance, utilities, 911 calls. Toll bridges are coming to Alberta. Thank you to the Minister of Transportation. These are all increased costs, and the government plays semantics: oh, we're not increasing taxes. Hey, news flash: they're all taxes. Ask your accountant or your accountants in your caucus. They will tell you. As you are charging Albertans fees, those are essentially taxes. The difference is – Albertans would argue – that we pay our fair share in taxes, and we expect certain services. Protecting our parks, protecting our backcountry is something that we expect. This is why, quite frankly, members of the government caucus, under the NDP government we created a new park in the Castle. You know why? Because they faced these exact same challenges where there were random campers that were leaving that beautiful part of Alberta a mess when they left. One of the ways to protect an area is to create a park. [interjections]

You know what? The Minister of Transportation is heckling me. Well, I'm sorry, Minister. People can go there, but parks will put certain parameters on how they can be used in order to protect the ecology. Guess what? Hunters, ranchers are the first people to stand up to say that we need to be doing this. I would argue that so would OHV vehicle users argue that they want to protect the ecology. You know why, Madam Speaker? Because they want it to be there for future generations. But the difference between this government's approach and the previous government's is that the previous government used revenues generated from existing taxes to achieve this outcome. This government is nickel and diming Albertans and then denying that they're doing it and expecting Albertans to think otherwise.

You know, the previous member, from Banff-Kananaskis, talked about this bill and being able to charge random campers for leaving behind an unwanted mess or, let's just say, even charging random campers. Great. Government of Alberta, how will you enforce this piece of legislation? It's not in the bill. Is the money, through legislation, funnelled into a separate account that ensures it actually goes toward protecting the parks, enhancing the parks, enforcing this, cleaning these areas? Nope. It goes into general revenue. But you know what, Madam Speaker? I'll ask the government: where does their portion of the education property tax go? Does it go to schools? I'll ask the Minister of Education that. The answer is: no, it doesn't. It goes to general revenue.

The problem is that there is no guarantee with this bill as it's currently written that these fees, which I oppose, increasing costs on Albertans when they're in the middle of a pandemic – on behalf of Albertans who've written to my office, how dare you. Other provinces are coming up with innovative solutions to encourage their citizens to spend their dollars in their own province. What does our government do? We finally see a light at the end of the tunnel,

and our government, our UCP government, charges Albertans to spend their vacation here in the province, a disincentive to stay here.

Madam Speaker, do you know how much Albertans spend in the tourism sector? Seven billion dollars out of province. This bill is essentially writing a note to Albertans to say, “Enjoy British Columbia. Enjoy other provinces because we’re going to charge you more to enjoy your own backyard,” as Albertans have been shuttered for more than a year and are itching to spend money. Here’s the irony. International tourism, international travel will be very slow to come back. We’re a long way off from that, so for this summer, coming into this summer, we have a real opportunity to encourage, to incentivize Albertans to stay in our province, to spend their money in our own communities, in their own backyard. This bill does the opposite.

Now, compare that with the proposal that the Official Opposition put forward recently for a travel voucher, which exists in New Brunswick – Ontario is bringing it in, and it’s based on a travel voucher that was introduced in European countries – that provides or reimburses Albertans 20 cents on the dollar for their fees incurred to travel within Alberta, up to \$1,000, and they have the whole year to build up to that. That, Madam Speaker, is innovation. That’s creativity. That will incentivize Albertans to go out of their communities, whether it’s a full-blown vacation or a weekend getaway to try that new restaurant in Drumheller, to visit a different part of Alberta that they haven’t, whether that’s the badlands, whether that’s the mountains, whether that’s southern Alberta or the far north to explore and take advantage of the northern lights and other incredible experiences that exist in our province. That would actually support the tourism sector, which has been hit the hardest, hurt the most out of any sector in this province.

10:30

Madam Speaker, we know – the opposition has asked time and time again of the jobs minister for sector-specific supports, especially for those who have been hit the hardest. Time and time again we hear the same response: not necessary, and we won’t entertain it.

Meanwhile this program would not only support the very entrepreneurs in this province, but the benefits go through everyone in the value chain, Madam Speaker, in the restaurant and hospitality sector: those that supply the food – our farmers, our producers – those that prepare the food, those that serve the food. Individual Alberta families would benefit from the experiences vacationing in their own backyard. I’m flabbergasted. I’ve yet to hear an argument against a proposal like this, a credible argument.

Again, I mean, it seems that our Premier loves to take his notes and signals from the Premier of Ontario. We seem to follow suit with Ontario except for the level of supports for businesses – they provided \$40,000 in this third wave; we’re giving \$10,000 – except in this case, where the province of Ontario has recognized the potential for a travel voucher.

But I’ll come back to the referral, Madam Speaker. The reason that this should be sent to the Resource Stewardship Committee is because I can’t stand here in good conscience recognizing the incredible burden that Albertans have had to endure due to COVID-19 but which has not been made easier by this government’s actions. At a time when Albertans and businesses and families are hurting the most, this government proposes a new fee, a new tax on Albertans to visit the very communities and beautiful landscapes that Alberta has to offer.

There is another way, Madam Speaker. Any time the government stands up and says: “We don’t have the money. We can’t afford it. You want us to spend, spend, spend.” No. You know what? Cut out that embarrassing war room of \$30 million a year, which has actually

hurt Alberta’s reputation, not benefited it. I challenge any member to table a shred of evidence that the war room has actually assisted, promoted, or helped our energy industry. It has not. I encourage members to talk to the CEOs of the Alberta energy companies, and they will tell you that it has not helped them at all. But if there’s money for a failed initiative like the war room, then that is a conscious decision and a priority this government is making that could easily be allocated to ensure that our wilderness is taken care of.

I’m not opposed to those Albertans who decide to take advantage of the beautiful areas of this province and leave it a mess and consciously leave their waste behind. Should they face fines? Yes. Obviously, there’s due process. We separate, obviously, the state from those that enforce. But should there be consequences for people who are intentionally breaking the rules and making it worse for those that come after them? Yes. But this proposal, this bill is not the solution. That’s why I’m supporting the Member for Calgary-McCall to send this to committee so that it can be thoroughly discussed and debated.

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

Seeing none, any other members wishing to speak to the amendment, REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It’s an honour to rise this evening to speak to Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, and specifically to the referral motion as proposed by the Member for Calgary-McCall, once again, that this piece of legislation, Bill 64,

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.

I have appreciated the conversations, of course, before this referral amendment was put forward, and to the members that have spoken following that, I’m very appreciative of those comments.

You know, we’ve had the opportunity to hear from a lot of members this evening and in previous opportunities to debate Bill 64. It has really put a lot of this into perspective. When we consider the fact that we are in the midst of a global pandemic, that we are now in the third wave, and we look at the priorities of this government, whether we’re looking back at the failure of this government to move on the critical worker benefit, with only a few days left on that program, before that money was essentially gone in terms of this government being able to sit down with the federal government and come up with an agreement that would actually support Alberta workers. Unfortunately, once again this government left that to the eleventh hour.

Yet here we are with a piece of legislation that’s actually going to cost Albertans more when they are trying to do things like random camping and the use of public lands. We see this government moving as fast as possible to see this implemented, of course, after being voted on, if it were passed, to be implemented by June. Even when we look at the priorities in terms of the last piece of legislation that we’re debating and conversations around the Recall Act, once again this government, when it’s to their benefit, is happy to move forward pieces of legislation and ensure that they’re being implemented and enforced as soon as possible when it comes to taking more money from the pockets of Albertans. But when we talk about recall legislation, as flawed as it is, and holding representatives accountable, they don’t want that to be discussed until after the next election, and they don’t want that to be implemented in a manner that would actually hold them accountable in a timely manner.

It's very clear, the priorities of this government, when we look. Many members this evening have spoken to the fact that we are seeing an incredible number of new fees and service costs being piled onto Albertans, whether we're talking about the 911 fees that we recently debated. Unfortunately, with that \$42 million that is going to be taken from Albertans' pocketbooks, once again no real commitment that that money is going to be reinvested or that that money is going to actually ensure that the quality of emergency services is strengthened. Quite the opposite; we hear silence. We hear nothing from government members, who continue to sit through further centralization of many of those services. I'll just point out, Madam Speaker, that earlier this evening we heard the Member for Sherwood Park talk about how the UCP government could never stand for anything centralized, yet these same government members have been completely silent on those issues. It's quite clear, the priorities of this government and the direction of this government.

When we talk about these fee increases, it makes me think back to the 2015 election, when the Progressive Conservatives were voted out for many reasons. Unfortunately, we're seeing a lot of those same trends happening within this UCP government. I wonder where that ideology and that perspective is coming from. Of course, we had the Minister of Transportation rise earlier this evening on Bill 64 after a speech from one of our members who was asking very clear questions about: how are we going to ensure that the revenue collected through this legislation is going to be spent on what the government is saying it was going to be spent on? There is absolutely zero indication of that in this legislation, zero commitment through any sections of this legislation to ensure that those fees will be spent on maintenance, will be spent on enforcement. Many members from our side have raised those concerns.

10:40

In the five minutes that the Transportation minister took to stand up and speak to that member, he answered none of those questions and said: trust us; we are going to make the right decision. But the right decision is to include how that money is going to be spent specifically in this legislation. I've questioned many members on that.

As we look at the direction of this government and where their priorities lie, once again looking back to the 2015 election, you might remember, as I do, Madam Speaker, that the Progressive Conservative government at the time, which that Transportation minister was a part of, was calling for the implementation of things like health care levies and was calling for the implementation of things like increased motor vehicle fees and increased land title fees. It's very interesting, now that they have formed government under the UCP, with some of those very same members, who are now ministers in the UCP, that were ministers under the Progressive Conservatives, that many of these ideas that were proposed in the 2015 budget before coming into the election have actually made their way into government policy and have made their way into increased fees on Albertans.

I wonder exactly who's calling the shots here. Is it the Progressive Conservatives that have merged into this party that are increasing fees on Albertans? It's very concerning that the level of entitlement that we saw under the Progressive Conservatives has come to light so quickly under this UCP government. I have to question who's calling the shots over there.

Once again, when we look at things like the decision of this government to lift insurance caps – of course, when we were in government, we put a 5 per cent cap on those insurance rates, and this UCP government and this Finance minister came in and said:

absolutely not; we can't support Albertans with capping insurance fees because, as the Member for Calgary-McCall spoke to, we need to ensure that the returns for these insurance companies are good enough to make sure their executives are making millions of dollars at the end of the year. Unfortunately, that is not supporting the Albertans who are now being asked to pay hundreds and hundreds of dollars and potentially, in larger families, thousands of dollars more per year to pay for their vehicle insurance and in some instances aren't even able to use those vehicles. When they might be considering using those vehicles to do things like camping, well, not only are they going to be paying more for their insurance, but they will also be asked to pay more for accessing those campgrounds and those public lands.

It's interesting when we consider the priorities of this government and the decisions that they're making around insurance cap fees being lifted, once again utilities caps being lifted, an issue that we're hearing from so many Albertans, at the same time as we are in the middle of the third wave of a pandemic. Further perspective: I think the Member for Calgary-McCall once again recognized who is being impacted most by these fees. It's likely and potentially those front-line workers, potentially retail workers who are looking for some respite at the end of a busy season potentially, who are now being asked, on top of potentially not qualifying for the critical worker benefit, to pay more for doing things that should be affordable to Alberta families, like random camping and like the use of public lands across our great province.

It's very frustrating and very concerning. The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview laid it out quite clearly, that we should be doing everything in our power to support tourism within our province, but we're seeing the opposite from this UCP government. Once again, just looking back at the proposals that we've put forward about opportunities to reimburse Albertans for travel expenses, why aren't we discussing that? Why are we discussing putting more burdens on them, putting more service fees on them? It's absolutely unbelievable that here we are, essentially double-taxing Albertans for something that we should be able to pay for already.

While I appreciate the comments from, say, the Member for Banff-Kananaskis about certain organizations talking about the potential to support these public lands for future generations through the use of fees, I would say that our concerns continue to be that we are in the middle of a pandemic. The other concern, which I don't think the member addressed, is that we see no promise within this legislation and no assurance that the money being collected on these fees is going to be spent for enforcement and maintenance of these public lands and these parks. I think that's an important part of the conversation, and I think it's been raised several times through this debate, which is, once again, why I am calling on this government and supporting the Member for Calgary-McCall in his call to refer this to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship. It's the least we can do.

I've heard loud and clear from my constituents, who are just itching to get out of town, just itching to do some random camping and to use some public lands, that are very concerned with the speed at which this legislation is being moved through the House, with the lack of a fulsome consultation on this legislation.

I know that government has talked to some extent about the survey that they put out, but we know, whether we're looking at the consultation on coal mining, whether we're talking about consultations on draft curriculum potentially, Madam Speaker, that this government is not very good at putting surveys together. Well, maybe they are good for their members and for their government and getting the answers that they want but not good for Albertans who are trying to get their points across. When this government is

creating surveys that are giving them the answers that they want, unfortunately, for Albertans who are concerned, that is not being reflected in the survey responses that we see being brought forward by this government and the answers that they're saying happened in the what-we-heard report.

Once again, as we're reflecting on this and reflecting on the great privilege that we have as members of this Assembly and how the legislation and the fee increases that we are potentially putting forward to Albertans are going to affect them, I think it's very important that we pause and reflect on that, on the socioeconomic place that people that often going out to these communities are in. I remember earlier in the session, Madam Speaker, a member of the government caucus speaking passionately about the fact that camping was one of the only things that their family could afford in terms of going on vacations. Yet a few short months later, or maybe several months later, we see this government moving forward to make it more expensive for people like that member and their family to afford camping.

So we see a complete 180 from that member and from this government on issues of increasing costs and increasing services, from a government that campaigned on quite the opposite. As the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview laid out, as have several members this evening, when we look at bracket creep, when we look at the decision from this Premier and this Finance minister to increase personal income taxes on many Albertans in the midst of a pandemic and an economic downturn because of the slump in global oil prices, it's unfortunate that these are the priorities that we see this government moving forward with.

I think, at the end of the day, that many members of the public and many Albertans are asking themselves, based on the commitment of jobs, economy, pipelines that this government put forward in the last election, if any of those things have come to fruition, if any of their lives have actually gotten better or more affordable. I think that for the majority of Albertans, when they reflect on insurance increases, when they reflect on utility increases – if they are potentially living on a fixed income, with changes to pensions, or maybe they're on AISH, and this government made a commitment to them that they would actually index AISH to rise with inflation and, unfortunately, went back on that decision. Albertans, I think, quite clearly see that this government has no intent to actually make their lives more affordable.

10:50

When we look at the \$4.7 billion handout that we saw very early into this government's mandate, when we look at the \$30 million war room that this government continues to go through with, which is a national and an international embarrassment for our province, when we talk about the need to increase fees, we could easily pivot some of that money to ensure that Albertans aren't get double-taxed on things like camping, aren't getting double-taxed on things like 911 service fees, on things like tolls, in this instance on bridges potentially. But the Transportation minister has not ruled out tolls on anything.

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

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise under 29(2)(a). I tried to listen to the hon. member, but I have to say that I think the legislation must be pretty good because the folks across keep talking about every other piece of legislation, every other complaint that they have, and not what's in this piece of legislation, at least half their comments, so it tells me that what's in there must be pretty good.

Here's a comment that I agree with that the previous speaker said. He said, "It's the least we can do." It sure is, Madam Speaker. If this legislation goes through, then the Environment and Parks ministry can start making improvements to the parks, maybe improve some of those bathrooms that the member across talked about needed improving, maybe pick up some garbage. But, no, the NDP wants to do the least they can do. They sure, sure do. But I don't think that's necessarily what Albertans want.

The other thing that Albertans didn't want was what their former environment minister from the NDP did, to lock them out of a great deal of Alberta's backcountry and restrict the activities there, not let people go there at all and do the things they want to do. What they actually have said to our environment minister is: yeah. The responsible ones, lots of them, have said: we'll pay a little bit so you can get some enforcement so the yo-yos have to follow the rules, too. I don't know; I hope "yo-yo" is okay to use here. There are lots of other impolite words that I would like to use for people that leave their garbage behind and make a mess and whatnot.

This is the intent. This is what our Minister of Environment and Parks is wanting to do so that this year – I agree with this part, too, that there are going to be a lot of people this summer. I hope the Premier is right that this is the best summer ever. Maybe it'll just feel like the best summer ever after we haven't been able to congregate in person indoors with people that we love as much we would like to, and we can start doing that. It sure might feel like the best summer ever to me.

Here's the thing. The member that just spoke talked about insurance. Our government is trying to fix the insurance business that they broke. When the NDP were in government, they tried to starve out the insurance companies so they could put government insurance in place. They wouldn't let them make a profit. They wouldn't let them increase their rates according to what their costs were. They were trying to starve them out to put in government insurance. That's the NDP playbook, probably chapter 1 or 2 of the NDP playbook: have the government run everything. There they go. They broke the insurance business, and now they're complaining about it. Standard NDP. Earlier speakers were talking about electricity. The NDP totally broke the electricity business, \$30 million a month. Now we're trying to fix it, and now they're complaining about it. This is really rich from the folks over there.

The parks system: they broke that, too, as I said. They were getting to the point where they were actually restricting Albertans' access to the backcountry and were going to do more of it in the west country. We're fixing it, and now – wait for it – they want to do the least they can do. Yeah, well, I guess the least they can do is probably better than what they did when they were in government because they didn't just do nothing; they went backwards. It was negative. Albertans' ability to enjoy the backcountry of this beautiful province went backwards.

Now we don't have the NDP money tree. No one actually does. We realize that if you're going to have somebody be out there to write tickets to people that behave badly, you've probably got to pay them. If you want more people out there picking up the garbage, you've probably got to pay them. It's always been my experience that when you stop paying people, they stop showing up for work. Maybe there's something they should write down over there. I'll give you a minute.

There you go, Madam Speaker. The fact is that this bill is about improving the way that Albertans can access provincial parks and backcountries. This is taking the side of those that go out there and behave well and against the side of those that go out there and behave badly. That's what's intended here. You know what? Albertans will judge how we do. I appreciate that. But this amendment, to do nothing during this summer after COVID, when

people haven't gone out, to take away the government's ability to improve the way that things are looked after, including the bathrooms and the garbage pick up, which the other side legitimately complained about, and I don't disagree with them – let it happen. This is trying to stop it.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, any other members wishing to speak to amendment REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thanks for the opportunity to say a few words in regard to the hon. member's amendment to refer this Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship. I certainly am here to endorse this amendment. I think that through all of the rhetoric and sometimes a little off-topic hyperbole that we hear this evening, we all share an interest in making sure the integrity of our public lands is intact and that Albertans have a way by which they can enjoy those places. Indeed, thousands of Albertans – I would include myself and my family in that – do go to our Crown lands to camp and to recreate and, you know, have some fun in all seasons of the year, really. The key to maintaining the integrity of that and to expanding those opportunities is certainly not to put a fee in the way of people to be able to go to use those things.

We're already starting to see, Madam Speaker – I've seen it over the last 10 or 15 years, and certainly it's been concentrated in the last year or so with COVID – is that people have an enhanced sense of being able to go out and to be in the outdoors and to be camping and to have recreation opportunities associated with that. What we need to do and what the responsible thing for us to do here as a Legislature is to make sure that we put, you know, a framework in place by which people can, number one, feel like they can do that, they can do that affordably, and to have a plan to make sure that that is sustainable into the future.

Again, cutting through all of the rhetoric and obvious exaggeration about people cutting off recreation opportunities like that – I mean, that's absolute nonsense, and we all know that – it's to, in between, find a way by which people can carry on and make plans, because we're talking about legislation here that would go into effect in the next six weeks. I don't know of any plan that you could possibly make that would cover the eastern slopes of this province, which is literally the size of a mid-sized European country, and build a framework by which you could equitably charge people for that access to Crown land.

We know that there are lots of different recreation areas out there. There are provincial parks. There are national parks. There is Crown land. There are special protected areas and so forth. The thing that I don't want to be a part of is to get in the way of people being able to use those places now with their families in the next six weeks. It's as simple as that. I believe that the notion of – you know, now that we've started to talk about this idea of Crown land and having to provide more services, as we say, basic human sanitation, I think, is a very important thing for sure. I mean, if you stray off your random camping site and you think that people are using it as a washroom, that is a public health issue, right? But we're talking about thousands of square kilometres of land that people use on Crown land to camp in.

So the first thing that I would suggest, Madam Speaker, is that you work to have people internalize the responsible thing to do in their own behaviours, and you don't do that by saying: oh, well, we're going to charge you 30 bucks per head and, you know, we're going to bring in the cops to stop you from doing it. The way that we provide law and the way that law is executed in any place, any

jurisdiction in an effective way is to make sure that you internalize that law so that people know that's the right thing to do, right? It's like speeding, right? You know, there's not a policeman around every corner although sometimes on highway 2 it feels like that. You have that notion in your head that it's not safe to speed, that it probably endangers, potentially, yourself and other people, and you regulate yourself accordingly on an internal basis.

11:00

I mean, I hear from conservatives of all stripes, through this Legislature and other places, about the importance of freedom and having people do as they need to do and to do for themselves and all of that kind of thing. Well, this idea that, number one, we have to somehow legislate and charge people to use the Crown land, which they own collectively – you know, we all own it together. It's not as though the UCP government of Alberta owns that land. It's Crown land, which symbolizes the land that we all own together, right? How do we look after that? First and foremost by internalizing responsible behaviour that allows people to ensure that they know what's the right thing to do.

Are there going to be people that will move outside of that? Yes, of course there will be. Can we help to educate and to have people understand the value of sustainable behaviours in camping so that it's safe, that it's healthy, and that it's going to be there for not just your family for that year but for generations to come, everything from firewood to – as well, we know we can have concentrated random camping in a certain place. I know that in areas that I go to when I'm canoeing and so forth, when there are a lot of people in concentration, the wood is all gone because people have just literally put that imposition on a place. Is there garbage in some places? Yeah. You know, for us to be able to work to build a sustainable system that does work for everybody and that's affordable, I think that's the thing we need to do at this point in time. I mean, I'm not precluding the possibility of having other things put in in the future, but we're talking, Madam Speaker, about something that is going to happen or not happen six weeks from now.

I can tell you that nothing is worse than when you charge somebody 30 bucks a head and say, "Oh, well, it's for the garbage and the bathrooms and all this kind of thing," and they go out and they camp and they see none of those things happening. They don't see any sign of those things happening. Then, you know, you lose that value.

When you make a rule, you build a pact of trust between the individuals – the citizens and the residents of Alberta – and the government. If you're not seeing a tangible way by which this thing happened, when you see this result coming as a result of that, then you are wearing that trust thin. The hon. member's amendment to move this to Resource Stewardship I think is eminently reasonable. I think that it's in the context of not just looking at not rushing an important change. We've never had a fee for people to access Crown land before here in this province. You know, the implications of that can be quite severe. When I look at this legislation, I don't see any place where it precludes the government from being able to charge a fee for other uses of that Crown land as well – right? – for day use or other recreational use like that.

You know, part of who we are as Albertans and as Canadians is the heritage of this wonderful, natural land that we own together. It's one of the largest natural areas if probably not the largest in the world. For us to somehow put a price on that I believe goes against the very sort of pact that we have as citizens of this land, as residents of Canada, of Alberta specifically, and I think it undermines that basic sort of pact that we have between us and that land. On a reasonable level, you know, six months is not forever – right? – and

we have a Resource Stewardship Committee, and I think that this idea of putting a price on access to Crown land in the next six weeks is just a bit rushed.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any members wishing to speak under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise in the House and have the chance to speak to the amendment on Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021. The reason I wanted to speak in support of this amendment: in looking at the bill, at the very time when Albertans are facing and going through a number of challenges – a high unemployment rate, financial constraint, COVID-19 pandemic challenges, mental health issues, and rising costs – this would be a time when the government should have been focusing on how to put people back to work.

It has not been a long time since we discussed budget '21-22 and discussed the jobs now program. The government, actually, somehow failed to implement that very program. They were just, you know, so determined and promising that the program will actually start, that it's ready to go, that it will be fully implemented within 11 days. On top of that, what's more important is that the government failed to spend the federal money. That was very important for Albertans facing the unprecedented unemployment rate and seeking financial support.

This should be the time when the government needs to focus on creating jobs, focus on the safety and well-being of Albertans. As was mentioned by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, it's time to look around and learn from it. You could see some of the European countries – I have visited, some of them, too – not only helping their citizens but also growing their internal, home tourism and travelling industry. This would have been the time when the government should have been thinking about how to help people and promote tourism within the province. That can add to the GDP, that can help small business, and that can circulate in the economy.

That's what, actually, the NDP opposition has been proposing for some time, looking at some other developed countries – I would say European countries and some of our provinces, jurisdictions within the country – and taking the lessons from them, what they have implemented to support their citizens. This is not what this bill is dealing with and is one reason, specifically, I would say, why it is philosophically against the model of what we should have been focusing on and is totally doing the opposite.

That's the very reason why I just wanted to support the amendment that this bill “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.”

11:10

The other very reason: this piece of legislation cannot be looked at as a stand-alone document we are discussing in the House. We are seeing the pattern of the work of some of the bills we have debated in the House during the day today or just before this bill such as Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, and the other bill we debated during the day, the Cost of Public Services Transparency Act. In looking at the names and the claims the government makes with those bills, the pieces of legislation, that propose to solve problems, they are totally contradictory. The Premier does not lose the chance – I see that this is basically the daily-basis narrative – to say that the UCP government is

fundamentally against high taxes and that it's the opposition that want to impose more taxes on the people.

So far, with the pattern of work we are seeing since the UCP took office in 2019, the only thing we have seen: the government is more generous, much more generous to the super-rich corporations. The companies: they are struggling to, you know, move their money across borders. Every step of the way the government proposed legislation in this House and is so much convinced by the idea that Albertans – it doesn't matter how hard they're working to make ends meet, to put food on the table, or pay the fees for their children or to pay their mortgages. The government knows, like, that the majority of high-paying jobs have been lost due to the economic recession, but every step of the way, with every piece of legislation that was introduced in the House and was debated here and passed by the government, it imposed more and more taxes and fees and premiums on ordinary Albertans, on ordinary families.

On the contrary, we have seen that with the insurance companies, the big corporations, their net profits have grown. I was looking at the list of CEO salaries, a comparison of the past four or five years. There are none of the corporations whose CEO's salary has actually a negative effect. It doesn't matter what kind of economic scenario we're going through; they had added to their rewards by millions and millions of dollars. That is the very reason that we don't want to see this bill being read a second time in the House.

I can mention a number of steps, actions that have added financial burdens on everyday Albertans. The government failed to properly fund rural communities for policing. They ended up increasing property taxes for their citizens. We debated Bill 56, that has been opposed by, you know, the majority of the municipalities within the province, by saying: this bill does not justify, so they will not be able to afford adding or increasing taxes on their citizens, or they will end up losing the sum of services. But the government is not ready to listen or sit and consult those communities that are going to be directly affected by this legislation.

The other big concern that's specific to this bill and some of the other pieces of legislation and some of the moves – I don't know if they were made by the legislation or the regulations. The fees: they're being imposed on Albertans under the guise or name of being specifically for the use of the services being provided to the Albertans on Crown lands or provincial parks. At the same time it does not guarantee, doesn't wind on government that the concept being proposed in this legislation be guaranteed delivered to the citizens of this province.

The government has done this before when they moved the casino funds to general revenue, and the community organizations, cultural groups, nonprofit organizations came very hard, in robust opposition to the changes, complaining that they had a huge negative effect of not being able to qualify for the grants they have been for the past decades to run and operate the very function and services they were providing to the community. So similarly here: it seems like the creeping, you know, tax brackets, rising education property taxes, new fees on provincial Crown lands are also going to the general revenue fund.

In the general revenue fund, as I also wanted to refer to when we discussed this cost of public sector transparency act, it wasn't very long ago when this government silently handed \$1.3 billion – that even took so long, and the opposition had to work around to find out the amount that we're claiming and that is out in public. Still not sure if that is the exact amount.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

11:20

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

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate on amendment REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an honour to rise and to speak to the referral to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship. You know, there are a couple of things that I've been listening to this evening that I feel need to be maybe broadened and spoken about a little bit more, and that's around the economic impacts that our parks generate outside of just the camping and the hiking, canoeing, all of those things. Something that we, I think, have missed out of this conversation, the context of what the government is missing in this conversation is the fact that we know that when we have vibrant communities, vibrant places for people to go and to engage in outdoor activities, the communities surrounding many of those places prosper.

What we know – and it's based on some economic evidence – is that, you know, counties or areas that are surrounded by protected land have about a 345 per cent increase in jobs, and that's because, of course, many of those areas are hiring people to work in the parks. You have your little cafés and your restaurants that are just outside of those areas. You've got your local grocery stores, where people are stopping by to pick up their food before they go camping for the weekend. What happens is that these parks not only become a destination for people to relax and to enjoy the great outdoors, but they also become economic drivers for the surrounding communities in those areas.

I find it really interesting because what we've seen with this government over the last few years is a real disconnect when it comes to that recognition of the economic impact. The reason that I say that is that if we look at the Alberta parks budget, in 2018-2019 it was \$86.1 million. Very quickly when the UCP took over, there was immediately a \$6 million cut in the first budget and then another \$7 million cut in the second budget, which obviously has an impact on the ability for support to these very areas that we're talking about right now.

The government likes to try to turn this into something where it's about: we need to charge people to protect those areas because, you know, people aren't taking care of the land and there are issues happening. But the reality of it is that when you start cutting pretty substantial amounts out of your budget and you don't provide the staffing supports or the provincial supports to those areas because you've cut the budget, you are going to naturally see deficits starting to appear. It's like that cause and effect. I guess the question then becomes: well, what came first? Was it that people were damaging these public areas, or was it that the budget has been cut so substantially over the last couple of years that the supports and the staff that were available up to two years ago, prior to these substantial budgetary cuts, were actually keeping those areas clean and safe and enjoyable for communities?

You know, that is definitely something where I think the government likes to try to find every excuse there is to rationalize why it is that the things that are happening are happening, in the sense of: well, it's not the policy decisions that the government has made; it's everybody else around them. The reality is that when you have a substantial change to your overall budget that's providing those very supports, there's obviously going to be a pretty significant expense. I think that we need to be looking at that piece as well.

But I also think that, you know, again going back to the idea of job creation, when you cut a budget the way that this budget has been cut and then say, "Well, we're going to impose these fees," the reality of it is that you're not going to be replacing those jobs with the fees that you're going to be charging Albertans. In fact, you're going to continue to have some of the struggles that are being

identified by some of these volunteer organizations that are taking care of some of this public land.

The other piece of this as well is that at the same time that the government is saying, "Well, this is about protecting the areas and making sure that they're clean and they're accessible and all of those things," we're also seeing the government privatize. We've seen them privatizing recreational sites. We've seen a potential, the closing of up to 20 of those sites. We saw the budget for cross-country skiing and grooming cut. Again you're expecting people to pay a fee. Albertans are expected to pay a fee to cross-country ski, yet that was cut out of the budget.

There are no new parks planned. You know, I kind of get a kick out of the hon. minister who keeps talking about Castle and how, when the NDP was in government and the Castle provincial park was created, we were telling people not to go there. That is totally not the case. There are beautiful hiking trails in Castle park. ATVs are still allowed in Castle provincial park; they're just not allowed to drive here, there, and everywhere. They have to stay on the designated trails for ATVs. Many people are still accessing, and in fact there are more people probably accessing Castle park now because the campsites have been maintained and there are pieces being set up.

Although I appreciate the minister continuously saying that it was a shutdown and we weren't allowing people to access it – well, in fact, the reason the Castle provincial park was created was to ensure that the province was monitoring those areas so that they were protected and safe while people were still accessing them. It's counter to the messaging that the government is actually trying to say now, which is: well, without these fees people are going to go, and they're going to, you know, damage these areas. Well, that's the whole reason why Castle was set up. It doesn't make a lot of sense, and it's not connecting to what the government is trying to say.

Again, I think that when we look at the fact that – if we go back to a 2011 report that was done, actually, by Alberta Parks, it shows that tourism expenditures in Kananaskis Country alone resulted in over \$200 million in real economic impact to the province: more than 3,000 full-time jobs were directly supported by the parks and recreational sites, and over \$35 million in taxes was paid to the government of Alberta by businesses that are associated with that particular region. That was just in one year, and that was decades ago. Now what we're seeing is a government charging people more to go to those same areas at a time when we're trying to encourage Albertans to get out and stimulate those economies in those areas that have been hardest hit because of COVID-19.

In fact, what's happening is that this government is making life more expensive. They're making it harder for people to access. We know that there's going to be a \$20 fee to a \$30 fee for each family that's going to be accessing, but we also have heard the minister in estimates say that there's also potential for park fees for campsites to go up from a dollar to \$3, depending on the location of those campsites. There's another fee that's going up. I'm sure that access to firewood, which is \$8 a bundle now, is probably going to be more than that this summer, once we get out to the parks to see what they're being charged for. As you charge more, fewer people go, which means that they put less money into the surrounding communities where they're going camping.

Again Castle provincial park would be a prime example. I bet you that the member from Pincher Creek would really like to see some economic stimulus happening in his community, where people go to the local co-op and pick up their groceries before they go camping. But, you know, maybe people won't be going there as often because they're going to have pay that park fee. There is a cause and effect here, and I think that that's why it's so important

that instead of putting more financial burdens on Albertans and making it harder for them to get out into their communities and actually stimulate the economy because they have more money to spend in the economy, we don't have these fees, that we encourage people to go camping, that we encourage people to go canoeing or to involve ATVs, do whatever they're going to do in their outdoor communities and, while they're doing that, encourage them to spend in those smaller local communities that are surrounding those areas. Let's get money into those communities. Let's do some economic stimulus and cancel the fee.

I mean, that was why we as a caucus proposed that – instead of putting more fees on Albertans, we actually proposed an Alberta travel pass so Albertans could receive \$1,000 of travel expense refunded back to them at the end of the year, refunding 20 per cent of eligible travel expenses, because we believe that by giving Albertans an ability to have a refund on some of their travel, we're actually stimulating those economies.

11:30

That is the piece that is missing out of this whole conversation by the government. It continues to be tax, tax, tax, more fees, more fees, more fees, yet none of this money has been earmarked for any of those communities; none of that money has been demonstrated as to how it's going to stimulate the local economies that are surrounded by those parks. In fact, you're taking money out of the local economies and putting them into the general revenue when what needs to happen right now is where the local mom-and-pop coffee shops, the local grocery stores, the local tourism, tour guides, dogsled teams, whatever it happens to be are starting to get some income, because that's where it needs to go right now.

In saying that, I think I will end that there, and I will adjourn debate on the amendment.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 56 Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

[Adjourned debate April 12: Mr. Sabir]

The Deputy Speaker: Are any members wishing to join debate on Bill 56 in second reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise with great interest in regard to Bill 56, dealing with municipalities and all of the trouble and chaos that has ensued from this UCP government making literally hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts to municipal governments across this province and causing great consternation amongst all of our municipalities here in the province and leading the way to potentially significant increases in the municipal taxes over the next number of years here in the province of Alberta.

You know, as I was debating this same bill last week, I still was curious to know the answers to a couple of questions, the first one being: has this UCP government made an accounting of all of the funding that they've downloaded onto municipalities and, thus, ratepayers here in the province of Alberta? I still don't see an accurate number. Certainly, I know that this government must have made a projection of how much they were imposing on our towns and cities across the province and then, thus, individual taxpayers, but we haven't seen this government fess up to just exactly how much they've been imposing on us, because, of course, as we've heard many times in this Legislature, there's only one taxpayer.

You know, we know that municipalities actually provide a lot of essential services that it's incapable for any other level of

government to do so. We see here the city of Edmonton, for example, providing a whole universe of very important services that are even more important now, considering the economic downturn and so forth and COVID. To pull the rug out from underneath the large cities, the medium-sized, little towns, villages and so forth with this change, with Bill 56, I find to be unconscionable actually, quite frankly.

You know, I think it's a relic from when this government built their plan and so forth before the economic downturn and before COVID started. Here we are now, in 2021, in a much different landscape, and we have this archaeological relic that we've found, that this government is stubbornly holding on to, which is completely out of touch with what is actually going on here in the province both fiscally and socially and just generally as well.

I know that everyone in this House has, you know, sometimes even dozens of provincial municipalities in their constituency. I would challenge any member here to bring forward a single municipality that would say: "Yeah. You know what? This Bill 56 is awesome. Thank you for doing this. We really appreciate it." It's impossible that anyone has that conversation with any of their municipalities.

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

Of course, that's a reflection of what will happen and is happening now as people start to get their tax bills, right? You know, you get your tax bill here in Edmonton probably in May sometime, and there's going to be heck to pay, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker. I really am concerned about this, not just for the tax bill that this UCP government is dropping onto Albertans in May but for a drop in services and a drop in the economy that this would suggest as well.

I mean, we see jurisdictions all across North America and around the world providing stimulus for the economy and putting money into the economy like no other mechanism can do, quite frankly, in the province right now. The Alberta government has the capacity to put stimulus money into our economy like no other mechanism that we have available to us. Instead of doing that responsible thing, here we are with Bill 56 taking literally hundreds of millions of dollars out of our economy at a very crucial and important time.

You know, I really think that we need to rethink this particular bill. I think that we're seeing the rising tide of anger and distrust around Bill 56, and, Mr. Speaker, the responsible thing to do – I have in my hand here right now a very helpful document, and I have 87 of them. It's an amendment that I am bringing forward to Bill 56 in order to rectify the situation while we still have time to do so. I'll just wait for that to be distributed.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

This will be amendment HA1. If I could ask the hon. member to read it into the record for us tonight.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm moving this on behalf of my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, that the motion for second reading for Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, I think, you know, looking for a reasonable mechanism by which we can rethink such a precipitous drop and cut to municipal funding here in the province of Alberta is the responsible thing to do. We know that, as I say, many of our municipalities around the province are already facing significant

decreases in their commercial tax base and their personal tax base as well. People are hurting, and companies are having a hard time all across the province here. But we see a window for economic recovery, too. You model these things, you project them, and you lead through hope and through positive, affirmative action as well.

That's what this is, this amendment. It's a way by which to reach out to our hundreds of municipalities around the province and say: "Look, we recognize the predicament that you're in. We recognize that we are the responsible body that can provide some relief over the next six months, and we can revisit the way by which we restructure or reform municipal levies here in the province of Alberta down the road when more people are vaccinated, when the energy industry starts to recover better and we have a foundation for recovery that would be sustainable."

11:40

Okay. You know, this Bill 56 or a reform of some kind of the municipal tax relationship with the province of Alberta is probably a good idea to revisit from time to time. We know that the big-city charter, say, for example, was a real ray of hope that people were looking towards in regard to municipal-provincial tax reform, and there's room for improvement for sure. But certainly this is not the document that reflects that. Bill 56 simply takes hundreds of millions of dollars out of municipal coffers at the very worst time that we possibly could see, probably certainly in my lifetime and perhaps for several generations, and leaves many municipalities in a very, very difficult predicament.

You know, the infrastructure that we've built across this province – I mean, it is comparatively a young jurisdiction compared to other places even in Canada and so forth – has taken generations to build, and when you build young communities like we talked about before, a place like Hinton, for example, which you probably know well, and a place like Whitecourt and so forth, Devon even, I mean, these are towns and small cities that were just built and founded within a lifetime. All of the services and whatnot to build a community and to have people choose to move to a place and to stay in a place like that, they've taken decades to build up. Literally pulling the rug from under these municipalities by cutting their resources so precipitously during this time is really the wrong thing to do.

You've got to look ahead to where the next thing is going to happen, Mr. Speaker, and where the next thing is going to happen – our responsibility is to make sure it does happen, that we start an economic recovery now here in the province of Alberta. A foundation of an economic recovery includes making sure that we value the infrastructure that we've built over, as I say, many decades. So that is the responsible thing to do now. You know, we have a deficit position, but that deficit position: you have to make sure you're including the assets that you have in the bank, both literally and figuratively. If we start to lose those resources, we start to lose population in smaller centres. As I look around here, I see members representing smaller municipalities that don't have the room for another cut, quite frankly. They will end up having to cut services quite significantly. People will suffer as a result, populations will suffer as a result, and the standard of living for Albertans in general will suffer, too.

I think that this very modest proposal by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods will serve to send a more positive signal to Albertans and to our hundreds of municipalities across this province that we are here to help them, not hinder them, and that we are here to lend a hand up and to lend a hand out during this difficult time.

I urge all members in the House to vote in favour of this amendment, and I think that we would be serving everyone well to do so. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment HA1? I see the Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise this evening and speak once again to Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. Of course, the Member for Edmonton-North West so graciously presented to us on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Mills Woods an amendment that "Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence."

As I mentioned, I have had the opportunity to speak to this legislation, and while some time has passed since I had that opportunity, my concerns have not changed nor wavered. Unfortunately, many of the questions that we've brought up over the course of this debate remain to be concerns for myself and my colleagues and, at the end of the day, all Albertans, Mr. Speaker. We've heard from a number of very important stakeholders, one being the president of the AUMA, who has made it very clear that passing this legislation would be to the detriment of all communities, none more than others necessarily. When we look at the funding cuts that we see here, of course, this government has front-loaded some of the funding on this, but the fact is that following that first year of front-loaded funding, it is essentially a 44 per cent cut to the funding that municipalities across the province will see.

As I discussed earlier in my comments to the main Bill 56, this is coming after the complete one-eighty that this government did on the big-city charters, an agreement from when the NDP were in government. We sat down at the table with our larger municipalities, our largest municipalities, and came to an agreement that the right thing to do for the future prosperity of our large municipalities and, at the end of the day, all Albertans was to support those municipalities through increased funding.

At the time, I'll remind you, Mr. Speaker, the UCP, in opposition, supported that piece of legislation. They ran the election on a promise and a commitment to our largest municipalities to support that commitment, and here we are today. Well, I suppose that, going back a little bit, after the election results came in, the UCP did a complete one-eighty on that, and now we have Bill 56, which, of course, has no mention of that. We see that not only did the UCP go back on their commitment to the largest municipalities in our province, but they went further and actually reduced that funding even more than that initial commitment.

It's absolutely devastating to, of course, our largest municipalities – the city of Edmonton, the city of Calgary – who had an agreement, but unfortunately it's just as much impact, very likely, to rural communities and constituencies across the province, which is why the president of the AUMA raised several flags, pointing out that there are going to be service cuts. This isn't that there potentially are going to be service cuts; this is flat out that those are totally going to be the case. There are going to be things that aren't getting built, there's going to be maintenance that isn't getting done, and it's going to be costlier for Alberta taxpayers in the long run. Unfortunately, what we've seen from this government is essentially kicking the can down the road. They had an opportunity to follow through with the commitment, an election pledge, and a pledge when they were in opposition to support that fiscal framework, and once again they have completely done a one-eighty.

We know, through discussions that have happened in recent years and for many years in the past, that many rural municipalities and communities across the province have struggled with the inability to collect oil and gas revenue in terms of unpaid taxes, and

unfortunately this government has provided no answers on that front either. Not only are they not able to collect that revenue, but here we are with further cuts to municipalities across the province.

It's unfortunate because we had a real opportunity to set in place funding models and funding agreements that would support the long-term viability of our communities, but it seems, Mr. Speaker, from the decisions that this government has made through this legislation and many other pieces of legislation, that it really doesn't seem to be much of a concern, the long-term viability of our smaller municipalities, to this UCP government.

We can reflect even from earlier this afternoon. We spoke to Bill 52, the Recall Act, and the pressure that this government is putting on municipally elected politicians, and the same goes for school boards, of course. It's a double standard, once again, for recall legislation on MLAs, which is a much more thorough process. In some respects the threshold we are arguing is too high, but when we look at the, I guess, quote, unquote, accountability that this government might be expecting from municipal councillors, well, it's very concerning. What we can see from the Recall Act is an opportunity for this government to bully. Whether it be school boards or municipalities and municipal councillors and politicians, essentially this government is giving themselves the ability to bully these councillors into potentially being silent on these very important issues, Mr. Speaker.

11:50

I can see an instance where municipal councillors are trying to figure out how they're going to pay for these funds, and the fact is, Mr. Speaker, that because of the decisions of this provincial government – the cuts to the MSI are only one example – these municipal politicians are having to make extremely tough and unfortunate decisions, decisions that they shouldn't have to make, at the end of the day. When this government comes back to these municipalities and says, "If you don't side with us, if you speak out against these budgets and these budget cuts, you know, we are going to start a force of people to come and attack your integrity, to try and recall you," this is very concerning when we look at the writing on the wall.

We've seen from the Municipal Affairs minister a move to, I would say, attack the integrity of municipal councillors across the province through decisions about, you know, report cards for municipalities. Of course, Mr. Speaker, no report card, any such thing, will be provided by the provincial government about themselves other than by an associate minister of red tape, who makes up numbers about how many things they're cutting as red tape. The fact is that this government really is setting a double standard for themselves and for municipalities across the province.

Once again, you don't have to take my word for it. You can take the word of the president of the AUMA, I think somebody and an association that we all respect very much. They are throwing up the red flags, Mr. Speaker. When we look at the cuts after this first year, of course, of upwards of 44 per cent, it's absolutely devastating.

We've heard the dismay of the mayor of the city of Edmonton and the concerns from the mayor of the city of Calgary, who went on at length talking about the fact that we aren't going to be able to build important infrastructure, that we aren't going to be able to create the jobs that are needed in the midst of a pandemic, in the third wave, because of the decisions that this provincial government, this UCP government, is making.

Once again, these are issues that are compounding when we look at the inability or unwillingness of this provincial government to continue to potentially do things like freezing the education property tax. These are expenses that are going back to our municipalities, expenses that are going back to our school boards.

Mr. Speaker, what does this government have to offer to them? Essentially, "Tough luck; they need to figure it out themselves" is what they're hearing if they're willing to speak on the issue at all. It's very disappointing as residents in my community and communities across the province are trying to figure out exactly how they're going to pay for potentially increased property taxes, increased education property taxes. This government really has no answers for them.

Reflecting on the comments of the mayor of the city of Edmonton, he laid out quite clearly that any gains that were to be made because of extra COVID pandemic funding that was coming from the provincial government have essentially been completely wiped out by the changes that we're seeing to MSI funding through this legislation. It's absolutely devastating. Mr. Speaker, I imagine that residents in your communities and communities across the province, no matter who is representing them or how they might be politically leaning, are rightfully concerned about the cuts to their communities, absolutely.

I know that the city of Edmonton has been grappling with these decisions from the provincial government as they work through their own budget. Of course, they're held to standards of having no ability to take on debt, so they have to have conversations about how they're going to afford to continue to run their municipalities at this point as the provincial government rushes through cuts to MSI funding and several other funding agreements that were once in place.

It's devastating. Whether it's, as I mentioned earlier, in my own constituency things like the Lewis Farms rec centre, opportunities that we have to build infrastructure across this province to create good-paying, long-term, sustainable jobs, to ensure that we are doing our best to build vibrant communities, these projects are potentially being sidelined, potentially being extended in terms of timelines for completion, and in worst case scenarios these projects are being completely cancelled because of the decisions of this provincial government. Once again, these municipal councillors have to go back to their community and explain why they're unable to finish these important projects for communities like my own, and it's absolutely devastating.

Of course, it's not only things like rec centres that are potentially impacted by MSI funding. Maybe they aren't directly funded by things like MSI, but at the end of the day, when we cut programs like MSI, which might be supporting things like waste-water management, like roadways and transportation infrastructure, when cities have to make decisions about how they're going to fund that important infrastructure, it has a domino effect on how it impacts other important infrastructure in our municipalities and across the province, and it's absolutely devastating, Mr. Speaker.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Once again, that is why, Madam Speaker, I will be supporting this amendment that "Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence." Really, we need to pause this. The AUMA and municipalities across the province have said very clearly that now is not the time to consider reducing MSI funding, that now is not the time to put important infrastructure projects on pause or even slow them to any extent. It's been quite clear and quite resounding how not in support municipalities and stakeholders have been for this piece of legislation.

Of course, I can appreciate that the circumstances we find ourselves in are unprecedented, but when we look at the priorities and the decisions made by this government, whether it be the decision to give away \$4.7 billion to the largest corporations, with

no commitment to get any of that revenue back or that there would be any increase to our provincial revenue from that, or the \$30 million a year to the war room, once again, Madam Speaker, these are things that should have been invested in our own communities.

It goes much further than the impact of MSI cuts. When we look at the changes to CFEP and CIP, very important grants to our municipalities and charities in our communities, upwards of a 50 per cent cut to these absolutely vital funding models for our community stakeholders, Madam Speaker, this is going to be devastating. Not only are we losing funding opportunities through MSI for municipalities to support local charities, to support local community leagues, but these organizations are getting hit twice from this government by massive cuts to CFEP and CIP.

As the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs mentioned earlier, we are losing a large number of these local charities, and that is going to have lasting impacts, negative impacts, and consequences on our communities. It is going to increase, at the end of the day, the amount of money that the provincial government is going to have to or should provide to municipalities to support the important work that is done from day to day. It's those unsung heroes in our community, whether it's local affordable food programs, whether it's affordable housing, whether it's programs that support seniors getting driven to medical appointments and getting driven to local community events: these are all things that are losing funding because of the decisions of this government and that are going to have lasting negative impacts on our community, Madam Speaker.

It's very unfortunate that the government is relatively silent on these issues as people like the ... [Mr. Carson's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I hate to have to do this again. I just kind of have to. The fact is that the NDP is complaining that the municipalities are getting less money, and we've made it clear that there's a 25 per cent cut to the MSI coming as it becomes the LGFF, because we pushed that out. I have talked to the AUMA president and the board about these things. I reminded them that if you take the difference between the LGFF number that the NDP negotiated, the \$866 million, and the \$722 million, that's \$144 million a year. That times three is \$432 million, and I reminded them that we also gave them an extra \$500 million through COVID stimulus. Actually, what the NDP is complaining about is the municipalities getting more capital funding from our government than they would have got from theirs. But they can complain. That's what they can do. Listen, actually, long term they're taking a haircut on their capital funding because of the 25 per cent, because of the financial situation that the province is in. They understand that.

12:00

But unlike the NDP, I think the municipalities are actually better at their job than the NDP would give them credit for. I actually think that they will be responsible with the decisions they make. I think that they have probably been prudent, in almost every case if not every case, with how they've spent the capital funding that we provided them through COVID and through the MSI now. But, yes, we've been up front about the fact that there's a haircut coming, but the NDP is actually trying to push off a bill where, in fact, the municipalities will get more capital funding during our term of office here than they would have under the NDP plan. But down the road they are going to get less. That's true.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm a little bit blown away by the comments of the minister, that he just made right now, as if to say that municipalities should be thankful that the province stepped up during COVID and supported municipalities and as if that is somehow something that was gracious and compassionate on behalf of the government, to take care of Albertans at a time when municipalities, when the province is continuing to be in crisis.

To say that the opposition shouldn't be upset at the significant decrease in funding that this bill is going to impose on municipalities because – thank goodness for COVID – they were able to get more: I don't know what to say to that. I find that to be so disrespectful of the situation that Albertans are going through and the economic challenges that are being faced by our municipalities right now while they try to make adjustments to the way that they are providing transportation in their communities, the way that they are trying to keep their citizens safe. By doing that, they have now been apparently gifted this COVID money by the government, and thank goodness for that, because if not, they'd have nothing, apparently. Like, so off the mark from this bill. I just don't even understand.

Okay. Let's get back to the bill, though, because there are actually some pretty serious things happening in this bill that relate to how municipalities are going to move forward. I think that the hon. minister will talk about talking to members of the AUMA. Yes, they're getting a 25 per cent cut, but only yesterday, I believe, the conversation around transportation, highways, infrastructure, major routes came up in this very Chamber with a discussion about municipalities being very, very concerned about the fact that major highway transportation routes between Edmonton and the north are significantly being impacted right now and, as quoted by some municipal leaders in the Athabasca region, saying that it's unsafe.

Now, they're saying that it's unsafe and there's a problem here, and they need financial assistance to be able to manage the very transportation issues that they are facing. If the MSI funding was in place in the way that it could be, some of those concerns may have been able to be mitigated. What we do know is going to happen, because it happened last year, is that when we hit flood season in the north, in the Athabasca area specifically, roads washed out. Emergency culverts had to be built.

In fact, I've got a quote in regard to just the very issues that some of our municipalities are speaking about when it comes to agriculture and the need for supports and how they would use their MSI funding to deal with those. The quote here is from Paul McLauchlin, who happens to be the president of the RMA – fun fact – who says: one thing that we've seen is a tremendous size of machinery, tremendous volumes that are being moved out of Alberta's agriculture on our roads, and our road design needs to keep up with this tremendous growth. In fact, in some of these same municipalities unpaid tax amounts are so high that service levels are being reduced, municipal staff are being laid off, and serious discussions are occurring about whether the municipality can continue to function. Sounds a little bit more than a haircut. Just saying.

When we're hearing these things and we're hearing these from provincial leaders who are trying to manage a bill on top of COVID – apparently, COVID money was a gift – it's an issue. It's an issue because if we do not support our municipalities, who are our local economic drivers in the province, who see the impacts that this defunding of their supports is happening within the province, we're going to be in some serious trouble. If our highways don't function, if they're washed out because of flooding or because there hasn't

been appropriate water mitigation being done and our farmers can't get their grain to market or their, you know, beef and hogs to market because they can't drive them down the highway because, unfortunately, the infrastructure hasn't been maintained, that is a problem.

What happens is that these municipal leaders, who are elected on behalf of their constituents, come to the province and say, "This needs to happen; we will use some of our MSI funding to do this if you meet us halfway," and the government says: "Well, we're cutting your MSI funding, so I don't know what you want us to do. I guess you'll just have to do some emergency work for now, but, you know, that highway that you need is two, three years down the road; it's not happening." Hospitals; for example, the hospital in Edmonton in the south that was supposed to be started: now it's a big field with grass growing in it. It probably cost more to put grass in it than it did to start the project.

You know, there's a real disconnect between a respect for the very people who are elected within these municipalities, their understanding of their communities and the needs that they have, and the request for a mutually respectful relationship that will provide some financial agreed-upon amounts that were negotiated prior to this bill coming in. Now they're being told that they're going to have 25 per cent less when they know what is really going on in their communities.

To say that the opposition should be thankful that COVID money was provided to municipalities – and, in fact, that would mean, then, that they got more money than they were supposed to. Well, I could probably say that they weren't anticipating the cost that COVID was going to put onto the backs of municipalities either, their emergency services or, you know, the fact that they still have infrastructure costs, but they have no revenue coming in because nobody is allowed to go swimming right now or go skating or hockey or do any of those things. Although the province supporting municipalities to adjust to the COVID response is not a favour – it is a responsibility of the province to work with our fellow elected members and come up with plans that make sense to deal with the issues that are happening in communities.

So I find it very frustrating that when we see municipal leaders coming forward and saying that they are concerned – and we have many comments from many different leaders. St. Albert, for example: the Community Growth and Infrastructure Standing Committee met to discuss whether certain projects are realistic for the city to keep on the books over the next decade. Currently the cost for future capital projects is about \$309 million spread over nine years, but they're only getting \$71 million for that exact same time period. Repairs, maintenance, and replacement projects also take priority over new growth projects, and it's very probable that the city will see new or increased RMR needs in the future. Without continued taxes, increased to fund these capital projects, the problem will continue to grow.

What the province is now saying to our municipal leaders is: you have to increase property taxes because if not, you won't be able to build anything, you won't be able to pay anything. So Albertans are now going to have to pay more on their property taxes because the provincial government is not working in collaboration with these municipal leaders. Ultimately, the people that are impacted the most are the very citizens that elected us to be here, and, you know, that is a struggle because what we know will happen is that we will start to see infrastructure start to deteriorate. It will take even more money to invest in the future to have to rebuild those infrastructure pieces. We will see transportation, like public transportation, not being as accessible as it should be. We won't see the resources for expansion of our municipalities happening.

12:10

In return, we won't see the economic growth that could potentially be happening in these communities because the very basic infrastructure that employers are looking at, that they want to be able to ensure that their employees have access to – if they're not available, they're not going to come here. They want to know that urban centres can provide a quality of life to their employees, and if it looks like these municipalities are unable to do that, then why would they choose to come to Alberta? Why wouldn't they go somewhere else where they're going to be able to see that those services – public transportation, walkable communities, schools, parks, playgrounds, all those great things – are available and make a community attractive to live in. It is an issue.

It's an issue from a long-term growth perspective of our province. If we continue to see ongoing cuts, downloading of costs onto Albertans so that it's nickel and diming here and there, then what ultimately happens is that people don't want to live in Alberta anymore. It's cheaper to live somewhere else. I'm going to go live somewhere else where I don't have to pay the same property taxes. Maybe a house that I could buy would be cheaper somewhere else. I can probably get public transit there and not have to commute to work with a car, so it won't cost me as much to do that. My property taxes, my personal income taxes, all of those things.

Yet at the same time that we're seeing all of this nickel and diming and these downloading of costs onto Albertans, I haven't seen anything from the government to be holding businesses and corporations accountable that owe property taxes, that owe taxes to these municipalities. I don't see any move by this government to find what is owed to these municipalities to help offset some of these costs. You know, it's one thing to say, "Well, Albertans should have to pay more," but at the same time, why is there no accountability for corporate taxes that are owed to municipalities, whether it be through property taxes – where is the accountability on that? Where is that coming from? I can tell you right now that many of these leaders in our municipalities are saying that in some municipalities unpaid tax amounts are so high that service levels will be reduced, because they're not getting their taxes. Where is the government's help with that? That would be great. That would be a great way to start, to help the municipalities get back the money that they're owed.

Then, of course, you know, on top of that, we also know that things can happen in municipalities, whether it be wildfires, which we see have started to become a concern already. We see flooding. Some of these municipalities over the last few years have spent quite a significant amount of their budgets trying to put emergency waterways, culverts, rebuild bridges so people can get out of their communities, rebuild roads so that they can get out of their community, all because they're not getting the support to be proactive in planning what needs to be done. I think that there are many concerns that are legitimate here.

Not only is it just about the MSI funding and the fact that municipalities are concerned about how they're going to be providing these supports and the fact that they're going to have to download costs onto Albertans through their property taxes; we're now also seeing an increase in fees on 911 in this bill. What we're seeing is that on average, if we base it on what the CRTC is telling us about how many cellphones are in a house, if you have four cellphones in a residence, because you've got two parents and two kids, that's \$25 more that Albertans will be paying for cellphones. That's another fee that's being added on top of the numerous other fees that this government is expecting Albertans to start to pay because, for some reason, long-term planning is a deficit that this government has.

It is all short-sighted, and it's not about economic growth. It's not about creating jobs because if it was, then we would be looking at the fact that you want to make sure that Alberta is an attractive place to live and to play and to work. You want communities that are healthy and that have all of the lovely amenities that people look for when they move into a new community, and what municipalities and what elected officials within those municipalities are telling us is that, well, they can't afford to build those things.

We're losing an advantage when we continuously keep cutting support to build the communities and make communities healthy and safe, so I support the fact that I think that this government needs to go back, re-evaluate priorities, look at what a true economic plan looks like when it comes to trying to attract investments into this province, what employers are looking for. It's not just corporate tax cuts, which this government keeps wanting to talk about. It's actually about quality of life, because if their employees are happy, they tend to be more successful. They tend to keep their employees around longer. They don't have to worry about brain drain. They don't have to worry about retraining. They have young families that start to build roots in their communities, so they want to stay around longer. Then you see innovation happening because you see people who fall in love with their communities and decide that they want to expand, or, you know, entrepreneurs start new businesses and get involved in IT, whatever those things are, because they fall in love with their communities.

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

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I won't be too long. I'm just going to correct a few things here. Now, the hon. member is right. The municipalities have a reason to be concerned. They're getting a 25 per cent cut in their MSI funding, even if it's called LGFF. Either way, they're getting a 25 per cent cut.

But the hon. member should probably spend some more time talking to the municipalities so that the hon. member knows what they're talking about because she clearly doesn't. She asked – they talked about that if they had more MSI, they could have fixed highway 55. No, Madam Speaker. Highway 55 is our highway. No matter how much MSI they had, it's our job to fix it. As I made clear in question period yesterday, I said we would do that. Next year will be a bigger repair, and this year, like every year, we will do the repairs to keep it safe. We will do that. That's our job; we will do it. I made it clear yesterday although the hon. member might not have been paying attention. Somehow she didn't seem to grasp that, nor did she grasp the fact that it's not the municipalities' highway to fix and build. It's ours, and we'll do it.

The hon. member talked about 911 fees and complained about it after taking AUMA's side. Listen, I take AUMA's side on many things; I was on that board for a year when I was elected municipally. But I'll remind the hon. member that the AUMA passed a thing at their AGM a couple of years ago to raise the cellphone bills higher than what we did – not by much, just by a couple of cents – because they want the enhanced 911 service with the texting, which will actually be a benefit for people that have violence in their house, where they could go and text for the police and somebody wouldn't be able to hear them, or any of us could be able to text. Municipalities love the 911 changes. So the hon. member may be wanting to check in with the municipalities before she talks about that.

She also complained about the bills on four cellphones. Well, if you've got a mom and dad and two kids, which one does the hon. member not want to have access to 911, the one at the park, the one shopping, the one at work, or the one at home? I wonder which of those four the hon. member doesn't want to have access to 911

service. I wonder how she'd answer that question. I think they should all have access to 911 service, which is what this bill does.

And it's actually a better 911 service. Our rural members said to me – and I did some learning here, too – can you drop a pin? You don't have to drop a pin. With the new service, when it's in, it's GPS, so they'll know exactly where you are, closer than you could probably describe. This is actually something that municipalities want. In fact, out of the 20 primary and nine secondary 911 centres, the current 911 only funds the 20 primary. Under this new legislation it will fund the nine secondary. Who's funding them now? Mostly the municipalities either directly or through their emergency services, but the hon. member is complaining about this benefit to municipalities. I guess she can do that. That's her decision. She just complained about that.

I'm just letting the House know what's actually in the bill, which seems to be fairly divergent from many of the things that we've heard from across the aisle.

12:20

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. My pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 56 and, more importantly or more aptly, speak to the hoist and the fact that this bill should be read again in about six months hence, which, as members of this Chamber recognize, would essentially put an end to this bill and send the government back to the drawing board, which is what we are proposing.

You know, I appreciate the Minister of Transportation getting up and responding to members of the opposition during 29(2)(a), and I mean that in all sincerity. I do appreciate when ministers respond to questions and get up and engage with the opposition, so I will thank the minister for that but remind him that this is another bill and another example of this UCP government raising costs on Albertans.

For a government that says that they are in favour of lower taxes, their actions are completely contrary. User fees, increased costs are a form of tax. It's costing Albertans more. For a party that goes on and on about a single taxpayer, this government is sure milking the heck out of Albertans at every corner. In fact, this is the second bill we're debating tonight, Madam Speaker. Out of three bills total, two of them are proposing increased costs to Albertans. That doesn't sound very fiscally conservative to me. That doesn't sound very financially responsible. You know, in some of the comments that the minister made, I think that the minister missed the point the Member for Edmonton-Manning was trying to make. The issue of increased costs for 911 services is that it's an increased cost to Albertans. The provincial government has a \$55 billion budget. Nickel and diming municipalities, who then pass it on to Albertans, is a form of tax.

Now, I don't blame municipalities. You know why, Madam Speaker? Municipalities deliver 90 per cent of services to Albertans. They are the closest order of government to individuals. People experience the municipal jurisdiction every day, whether you're driving on a road, again, going to and from work. The services are felt by Albertans daily; 90 per cent of the services that Albertans receive are delivered by municipalities. Do you know how much of a budget municipalities have? Ten per cent compared to the federal and provincial governments. They deliver 90 per cent of services with 10 per cent of the budget. If anyone is thinking, "That seems fair," I encourage you to, yeah, relook at your math.

My frustration is this. This current government continues to perpetuate a paternalistic attitude toward municipalities that the former PCs had. Daddy knows best. "We'll tell you how to spend

your budget, and if you don't spend it the way we like you to spend it, we're going to criticize you." How many days and how many times did the former Minister of Municipal Affairs, the current Justice minister, get up and berate municipalities for mismanaging their budgets? Yet silence when it comes to the war room, not just a waste of money but an embarrassment to Alberta.

If the war room actually helped our energy sector, I'd be behind it, if it actually helped our energy sector deliver products to Canadians and to the international community, but the war room has done the opposite. It's actually hurt our energy sector, and there are a number of companies who have spoken out against it.

The provincial government did not need to foist the 911 increase in costs onto municipalities, who then had no choice but to put it onto Albertans. [interjection] No. No, you didn't. What the minister is failing to recognize is, one, the province and the feds have dozens of more tools in their tool box to generate revenue to provide services. Municipalities have a regressive property tax, they have the odd fee that they can charge, and they get a slight portion of the education tax although under this government that's been reduced further. They're not allowed, Madam Speaker, to carry any kind of debt.

Now, my favourite thing is when members of the government get up and talk about how bad debt is. I asked them – if they're complaining about certain debts, then the members of the government must have all paid for their houses with cash. Remarkable. That's not the reality for 99 per cent of Albertans. In fact, it's probably 99.9 per cent. The fact that municipalities are extremely limited in their revenue yet Albertans rely on them to deliver the majority of services – they need partners. They need support.

But this provincial government, through this piece of legislation, for the first time since MSI was introduced, is actually legislating permanent cuts to MSI without introducing a replacement program. That seems to be the theme with this current government. Let's shoot from the hip and then stop and think about things later. It's kind of like, you know, shoot first and then aim later.

We saw that when they repealed a number of tax credit programs that were helping to diversify the economy and supporting businesses. The Finance minister himself came out and said: diversification is a luxury that Alberta cannot afford. Now, 16 months later he walked back those words. I guess that's progress. However, for many companies there was a void of supports for companies who then said: "Hey, government of Alberta, the writing is on the wall. You do not care about diversification. You do not care about these sectors. Therefore, we'll go elsewhere." And many of them did.

But that's an example, Madam Speaker, of the fact that this government made significant cuts to programs that were working with nothing to replace them. In this bill they're ending MSI, but there is no program to replace MSI. Now, at least under the former government there were the big-city charters, which applied to Edmonton and Calgary and was something that the municipalities had been asking for for many years. In fact, the Minister of Transportation might have been part of a city council that was asking the government to be a part of that.

Now, the great thing about the big-city charters that I appreciated was that the cities recognized that if they want a percentage of the revenue that the province gets when times are good, they have to accept a drop in revenue when times are bad and the provincial coffers are equally affected, and they did. But, unfortunately, this government came into office and ripped up those agreements.

12:30

Now, for a government that is bragging about the number of dollars they're investing in infrastructure, getting Albertans back to work, I'm not sure how this bill squares with that messaging. With one hand they supposedly give, and with the other hand they take it away, and somehow that is supposed to create jobs.

Now, again, when members of the government talk about how they cannot afford certain initiatives, let's look at the corporate tax giveaway. How many dollars have been forfeited in the name of job creation and economic development? How is that going for you? I'll tell you: it's not. It's not, Madam Speaker. My favourite is when the government tries to point to companies like Infosys and mCloud, that had zero to do with the corporate tax rate. In fact, go ask them; it still has zero to do with it. It's not even on their radar, and if you think that it is, you haven't spoken to the companies. They came and come for talent and quality of life. Again, you know who helps deliver quality of life? Municipalities.

With this government making significant cuts to postsecondaries, cuts to municipalities, cuts to education, cuts to health care, the number of companies interested in coming to Alberta under this government is about to dwindle. It's frustrating to watch, Madam Speaker, because it's about priorities and choices. This UCP government bet the farm on a lower corporate tax rate, which has not produced the results that they promised to Albertans, and we have numerous examples of companies who said: "Thank you for the savings. We'll take that, and we'll go invest in other jurisdictions and create jobs elsewhere." Meanwhile back here at home we have companies like Infosys and mCloud that have come despite this current government, not because of it. So when this government tables a piece of legislation and asks us to support it when it's codifying cuts to municipalities, who deliver the core services that Albertans rely on, I will say that I cannot support this type of legislation, which is why I am supporting the amendment that my colleague put forward so that this bill will not be read for another six months.

Madam Speaker, with that, I will urge all members of the Assembly to support this hoist motion and send this bill away and the government back to look at a more sustainable approach to funding our municipalities to ensure that they can continue to deliver the services that Albertans depend on.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any members wishing to speak under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any members wishing to join debate?

Seeing none, I will call the question on amendment HA1.

[Motion on amendment HA1 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: Given that this is a hoist amendment, I must now call the question on Bill 56, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021, in second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 56 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is tomorrow already, and I'd like to thank all members of the House for the lively debate. At this point I would move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 20, 2021.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 12:35 a.m. on Tuesday]

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