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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday morning, May 26, 2021

Day 104

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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Milliken, Nicholas, Calgary-Currie (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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McIver, Hon. Ric, Calgary-Hays (UC), Deputy Government House Leader	Yaseen, Muhammad, Calgary-North (UC)

Party standings:

United Conservative: 60

New Democrat: 24

Independent: 3

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Chair: Mr. Neudorf
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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Chair: Ms Goodridge
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Amery
Carson
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Lovely
Neudorf
Pancholi
Rutherford
Sabir
Smith

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Chair: Mr. Schow
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Ceci
Lovely
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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Cooper
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Dang
Deol
Goehring
Goodridge
Long
Neudorf
Sabir
Sigurdson, R.J.
Williams

Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills

Chair: Mr. Ellis
Deputy Chair: Mr. Schow

Amery
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Getson
Glasgo
Irwin
Nielsen
Rutherford
Sigurdson, L.
Sigurdson, R.J.

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Smith
Deputy Chair: Mr. Reid

Armstrong-Homeniuk
Barnes
Deol
Ganley
Gotfried
Jones
Lovely
Loyola
Rehn
Renaud

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Ms Phillips
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Armstrong-Homeniuk
Lovely
Neudorf
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Schmidt
Singh
Turton
Walker

Select Special Committee on Real Property Rights

Chair: Mr. Sigurdson
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Ganley
Glasgo
Goodridge
Hanson
Milliken
Nielsen
Orr
Rowswell
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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Chair: Mr. Hanson
Deputy Chair: Member Ceci

Dach
Feehan
Ganley
Getson
Guthrie
Issik
Loewen
Singh
Turton
Yaseen

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Good morning, everyone.

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

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise on behalf of the Government House Leader to move Government Motion 78 on the Order Paper. It's fairly technical and long. Do you wish me to read it aloud?

The Deputy Speaker: Yes, please.

Amendments to Standing Orders

78. Mrs. Savage moved on behalf of Mr. Jason Nixon:

- A. Be it resolved that the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, effective February 25, 2021, be amended
- (a) in Standing Order 41 by adding the following immediately after suborder (5.1):
 - (5.2) An amendment to a motion other than a Government motion, moved after the motion has been moved, must
 - (a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel no later than the Thursday preceding the day the motion is moved, and
 - (b) be provided to the mover of the motion no later than 11 a.m. on the day the motion is moved.
 - (b) in Standing Order 42
 - (i) in suborder (1) by striking out "previously explained by the mover", and
 - (ii) by adding the following immediately after suborder (1):
 - (1.1)A Member may make a request under suborder (1) by explaining, for a period of no longer than 5 minutes, the urgent and pressing necessity for the motion.
 - (1.2)Immediately after a request is made under suborder (1.1), one of the following Members may make a statement in response, for a period of no longer than 5 minutes, before the request is put to the Assembly:
 - (a) a member of the Official Opposition, in the case of a request made by a member of the Executive

Council or a private Member of the Government caucus;

- (b) a member of the Executive Council, in the case of a request made by
 - (i) a Member of the Official Opposition,
 - (ii) a Member of any other party or group in opposition, or
 - (iii) an independent Member.
 - (c) in Standing Order 74.11(2) by striking out "8 sitting days" and substituting "12 sitting days";
 - (d) in Standing Order 78.2 by striking out suborder (2) and substituting the following:
 - (2) No public hearings may be conducted under suborder (1) if the Bill has already been the subject of public hearings held by a committee after first reading.
- B. Be it further resolved that the amendments set out in this motion come into force on passage of this motion.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. These are minor proposed changes to the standing orders in order to address certain challenges and limitations that currently exist. I hope there's support from all parties for this motion.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other speakers to the motion? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the Minister of Energy for reading these detailed standing orders into the record. I won't be going over them, but I do have an amendment relating to clause (c) that the minister read into the record. I have the requisite number of copies of the amendment.

The Deputy Speaker: This will be known as amendment A1. Hon. member, please proceed.

Mr. Sabir: The Member for Calgary-McCall to move that Government Motion 78 be amended in part A by striking out clause (c). What this amendment does: it strikes the section of Government Motion 78 that seeks to extend the time that the Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills Committee would have to report back to the Assembly from eight days to 12 days. It's my understanding, in conversation with the government, that of the issue that has been identified, the proposed section (c) of this motion: we don't believe that this is the solution. We believe that there are other options that are available, and we're willing to work together with the other side to come up with a solution that meets the needs of all parties.

With section (c) removed from Government Motion 78, I don't see any reason why all members of this House are not able to support this. Therefore, I hope that members of the Assembly will support this amendment. Should this amendment be supported, I think that we will be able to support the changes that the Deputy Government House Leader has identified.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any speakers to amendment A1?

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any speakers to the government motion?

Seeing none, would the hon. Deputy Government House Leader like to close debate?

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would just note that these are some proposed minor changes to the standing orders to improve the operation here, and I would encourage and hope that the Chamber will support these amendments.

Thank you.

[Government Motion 78 as amended carried]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to call Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 64 Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021

The Chair: We are on amendment A1. Are there any members wishing to join debate on the amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. It's an honour to rise this morning and talk about public lands, an issue that I think is very important to all Albertans at this point, specifically when we look at the fee that is associated within this bill of \$90 for Kananaskis. Now, part of the reason why I think this is important and why this amendment is important is the fact that for most of the fees that we're seeing this government implement, which is really just another tax on another tax on another tax, we have absolutely no idea where any of this money is going. Of course, the issue here is that there's zero accountability in this piece of legislation that tells Albertans what the fees that they are having to pay will actually go towards, whether general revenue or towards what the government is currently telling us, which is to maintain these parks.

9:10

Now, it's an easy fix, really, in the fact that at this point all the government needs to do is accept this amendment, which clearly just speaks to the fact that the government under this amendment would say that "the Minister must, on an annual basis, make publicly available a report on all fees collected under [the clause] and the manner in which these public monies are spent." Pretty simple, pretty transparent, I would say. Pretty important to Albertans to understand where their fees are going and what they're being used for. We see this being done with our provincial parks. We see this done in other areas within the government around: if a fee is taken from Albertans, it's being put back in a specific way. This amendment clearly shows Albertans what the \$90 fee is and what all of the fees are that are being imposed on Albertans for public land.

If the government is actually being honest about what they're using this money for, which is to ensure that staff are being hired, that the parks are being maintained, that the public land is being kept clean, and that if any damage is being done or garbage is being left behind, it's being cleaned up, then fair enough, but the reality of it is that this bill doesn't do that. This bill does not tell Albertans where these fees are going to go. In fact, we know and we've seen where this government says that money is going to go one place, and in fact it just goes back into general revenue. We've seen a few bills actually introduced in this Legislature where money is being expected to be paid through fees or taxes, and instead of going directly back to the area that they're being taken from, they're being put into general revenue.

I think this is a pretty common-sense amendment. I think the government should seriously consider this. If they're going to say that they're open and transparent with Albertans and that they're the most transparent government in the history of governments and all the rhetoric that we continuously hear from this government, then why wouldn't the government make sure that this piece of legislation actually tells Albertans where this money is going?

As we know, there's an ability for this money to be spent in other places. Of course, the minister of environment will say: "Well, no, no, no. I changed my mind. I didn't want to do it." But, I mean, we saw an RFP that went out about drones. The RFP was clear; it was to supervise people using public lands. Well, the reality of that is: was that what the \$90 fee was supposed pay for, for Albertans to be supervised by drones? That could potentially be what it's being used for. I mean, there's nothing in this piece of legislation that prevents the government from making that choice.

Again, I think that it's a pretty clear and transparent and open amendment, where if the government wants to be honest with Albertans and if this money is being used for what the government is intending it to be used for and the government is being honest, then they just accept the amendment. Pretty short and sweet. Pretty simplistic. I mean, it's openness, it's transparency, and it's public money. I mean, it's Albertans' money. They're paying the fee. They're being asked by this government to pay a fee, yet there's no transparency about where that fee is going to go.

I think that it's fair to say that this government should have to come back on an annual basis and say: "This is where it went. This is what we used it for. It's working. Maybe we took too much. Maybe the fee is too high." Maybe we should look at whether or not they would actually think about: "Well, maybe \$90 is too much. Maybe we should decrease it because, you know, we actually didn't have to spend as much as we thought because – you know what? – Albertans care about their lands, they care about the public spaces. All of this assumption about all the damage that's going to be done and all of those things, it actually didn't cost what we thought it was going to cost, so this fee doesn't make sense." I think that that's fair. I think that it's, again, openness and transparency.

If it starts generating a surplus and that surplus is going into general revenue, that's a problem. If it is a surplus that is sitting in a separate account, that clearly says, "Well, this money was put aside to maintain Kananaskis, and there is a surplus," well, then maybe there are some upgrades that can happen to Kananaskis for services or different things like that because the requirements or the initial need that this government says that they need this fee for may not necessarily be the way that we see it going forward in the future. Again, openness and transparency, creating an account and reporting back to Albertans on an annual basis about where the money is going, how it's being spent, whether or not it's all being used, and if there are surpluses or deficits: I think that's fair, and I think Albertans have a right to know that information.

With that, I would urge the government to accept this amendment, to be open and transparent with Albertans, to actually tell them what's going on. I know it might be a first for the government to do that, but it would be a good start, so let's start there today.

The Chair: Any other speakers to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to rise today and speak to amendment A1. I, too – no surprise here – will be supporting this amendment. You know, I won't even spend too much time just talking about the fact that this government in its short two years in office has raised taxes, has raised fees on

insurance, on parks, and essentially is nickel and diming Albertans at every turn. But if the government is going to continue down that path, I think that at least the minimum a government can do is ensure that any fees that are collected go toward a designated fund that, in fact, will be used to improve our parks.

“It’s rich” is probably even an understatement, but when the current government was in opposition, if ever the tables were turned and our government looked to introduce any kind of fee that went into general revenues, the UCP opposition would light their hair on fire. Now, funnelling money back into general revenues so that it won’t actually be not only tracked but be applied toward what it was collected for is something that they fought against over and over again. I mean, the outcries were loud.

Now we’re in a position, Madam Chair, where there’s a bill in front of us, and the opposition has proposed ensuring that at least if there will be fees collected – again, I’d like to make it very, very clear that I recognize that there is a cost to maintaining our parks. However, Alberta has not charged fees for people to come and use our parks – I don’t know – since 1905, probably before, since we were a province.

I think the timing of this is problematic in that we’re trying to encourage folks from other jurisdictions, other provinces to spend their travel and tourism dollars here in the province, and instead of encouraging and incentivizing travel and tourism here, this current government is trying to nickel and dime folks for coming here. I appreciate that some may argue: well, it’s not that large of a sum. However, for many families the past year and a half have been extremely difficult. Families would like to travel locally, I think many of them in large part because of how challenging it’s been financially for them.

At a time when we should be incentivizing people to visit our parks and to spend money in our local communities, we’re slapping them with fees. I mean, the message that we’re sending is completely counter to what we should be doing. In fact, I wish this government would look at a proposal and an idea that the Leader of the Opposition put forward as far as travel vouchers – this is something that’s implemented in New Brunswick; I know Ontario is looking at bringing in a travel voucher – which would incentivize Alberta families to spend their money here in the province.

9:20

What I’m excited about with that proposal is that it’s a percentage of what they spend on gas, hotel receipts, restaurants, so every business within the tourism sector will benefit from this. It’s not just benefiting one group of businesses, and the fact that it can be used over the period of a year, up to \$1,000, is no small amount, Madam Chair. What I love about it is that for families that may not be able to take bigger blocks of holidays but may want to try a restaurant in a community that they haven’t visited before or run down to Drumheller and, you know, stay there for a night and go out to eat, well, they can do that and get money reimbursed or if later on in the year they have another opportunity for a weekend getaway. That’s the kind of innovative thinking and innovative solutions that the government should be implementing, not slapping fees onto the very people we’re trying to encourage to spend money in their own backyard.

I mean, Albertans spend \$7 billion a year on tourism. Seven billion. Why aren’t we looking for ways to capture that here in our own province? This is just giving some Albertans another reason to go to another province for their holidays. I don’t think we should be encouraging Albertans to go out of province. I think that especially right now, when our local businesses, our local communities are suffering and need this economic stimulus, we should be doing everything we can to keep them here.

The amendment that was put forward by my colleague at least puts a collar on where these fees will be collected and funnelled to. I think the worst place to collect them and move them to is general revenues. There is zero guarantee that any of these fees will actually be used to improve our parks, and I don’t have confidence. I don’t have confidence in this government. I mean, you know, from trying to sell off the eastern slopes to a number of different, again, fee hikes that were not in their campaign promises – we’ve seen the war on doctors during a pandemic, a mishandling of COVID-19. I find it fascinating that economists have put out a number of studies that show that provinces who have done the worst job collaring COVID-19 and getting the pandemic numbers down also have the worst economies, and Alberta is one of them.

This whole argument that the government has put forward from day one, you know, balancing lives and livelihoods: well, the government screwed up both of them. The COVID-19 response has been terrible in this province, and our economy is also doing more poorly than most other jurisdictions. It’s frustrating because restaurateurs, business owners are so tired of half measures. We’ve been limping along in this province for the past year and a half, and so many businesses have chosen to keep their doors shut because of this opening and closing, opening and closing. I mean, for a government and a party that claim to understand business, they have shown the exact opposite.

The biggest killer for business is uncertainty and the fact that there has been no certainty for businesses over the past year and a half. Now, I know that there is an announcement coming later this morning. I can imagine that it’ll have something to do with the economy, but I know, from talking to business owners, that if this is another grand reopening and in another three weeks there’s going to be a grand reclosing, that’ll be the end of some businesses in this province.

What we needed was swift, decisive action to address this pandemic and support our businesses. Over and over again the opposition has been calling for stronger supports for our businesses because they’ve been telling us that it has not been enough. The fact that there are businesses who have been waiting for supports for months tells me that this government has failed to support the very people that they claim to. And we know, especially when it comes to the tourism sector, that they’ve been hit the hardest. They have been asking for targeted supports from day one, and they’ve received none. The amount of support that many businesses have actually qualified for, because the minimal qualification levels have been out of reach for so many businesses – receiving a couple of thousand dollars that’s supposed to help them for months’ worth of rent and utilities and inventory hasn’t cut it, doesn’t cut it. So time and time again, Madam Chair, the opposition has called for stronger supports for our businesses because we know that small businesses are the lifeblood of this province, and we know that if we want to get our economy back on track, we need to support them.

A bill that introduces new fees is not just counterproductive; it’s a disincentive for families to decide to stay and spend their money here in the province. At least with this amendment, that I urge all members to support, it will ensure that whatever fees are collected go into a separate account that’ll be tracked, that’ll be transparent. Albertans will know that the fees that they’re paying – even though that’s what their taxes should be covering and not additional fees – the dollars that they’re spending are going to be reinvested back into improving the very parks that they’re using.

I hope that the government adopts this amendment. In fact, many of its government MLAs, if the shoe was on the other foot, would be on their feet, if we were government, saying: you need to amend this piece of legislation to ensure that there is accountability and transparency. Whatever argument or reason the government is

going to give as to why this needs to go into general revenues, I don't buy it, and neither do Albertans. If you're going to impose new fees that are going to be designated for a purpose, then put it in legislation. Let's see a line item in the budget that makes it really clear how these fees will be reinvested back into our parks.

With that, Madam Chair, I encourage all members to support this very reasonable amendment, that makes a bill that I think is not necessary and is a disincentive for tourism at least provide Albertans with a shred of confidence that their dollars will help strengthen the very sector that they would like to support.

Thank you.

9:30

The Chair: Any other members wishing to join debate on amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Chair. On Bill 64, the amendment that we are discussing – first of all, I just wanted to once again share my views on Bill 64. What does it do if this bill is passed?

If this bill is passed by this House, beginning June 1, 2021 – that's about less than a week, probably, from now – Albertans will pay a \$15 fee, I just wanted to mention, in the Kananaskis Country provincial sites and Bow Valley corridor. So that's where the people will start paying. New fees: \$15 per vehicle per day or a yearly pass of \$90; and if the vehicle is built up, a semi, commercial, or a school, like, if it's larger than an ordinary passenger vehicle, \$22 per day and the yearly pass is \$135; and if it's a commercial vehicle, then the fee is \$30 per day, or you have to purchase a \$180 yearly pass.

On top of this, this bill does not have any provision where it states that the government will not increase the fees after those listed in the bill. So it's not just opening up the new area for the government to enforce a new burden, in a way, on Albertans by way of putting up fees to access the parks in Kananaskis Country in the first time in history since Alberta was founded, but also it opens a way that they have similarly done in the bill that opened up the path for the government to charge the toll tax on roads. What we are seeing for the past two years or so is that somehow this government fully believes that the ordinary people and everyday Albertans should be responsible for each and every thing that has a cost to the government.

The government probably somehow does not understand, it looks like, what we are seeing with every piece of legislation being discussed in the House. The ordinary Albertans who go to work 9 to 5 are – we have discussed the bill where the government was so much convinced that the people should not only work eight hours, probably work 12 hours before they see the legislation striking in that they would be entitled to ask for the overtime. The government is somehow so much indulged into the theory or philosophy that everyday Albertans are living such luxurious lives, and they are the only ones to come up with billing the cost of a number of things that the government was directly responsible for.

The government created a \$4.7 billion hole in Alberta's budget. They bet over a billion dollars in the American election and so on. You know, the dissatisfaction of Albertans in the way the government is handling the COVID-19 pandemic and how their double standard has been exposed many times: the government or the Premier or the Executive Council saying something and doing another thing. We also discuss, then, the other distraction piece of legislation, called the Recall Act. In this such case, what the government is doing is basically running away from their promises that they made in 2019 and their accountability. This was not part of the manifesto. This was not part of their promises.

What was part of their promises was that they will create jobs, and the Premier signed the health care guarantee. They promised that they will provide the funds for the new students coming to the schools. They failed on all of those. Right now, when the people are going through challenging times – they're falling sick, they have to spend time in isolation, and every single day the chief medical officer of Alberta announces the new death numbers, and they're mourning the deaths of their loved ones – the Premier not long ago tweeted how important this land and the parks and environments are, important in the lives of Albertans, specifically for their mental health.

During this very unprecedented, challenging time, when the House reconvened yesterday after two weeks of shutdown due to health restrictions, these are the pieces of legislation we are discussing in the House. That was that the government decided not to spend a single minute on the wages discussions when the House reconvened. So how should we go forward, move forward to contain the spread of COVID and help Albertans?

Instead, they brought this present, this gift for Albertans, when we will be getting out of COVID, and you will have new burdens, financial burdens, if you seek, if you are stuck in the house for three months, two months. You're struggling with your mental health, and if you get out, you need to make sure that you will have extra money in your pocket; otherwise, you will not be eligible to do so. At the time when we have the second-highest unemployment rate in the country – over 200,000 people are out of jobs – that is the plan you have for those people. Instead of helping them isolate safely, save their lives, their loved ones, and Albertans, the government brought forward this bill for the people who are already struggling between isolating, the safety of their families and friends, and putting food on the table, or paying for mortgages and their bills. That is the gift we have for them now. Then the House reconvenes after two weeks of shutdown due to the health restrictions. This is so unacceptable.

9:40

On top of this, I just want to talk about accountability as it was bragged about in Bill 52, Recall Act. The government is moving all these funds in the name that they will collect this money and spend it for the betterment of those parks. They're moving all these funds to the general revenue. What they are trying to do, with the hole they have created in Alberta's finances, is that they're trying to force Albertans to pay back those monies to the general revenue. What does this amendment do? We know that the government has the majority in the House. The government is going to pass this bill, but what this reasonable amendment is doing is that if you claim accountability, if you claim this money is being collected for this specific purpose – we don't even agree that this is the right time to do it, but if you are doing it, then do so in the way that people can see it. It's the minister's responsibility to come out and show the numbers annually, how you're collecting this money from the people of Alberta and where this money is going.

That will set a matrix of how we come up to the numbers. Are they the right numbers? Are they used properly? What we can do going forward – we see there are issues, that there is more revenue coming in, less being spent, or less revenue coming in, and the government is finding new challenges to deal with the issues. That will actually provide a very transparent mechanism.

This amendment I will once again call a very reasonable amendment, that is in line with the claim the government is making in this bill, that even, you know, strengthens the claim if you do so. I would encourage every member of this House to please support and vote in favour of this amendment.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton–Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise this morning to speak to amendment A1 regarding Bill 64, moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton–Gold Bar, that Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, be amended in section 5 by adding the following immediately after the proposed clause (i.1):

(i.2) despite subsection (2), the manner by which the Minister must, on an annual basis, make publicly available a report on all fees collected under subclause (i.1) and the manner in which those public monies were expended by the Government.

Madam Chair, I think that this is a reasonable amendment. This is something that I think Albertans have a right to know. When they are being asked to spend money for a service, when there's a fee affiliated, they have the right to see how that fee is being collected and distributed, and if the government is being honest about how they would like to spend this fee and what the intent of it is, there should be no issue in compiling a report and making it publicly available. We know that when there's public money, there should be some sort of accountability on how that's being spent. What this piece of legislation is missing, glaringly, is that accountability piece. There's absolutely nothing in this legislation that dictates how the money received from this fee is being spent. There are concerns that it's going to be put into general revenue. Who knows what happens to that money? We saw this happen when they took the lottery funds and put that into general revenue. There was an outcry from community with concerns about how this government spends money. Unfortunately, that had no impact on the government and their decision, because we're seeing them do it all over again with fees that they're proposing without any sort of transparency or accountability to where that money is going.

When we're talking about fees, I think it's important to remember that there are so many other things that this government has done that are increasing money being required to be spent out of household budgets. When we look at cost of insurance, when we look at cost of utilities, all of these things are under this government being ignored. We had put caps in place to protect consumers, to protect Albertans when it comes to necessities. This government removed those. Now we're seeing the second-highest unemployment rate in the country right here in Alberta, and what is this government's response? We're going to create fees to access public lands, and then we're not going to tell you how we're spending those fees that are raised. I think that when people have a genuine understanding of how the money that they're spending is being spent by government, there might be some acceptance of this fee that's being proposed, but right now this government is saying: just trust us.

We've seen the record of what that means to Albertans. We've seen this Premier just recently talk about Alberta having its best summer in history. This is a statement that he made. He was quite proud of it. Within a matter of days there was another lockdown. There was another wave of COVID that this government failed to address. When we have a government saying things like that this is going to be the best summer in Alberta's history, I think Albertans are having a hard time trusting this government with the statements that they make.

He said: best summer in Alberta's history. Well, this piece of legislation, Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, was before this very Chamber, talking about increasing fees to accessing public lands. To me, being able to spend my summer, Albertans being able to spend their summer outside in a refuge, to take a break from perhaps this pandemic and have some sort of normalcy, we're asking that they pay to do things that they shouldn't have to pay for.

There's no understanding of what that fee goes to. We don't know that this government is going to do what they say because we don't have a track record to show that when this government says one thing, they're going to follow through. We do, however, have a track record that they say one thing and do something completely opposite.

[Mrs. Allard in the chair]

An example specific to this piece of legislation that they're proposing is that their budget came out and they talked about increasing travel and tourism. That was a goal. They wanted to be able to say that Alberta was a travel destination. It makes sense. We'd love to see the plan. Well, their plan is that they're going to charge fees to access public lands.

9:50

They talked about wanting to increase film and television and make this a destination for film crews to come and film in our beautiful province. But we don't see any sort of exemptions for film crews. When we have a film crew coming here, wanting to film in Alberta, there are hundreds of individuals that accompany that film. The crew: hundreds. So when we put a fee on every single one of those crew members, where is that money going? What is happening? We're trying to attract investment, we're trying to attract some sort of highlighting ability to talk about Alberta, to showcase it on a global platform, but we're going to charge those individuals to come here and film.

When we look at all of that money that's going to be raised just in one day of a film crew being on-site, what's happening to that money? I think that if a film crew had an understanding of what was going to happen, that there would be actually clear, transparent information saying that your fee went to pay for this, there might be less concern about that fee. There might be some sort of acceptance. But I can tell you that when this is being proposed, when you have a film crew that is considering Alberta and they see that to access our beautiful public lands, they have a fee that they don't know where it's going, they might second-guess whether or not they want to come to Alberta. B.C. is beautiful. They can go and film there without having each single member of their crew pay a fee to film a project.

All we're asking is to be transparent, to do a report, to report back to Albertans how the money is being spent. This government will stand up and talk about the fee and how wonderful it is and how they're going to take care of the parks and that they're going to make sure that garbage is collected and that there's monitoring and there are bathrooms and all of these wonderful things that make sense, but there is nothing in this legislation that actually holds them accountable to do that. So we propose this amendment to be able to say: "Great. Take the money and show Albertans how it's being spent. Show us where that money is going. What are you actually paying for when you're charging Albertans this fee?"

We know that there has been an increase in people wanting to get outside, wanting to go and travel, wanting to get away. It could be a quick weekend trip. I've heard from families that they feel this has been somewhat of an opportunity to explore our province. Some people that have travelled haven't really taken the opportunity to explore Alberta. They've always gone outside of our province. Now is the time, with all of these restrictions, to encourage travel within the province.

When you are able to experience the beauty that this province has as a family, it might become an annual thing that you do. How wonderful would it be to have your annual summer vacation spent in the mountains or Christmas right here in our province instead of travelling to Hawaii, for example, as your annual family tradition?

Being able to experience joy and have all of these wonderful things happening right here in our province could create future travel in the province. You make memories. You make these annual trips with your family. We have so many things that Alberta has to offer, and instead of promoting how wonderful it is to travel and tour our province, we're adding fees to that, which is a direct deterrent for families when perhaps they could go into Saskatchewan or go into B.C.

It's not just the parks this government is looking at for income. When we're looking at these fees, they're missing the bigger picture. When we have travel in the province, those are local businesses that are being shopped at. That's the ice cream shop in Nanton, where people can stop and go in and have some old-fashioned candy, have some great ice cream as they're doing their road trip. I know my family has done that my whole life, from when I was little to now with my children. We've explored our province. There are other ways that travel creates economic impact. We want to encourage Albertans staying in the province, travelling here, investing back into our economy, and by adding an additional fee, it could discourage travel within our very own province. It is counterintuitive to exactly what this government said that they wanted to do, which is increase travel and tourism. It just simply doesn't make sense.

When we propose our amendments, it seems that this government isn't listening. We propose an amendment, and automatically the response is: vote it down. I think that when we have the government saying how they intend to use the fees: put it in writing, make it part of this legislation, and make it accountable so that you're actually doing what you say you intend to do. There's broken trust with this government in saying one thing and doing something completely different. If they're being authentic that they want to use these fees for very specific tasks and very specific things to help ensure that Albertans have a great experience while they're accessing parks, put it in a report, and make sure that it's accountable to the money that they're collecting and how they spend it. It's very simple.

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

Most businesses understand that when you have an income and a spend, that's part of your reporting. It's what you do. Why this government thinks that it doesn't have to do that, that people should just trust them is mind blowing to me. You've introduced a fee, yet you haven't introduced a mechanism to report on it. We're suggesting, through this amendment, that a publicly available report on all fees be made available. It's something that I think is – it just simply makes sense, Madam Chair, when we look at what this government is saying is their intention behind this legislation. If they put in this amendment, it just reinforces what they're already saying. We're not asking for something different. We're just asking them to show their work, to show what the money is being spent on, to show how much money is being collected and how it's being spent. It's an accounting practice that isn't a foreign concept.

It's something that I believe government should be accountable to, especially when they're asking for this fee in the middle of a pandemic, when so many Albertans are struggling financially. So many Albertans are looking for ways that are affordable to be able to have a mental health break, to be able to take their family out and enjoy the province, to enjoy the outdoors. When families are feeling that they're cooped up in the house – they're complying with the guidelines – a nice reprieve is something that shouldn't have a cost affiliated with it when there's such a high unemployment rate.

There's a high stress rate that's happening. We're hearing over and over that people are just fatigued. They're exhausted. So many say that what helps is getting outside, being out in nature, going kayaking, going hiking, going camping. Those are all things that traditionally

have been free to be able to do in certain parts of the province, and now this government is saying: no; we're going to affiliate a fee, and we're not going to tell you how we're spending it.

The other thing that I think would be interesting is – we have the minister saying that they're going to continue to look at the user fees. They're going to continue to look at what fees are in place and perhaps increasing fees in other areas. A way to assess that would be to have a report to see what the user fees coming in are. Is it adequate, and would it support increasing fees in other areas? But that's not something that this government wants to do. They want to just be able to say, "Trust us; we need to increase fees; the money coming in doesn't support the money going out to spend for these services; just trust us," when they're making a decision to increase fees but have no accountability. This minister has specifically said that he will continue to look at user fees and potentially increasing fees. Based on what? If we have a general understanding of how many fees are coming in, how much money is coming in, and then in turn how much money is going out to support the services that they're saying that they want to support, I think that's easier to understand than "trust us." If this government had a good track record on accountability, on transparency, perhaps it could be easier to understand.

10:00

All we're asking for is simple accountability. Do a report that talks about all the fees that are being collected and how that money is being spent. I would suggest that every member in this Chamber can understand the basic concept of money coming in and how it's being spent. Why there is such a hesitancy to actually put it in writing and have it part of this legislation is somewhat concerning. I would question: where is that money going?

I know for myself, my banking, I monitor my spending; I monitor my income. I can clearly show where my money is going. If I need to spend more money in one area, I can do the math and figure it out and adjust. This government isn't open to sharing that banking, that accounting. They just want to increase a fee and not have any accountability to where that money is going.

I think that when we're looking at this amendment, I'm curious to hear what government has to say about why it should be opposed. This morning it's been all opposition members standing up and talking about this. If I could predict what's going to happen, government is going to stand up when it comes time to vote, and they're going to vote it down without providing any sort of explanation about why they can't be accountable on their budgeting, why they can't be accountable to Albertans about how the money that they're receiving is being spent. It's really frustrating to stand in here and not have any sort of understanding about why they will not accept this amendment.

I would encourage all members to support this amendment and, if you're not going to support it, to talk to us about why you are not going to support it because being accountable is something that in democracy makes sense. You should be able to say: this is the money we're receiving; this is the money that's going out. Albertans have a right to know how their fees that are being collected are being spent regardless of whether or not we're in a pandemic. Being accountable makes sense. A government that's saying that we will . . . [Ms Goehring's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. It's an honour to rise this morning to speak to the amendment before us, and I would

thank the member for bringing it forward. I agree with my caucus colleagues that it is an incredibly important amendment before the House right now. In summary, once again, the amendment that we're looking at would require the government to report how they spend the money raised through the fees that are being proposed in Bill 64, the Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021.

I also thank the member who just spoke previous to me, the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. The fact is that many of my caucus colleagues have had the opportunity to speak to this amendment before the House here this morning; unfortunately, we have heard nothing of the sort from the government side. It's frustrating because, once again, I believe that this is a very important amendment. I think that it would benefit all Albertans to understand how these fees are being collected or the amount of the fees that are being collected and how they are being spent.

Of course, within this legislation we see no information provided that guarantees, again, that the collected fees would be reinvested in public land management. It's one thing to continue the discussion around the idea of random camping and these fees for public access to certain areas of our province. Specifically, the majority of these random camping opportunities are occurring in the eastern slopes, as we've brought forward already. But even more concerning is the idea that when questioned in the estimates process from this year – the critic for Environment and Parks had brought forward his concerns at the time with potentially this legislation or the idea of fees for random camping and many other opportunities where this government seems to be interested in charging fees. Of course, at the time the Minister of Environment and Parks explained that: "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."

Now, I can appreciate that the minister does not necessarily fully know what his plans are for the future for access fees, for potentially parks, potentially other infrastructure opportunities across our province, but the fact is that within this legislation the government is giving itself the opportunity to essentially write a blank cheque with no accountability on the other side for Albertans. Today, once again, we're talking about random camping potentially, but tomorrow we could be talking about changes to user fees for accessing potentially areas of our province where Albertans like to go skiing, for example. We saw – I believe it was last year – that in the Kananaskis area the UCP made some major cuts that actually forced that community of skiers to raise almost \$300,000 themselves to maintain the trail system that is in that community.

Again, we have on one hand the UCP government making cuts to services for all Albertans that support the health and wellness or our community, that support the economic opportunities of Albertans, and so on, to the extent that these organizations are having to fund these projects themselves, and then on the other hand this government is asking Albertans to pay more. Again, in this instance we see one opportunity for the government to charge fees, but I wouldn't put it past them to come up with several more fees for Albertans to pay after Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, is moved forward, if it does, which, based on the UCP majority, I imagine it would, Madam Chair, but we will see.

Now, again, the government has argued that Albertans accept these fees on the basis that they would be reinvested into the important infrastructure that they depend on when they do things like random camping or go skiing. Unfortunately, as we've seen in other instances, whether we're talking about potentially the victims of crime fund that we have seen legislation pass within this House to remove some of the transparency for those funds, whether we're talking about the \$30 million war room, that at this point the

government states is unFOIPable because of the way they've set up that structure, whether we're talking about the changes that this government made to AISH financing and ensuring that Albertans who have disabilities are able to access that program, how they are getting their funding, across the board, Madam Chair, we can look ministry to ministry and see that this government has no interest in ensuring transparency for Albertans. It's incredibly frustrating, and I, again, would say that it is an important reason why we need to move forward with this amendment, that would require the government to report on an annual basis how the money is being spent and how that money is being raised.

We see some preliminary figures that the government put forward about how much they expect to raise off this program, and, Madam Chair, we're expected to take that at face value that that's how much is going to be raised, but at the end of the day Albertans deserve to see what those numbers end up being, and they also deserve to see if that money is actually being reinvested in the communities that are collecting that money. And if not, why?

Again, we've heard, for members on this side of the House, concerns. Of course, the government was very quick to renege on that commitment of an RFP for drone surveillance to watch over public campers. I appreciate that they went back on that RFP because I think Albertans were very concerned with that, but when we talk about programs like that, once again, we need to understand where the money is coming from and if that is in the best interest of Albertans.

10:10

You know, when we talk about user fees, we've heard, to some extent, these concerns brought forward from this side of the House already. Yesterday we heard the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs talk about how the government really seems to be trying to silo the fees that we're seeing coming forward from this government, whether we're talking about the insurance cap that this government lifted, whether we're talking about the utility cap that this government lifted, whether we're talking about increases to fishing licence fees or removing services from seniors potentially for dental or glasses. I mean, across the board we are seeing services go down for Albertans while fees are going up, and in Bill 64 that is no exception.

It's absolutely frustrating because if these decisions are being made to have Albertans pay more, to invest more in these communities, which they most definitely need, then it should have a paper trail at the end of the day, Madam Chair. We should be able to know how this money is being spent, so it's incredibly frustrating for me and for all Albertans to, again, see an unwillingness from this government to commit to moving forward with such opportunities.

Madam Chair, I can appreciate that we've spent some time this morning discussing this amendment and Bill 64 as a whole. I would again ask that the government stand and speak to why, as far as I can tell, they likely won't be supporting this amendment, tell Albertans why they don't believe that they deserve transparency around how these fees are being collected and how they're being spent, tell Albertans why you don't believe that you should have that accountability that you would expect of your government if you were not sitting in this Legislature.

There are so many questions left to be answered and the questions that we've brought forward as an opposition caucus around the idea of why in the first place the government decided against a dedicated revenue fund, something that we've went on to some extent about, if there were other options explored to ensure that the revenues raised can only go to public lands management. Those kinds of concerns would be somewhat addressed by the amendment before

the House right now. Maybe they wouldn't be done in the first place, but we could at least see if the government was or wasn't doing it at the end of the year or on an annual basis, so it addresses that concern. The concerns around limitations to what kinds of fees the minister could impose – once again, it's not going to solve all of the issues that we in opposition have raised around the concern around lack of transparency, but, again, at least on an annual basis we will be able to see whether the government is using those funds as was intended or doing the opposite.

There are many reasons why I support this amendment before the House that we review these funds on an annual basis. I think that it is to the benefit of all Albertans to support it, and if this government is planning on not supporting it, then I would really encourage them to rise and speak to that fact before we move to a vote on this.

With that, Madam Chair, I imagine that we'll have more opportunities to speak on this legislation that is going to cost Albertans potentially hundreds of dollars a year at a time when we should be encouraging them to get out. We've heard from many members, again, about opportunities about travel vouchers, that our caucus has put forward, and ensuring that Albertans see that the government is working to support them to get out into nature and not doing the opposite, especially when we talk about the economic opportunities for organizations like Travel Alberta, organizations within our film industry and tourism industry, and so on. With that, I'll take my seat, but I encourage all members to support this amendment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today to this amendment, that basically is just looking for some transparency, an annual report from the government on how they spend the money that is raised through the fees that would be levied under Bill 64. Now, this is important because I think that if government wants to maintain respect for the people it serves, respect with the people it serves, if it wants to maintain public buy-in and trust, it must be honest and transparent. Successful policy requires clarity, and it requires trust. You need that public buy-in.

Now, I'm going to offer an example. I'll apologize in advance, Madam Chair; this is a bit of a long walk, but it is moving toward my point specifically on this bill, so I'd just ask you to bear with me. If we take, for example, what we have seen over the last year with this government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, if we look back to the first wave of the pandemic, we pretty much saw Albertans universally pull together in following the public health restrictions. We saw incredible public buy-in. Albertans clearly saw and understood the need that was in front of them, the challenge that we faced together collectively, and they were willing to make sacrifices for the common good.

Now, clearly, there were some frustrations with some aspects, say, how long it took for government to provide some of the things like protections against evictions or some of the supports for businesses or their failure to follow through on their promise of paid sick leave, but that aside, we saw that generally Albertans were with the government in taking the steps that we needed to take. In so many respects because of that, we were incredibly successful with containing the coronavirus and minimizing harm. Albertans collectively achieved that.

But, unfortunately, Madam Chair, that didn't last, and I think that bears specifically on why this amendment is so important to Bill 64. What we saw, first of all, with the initial economic reopening with

this government – what I heard and I think what my colleagues heard and, I imagine, members of government heard from many, many people and businesses was their frustration with the lack of clarity from government, with the lack of support, with the lack of understanding of what steps they were taking, and with how much responsibility government downloaded on to businesses and others to figure out very important details, the uncertainty that created.

We saw that continue as the government made its announcements about school reopening for the fall. Many questions were asked by teachers, by school boards, by others, again, about costs that were being downloaded onto them without a clear sign of the benefit that they were going to have as a result of it. A lack of leadership by government, a lack of trust and collaboration, a lack of honesty and transparency. We saw that continue going into the fall as we saw COVID case numbers start to rise slowly, as they do, making their way up on that exponential curve, and we saw that lack of action from government, a lack of support for schools.

We saw the beginnings of the collapse of the contact tracing system as the government again downloaded responsibility and further erosion of that public buy-in, that public trust as government continued to deny what everyone could see happening, refused to listen to medical experts that were giving warnings. Indeed, at times the Premier and others proceeded with using language that undermined the severity and the reality of the threat we actually faced.

We saw the beginnings of concerns around a lack of enforcement as again the issue of public buy-in began to rise. We saw that begin to degrade, folks actively pushing back against those public health measures, and no action of any significance being taken. Ultimately, of course, that led to the new public health restrictions that had to be introduced at the beginning of December because the wave was upon us and washing over our health care system, and government was finally forced to act. But even then I think we had significant public buy-in. People wanted to see things change, so still we had a majority of Albertans who were willing to step up and follow.

Sadly, we saw that again undermined as members of government, including a former minister, took the Christmas vacation to go to Hawaii while other Albertans were here and buckling down and following the public health restrictions, maintaining that buy-in, utterly undermined by actions of the government caucus and then a Premier who tried to duck and hide from it before finally bowing to understandable public pressure and actually taking some action, one of the most significant moments of apology we've probably yet seen from this government, a seemingly, at the time, very heartfelt commitment to re-earn Albertans' trust, but ultimately, unfortunately, what we saw was that that was again undermined as we began to approach the third wave and the variants of concern.

10:20

Again, this is about public buy-in, which is so essential and important and why we are looking at this amendment to Bill 64. What we saw again during the third wave is, frankly, just an utter betrayal, marked again by the dismissal of experts who were warning of precisely what was going to happen, a refusal to listen to businesses about the government's increasingly seemingly political decisions, based on what we later came to see was a severe fracturing of their own caucus, and the impacts that was having on businesses who were trying to figure out, in the midst of all this uncertainty that was generated, how they were going to be able to continue to function.

We saw shifting goalposts from the government. We saw again the utter collapse of public buy-in as we saw the continued undermining that came from a lack of enforcement. Again, this is

about that public buy-in, which is part of why we are bringing forward this amendment to Bill 64. I am bringing it around, bringing it home, Madam Chair.

We saw that it ultimately drove 17 members of the government caucus to rebel and call out their own government. They couldn't even maintain trust among themselves, let alone with the public, Madam Chair, to the point that two of them now have been kicked out of that caucus and are now sitting as independents. It led to things getting so far out of control, both in our health care system with record COVID case numbers and hospital ICU admissions, blatant disregard of public health measures, with thousands of people attending a protest rodeo, severe fractures within the government caucus, that the Premier had to shut down this very Legislature for three weeks to get things back under control, all because this government failed to be honest and transparent with Albertans, to take simple steps early on . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but we're now eight minutes down this path, and I fail to see the connection to this amendment. I would ask that you tailor your remarks a little bit more towards the amendment A1, which we're debating.

Mr. Shepherd: Absolutely, Madam Chair. I was just reaching my pivot point, and thank you for your indulgence.

All of this because government failed to be honest and transparent with Albertans, to take simple steps to maintain good faith in public trust. Here we have a situation where government, again, through Bill 64, is making new demands on Albertans, downloading new costs onto the Alberta public, and is doing so without any clarity or guarantee or anything to show what that benefit is actually going to be to Albertans. I went through that long list, Madam Chair, to show what happens when government fails to maintain public buy-in, when they fail to demonstrate how the extraordinary demands they are making on Albertans are actually benefiting Albertans, what happens when government fails to be honest, when it is unclear. I would note that even the report on the first wave of this pandemic – the first wave – has yet to be released to Albertans, and here we are in the midst of the third.

That is why we are bringing forward this amendment. I went through an extensive list of how this government has undermined the trust of Albertans to demonstrate why Albertans should not be expected to simply trust this government about how it intends to use the money from this new tax on parks. I outlined the many ways in which this government has undermined the public's faith in their good intent to demonstrate why it is essential that they take maybe just this one, simple step here. If they genuinely intend to make the right and proper use of this new fee that they are putting on the backs of Albertans to access publicly owned lands and parks, this government could show just a little bit of good faith and simply then provide this report to Albertans, outlining how those dollars have been spent each year.

Now, I know that is something to which this government is somewhat allergic. On so many occasions what they have sought to do is to hide from Albertans precisely what they are doing and how they are spending dollars. As I have frequently referenced, and I think it deserves frequent reference, the embarrassment of this government's energy war room, which they specifically set up in such a way to hide from Albertans how Albertans' dollars are being spent by a former candidate for this government. They have intentionally gone out of their way to make it more difficult, even talking about the COVID-19 pandemic in the first wave, remembering how they used that as an excuse to short-circuit the budget process and have even less scrutiny on their budget for Albertans. That is the record of this government.

Time and again they have specifically undermined Albertans' trust in their government. That's reflected in the polling numbers. I think that's reflected probably in the correspondence that so many of these members are receiving, and I know because I get CCed on a lot of it. It's certainly being reflected in the folks I've talked to living in these members' constituencies in my opportunities to phone over the last few months.

What we are presenting today with this amendment is an opportunity for this government to take a small step towards what they promised back in January and have utterly failed to follow through and deliver on, and that is a commitment to rebuild trust with Albertans, to demonstrate integrity in their work. If they are going to ask every Calgarian family regardless of their income level who wants to access Kananaskis to pay as much in an annual fee as they pay to access a whole suite of national parks, they can manage the due diligence of issuing a simple report each year about how those dollars have been used.

Now, again, I know this government's record with reports is not a terribly good one. As I said, we're still waiting for the report from the first wave of COVID-19 as we are in the midst of the third. We've just seen this government give another extension, the fourth extension, to the Allan inquiry, which has also gone a million dollars over budget and still has yet to be able to deliver anything of substance to Albertans other than what we saw a few months ago, some absolutely embarrassing documents that Albertans also paid for.

Here is an opportunity, a simple opportunity, for this government to do something different, re-earn some trust with Albertans, and, boy, Madam Chair, they badly need to do that right now. Three weeks away from this Legislature may have given them a break, but I can tell you that it has not shifted Albertans' frustration with this government.

Here is a clear opportunity today to take a simple step, show Albertans that you are willing to be transparent with them about how you intend to use these new dollars which you are charging them for access to their parks and public spaces. It's my hope that we'll see all members of this Assembly take that opportunity and vote in favour of this amendment.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this amendment. You know, not to value amendments any more or less with their utility and their importance, but certainly I believe that this amendment A1 to the fee proposal as brought forward by this government is particularly important, and I believe so for at least two reasons.

10:30

The first one being: let's take a step back and realize and remind ourselves in this Chamber that this is a radical departure from how provincial parks have been managed and how they have been able to be accessed by citizens and individuals, not just Albertans but, you know, anyone from across the country or visitors from around the world. Introducing quite a significant fee to enter and use a provincial park is unprecedented in the history of this province.

I can say categorically, Madam Chair, that I do not accept the premise of charging a fee to visit and access and use a provincial park in the first place. We have built these parks, which are one of the most valuable possessions that we have collectively as a province, in order for all of us now and for future generations to enjoy, to help to preserve ecosystems, and in order for us to recreate

in the broadest possible way. The notion of bringing forward a user fee to access a provincial park, particularly in an unprecedented situation of a global pandemic, where we literally have nowhere else to go to provide that recreation: for the vast majority of Albertans, it's categorically almost a slap in the face, I would say, to suggest that at that very same time we're going to charge a significant user fee for people to access those same provincial parks that we, in fact, own together collectively and pay for collectively through our taxes as well.

The amount of money that you might collect from this user fee is only a fraction of what we spend in total for our parks system across the province. I would venture to say that Albertans, if you were to survey them, would say that that very much is money well spent, even for people that maybe, you know, have some trouble with high taxes and have some ideology around these things. I would venture to say with confidence that people would say to us that public money spent on parks is money well spent. It's not just people that use it to go camping or go for a picnic or an afternoon in a park. It's just the very notion that we have those things together as part of our provincial local community identity and as part of our national identity, too.

So to put a fence around these places like Kananaskis with quite a significant fee flies in the face of all of those things. I want to say very categorically and emphatically that that is, I think, not just my position but the position of the vast majority of Albertans, especially during a pandemic. The whole thing, as I say, is a bit of a slap in the face.

But more than that, let's look to see where this government has chosen to make a priority and to make cuts to our parks budgets as well. We've seen significant cuts over these last budgets, since this UCP government was formed, and we see a continued deterioration of commitment to protecting these areas. When we introduce something like a fee, at the very least Albertans are entitled to see where that money is being spent and how it's being spent. I know that in Canada it was a long-standing controversy around national park fees when people realized that national park fees for the longest time were just going into the general revenues. Again, it puts a barrier for people to be able to access parks, and it limits certain socioeconomic groups from ever being able to access those parks as well.

Amendment A1 is a very reasonable way to approach this, at least in a slightly more transparent way, and is, I think, quite frankly – you know, who am I to give free advice to the government? – a way to maybe re-establish some of that credibility that this government has burned through over the last number of months.

With that, let's vote for this amendment and move forward. We'll all feel better for it, I'm sure. There you go.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Any hon. members wishing to speak to amendment A1?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Chair: We are back on the main bill, Bill 64, in Committee of the Whole. Any members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. Actually, I rise to move another amendment, and I have the requisite number of copies of the amendment. Once you have that, I will read that into the record.

The Chair: Hon. members, this will be known as amendment A2.

Hon. member, please proceed. Note that you're moving it on behalf of another member.

Mr. Sabir: On behalf of my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar I move that Bill 64, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2021, be amended in section 5 by striking the proposed clause (i.1) and substituting the following:

(i.1) fees related to the use or occupation of public lands if that use or occupation is for a period not longer than 24 hours.

Madam Chair, we are in the middle of a pandemic. There are travel restrictions, and most Albertans are also complying with them. The only entertainment or outing for them is that they be able to go to the parks, go to the public lands, visit the outdoors, and explore this beautiful province. I think what this amendment does is that it is asking the government to not implement day-use fees on public lands. The minister of environment has confirmed in the estimates that they are looking at more fees, and Albertans are concerned about it. We are concerned about it, that this will lead to more and more fees, making it harder for Albertans to access public land, especially now that Albertans cannot travel out of the province.

Also, I think my colleagues mentioned that there is an estimate that Albertans spend \$7 billion on travel and tourism. We are lucky to have this province and have beautiful, beautiful landscapes, mountains, and natural beauty. We should be doing everything to incentivize those Albertans to spend that money, a part of that \$7 billion, within our province. That will generate economic activity. That will certainly create jobs. That will create revenues for the government. That will also help us highlight the beauty of this province: the beautiful mountains, the natural beauty, the forests, parks, all those things. Instead, what this government is doing is that they are doing everything to make it difficult for Albertans to access these public lands, to access these parks.

10:40

This amendment will make sure that at least the government is not nickel and diming those Albertans who are just accessing public lands for day use. At the end of the day, these are public lands, that belong to all Albertans. Albertans do pay taxes, their fair share, to the government. They shouldn't be charged extra to visit their own lands. I think it's a pretty reasonable amendment that will clear this hurdle out of the way and encourage Albertans to visit and access public lands without being charged, that will help Albertans stay within the province and on their own public lands. At a time when Albertans are already struggling and looking to get out, I don't think that the government should be charging them any fees.

With that, I urge all members of this House to vote on the side of Albertans, to vote against these day-use fees on public lands. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any members wishing to join debate on amendment A2? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my privilege to rise and speak to amendment A2, which, of course, will – at least for those families that are looking to get away to enjoy the public lands, that are collectively owned by the people of this province, who have used them, have enjoyed them since Alberta became a province, now for the first time in our history this government is charging Albertans additional fees to use the very lands that they've used for generations. I won't say for free, because there is a cost. But as my colleagues have correctly pointed out, Albertans pay taxes. They pay their share of taxes. These are one of the services that Albertans have paid for through other means and are now being charged a fee for.

Now, I've got to say, Madam Chair, that I'm actually quite shocked that the government, who preaches about transparency and accountability, voted down an amendment that would ensure that the fees collected in this bill actually go back to the parks and lands that they were collected for. Shame on you. You know, I'll give credit to previous Conservative governments and previous opposition members, who I hope are having a crisis of conscience, in that only a couple of short years ago they were vehemently opposed to any type of user fees or fees being collected by the government going into general revenue. Now today: yeah, that's no problem. Inducing fees, charging fees for Albertans to recreate and then siphoning that back into general revenues: zero accountability, zero transparency. How will Albertans know that what they've paid will actually go toward improving the very areas that they're enjoying? They won't. They won't.

Now, this current amendment at least provides Albertans and Alberta families with the opportunity to enjoy these public spaces without having to pay an additional fee. I think of families that are struggling to make ends meet. I think of families whose budgets have been pushed to the brink because of the impact of COVID-19 and who are in desperate need of a vacation. Their mental health is dependent on it, and this government has just placed a new barrier, a new obstacle in front of these very people to go out and enjoy their own province and spend time outside, where they can do it safely.

To me, this is just so tone deaf at a time that we're trying to encourage Albertans to be safe, to take care of themselves, to enjoy the beautiful province that we have, and this UCP government, instead of making it easier to travel, instead of encouraging Albertans to stay here, is saying: "No, don't bother vacationing in Alberta. Go to B.C., go to Saskatchewan. These other provinces are not going to charge you to use their provincial parks and their public lands, but here in Alberta we will."

You know, it's equally frustrating, and Albertans see that this isn't about the government of Alberta not having the money. The government of Alberta spends \$55 billion a year, and that's before you borrow. Now, let's keep in mind that this current government has run record deficits, including in 2019. Before the COVID pandemic hit, this UCP government ran a \$12 billion deficit, bigger than any NDP deficit when we were government, pre-COVID, the same year that the province lost 50,000 jobs. Albertans looked around and scratched their heads and said: what did we get for \$67 billion? Albertans saw not a lot, very few supports, very little job growth. In fact, company after company after company took their corporate handout and said: thank you, Alberta; we're going to go create jobs in Newfoundland and Saskatchewan and the U.S. That's what they did. The promise of jobs? It was either a farce or a failure or both.

We look at how other jurisdictions, other provinces have managed this pandemic and the tools that they are using to encourage tourism. I talked about it briefly earlier this morning, but I think it's worth saying again that the Alberta NDP opposition proposed an innovative solution to encourage tourism through a travel voucher that is based on best practices in other jurisdictions.

10:50

In fact, the government of New Brunswick has introduced the same. The province of Ontario is doing the same. In fact, the Premier's bestie Doug Ford is doing the same, introducing a travel voucher, yet here in Alberta this current UCP government would rather punish Albertans than incentivize them to stay here in our province and spend their money here. It's quite shocking, Madam Chair.

Now, at least with this amendment we're taking a misguided idea and trying to provide some relief for Alberta families who would like to at least enjoy our public lands on a day trip. Now, I don't want to presuppose the vote, but considering this very government refused to accept an amendment that would provide accountability and transparency, I hope Albertans see very clearly that when this government uses those words, it's lip service. There was an easy opportunity to show transparency, show Albertans where these additional fees are going, and the government chose not to. Now, at least this amendment will prevent the government from charging fees for just being on public land. It's a small step to correct a very flawed idea.

Earlier, Madam Chair, I was talking about the government budget and the dollars that are available to government. When government talks about how the maintenance of public lands costs money, I agree; it does. But the government has decided what is a priority and what isn't, and what isn't gets downloaded onto the backs of hard-working Alberta families. So when the government says, "We're standing up for Alberta families," no, you're not. You're stepping on Alberta families, not standing up for.

This government has wasted millions of dollars, not just on bad ideas but ideas that have been damaging to Alberta's reputation, ideas like the war room, that is an embarrassment in the international community, but I get that the government won't really know that because they closed a handful of the international offices and reduced Alberta's footprint. In the very breath that the government talks about trying to encourage investment into the province, your actions do the opposite. You're discouraging investment in the province. You're discouraging tourism in the province. It doesn't make any sense to me, and I haven't even mentioned the failed inquiry that's on its fourth extension. I'm not sure if we even know how much money has been spent on this inquiry to date.

But here we have an opportunity to at least allow these public lands to continue to be accessible to families who are only going for the day. I hope that the government will consider this. This is a minor amendment. It still doesn't fix the transparency piece, so the fees that are collected from people that are staying more than a day go somewhere, but at least this provides an opportunity.

Now, our concern came, really, in estimates. I believe it was the Minister of Environment and Parks that stated that these fees or the fees that he originally introduced were just one fee and that, yeah – you know what? – Albertans can expect more fees to come. It's not just doublespeak to say on one hand, "We support lower taxes" and then on the other hand, we find all of these sneaky and manipulative ways to charge more, whether through user fees, through insurance, through toll roads. It's actually quite surprising. I think many Albertans would be surprised if they saw a list of how life has been made more expensive under the UCP government in two short years.

I don't think Albertans and the majority of Albertans are content with this bill. Albertans recognize that it does cost money to maintain our parks. As tourism numbers were supposed to go up this summer, we'll see the impact of this bill on families. We'll see how Albertans feel about – is this not the bill that comes into effect June 1? [interjections] Yeah. That's also an interesting one, hey? Introduce it less than two weeks ago and don't worry about shocking families who have enjoyed these public spaces for generations, who show up and scratch their head and say: "Wait a minute. What? Now I have to pay for this?"

Well, I think I made it pretty clear how disappointed I am in this bill, but also many Albertans who have reached out to our caucus have told us their disapproval of this bill, the spirit of this bill, and the consequences of it. I'll encourage members in this Chamber to

at least support this amendment, which will ensure that families that are using public lands for the day don't have to pay a new fee, a.k.a. a new tax.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A2? The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Madam Chair. At this point I move that we rise and report progress on Bill 64.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ms Lovely: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 64. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

11:00

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. Carried.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 66 Public Health Amendment Act, 2021

Mr. Dach moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 66, Public Health Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 66, Public Health Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment April 21: Mr. Dang]

The Deputy Speaker: Any members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 66, the Public Health Amendment Act, 2021. Now, this bill, of course, springs from decisions that this government has made throughout the COVID pandemic, that we've been in, I guess, for about 14 months. In particular, the reason we are here debating this bill – of course, we are currently on an amendment, acknowledging that, recommending that this bill not be read now but be read again six months from now. The reason that we are even considering this legislation is because of a series of errors on the government's part, an incredible push-back that we saw from the people of Alberta due to this government's failure to consider the impacts of decisions that it was making.

[The Speaker in the chair]

We are here to put out a political tire fire, Mr. Speaker. This all began with the introduction of Bill 10, Bill 10 seeming to be an ill-fated bill number in the province of Alberta, for Conservative governments at least. A bit of trivia there for, I guess, some of the older hands in the Legislature. Bill 10, brought in last year, had a total of 48 hours of debate in this House. Well, not a full 48 hours,

but it was basically in this House over the course of two days. During that time I on behalf of the Official Opposition raised significant concerns with what this government was attempting to do; that is, to give their ministers unilateral power to create entirely new legislation in the midst of a public health emergency without ever setting foot in the Alberta Legislature, a significant step forward, a sweeping power that is not held, to my knowledge, by any other government in Canada. We are here today because the government now is walking that back despite the fact that at the time we brought forward a number of amendments to address those issues, to improve this bill, and the government chose to ignore them and dismiss them and instead rammed this bill through the Legislature.

Now, that led, Mr. Speaker, to a significant push-back from many Albertans and indeed many Albertans who were at one time supporters of this government. I know because, again, I was CCed on an awful lot of those e-mails. Now, it certainly was an odd confluence of folks for me to be aligned with, indeed, given that many of those folks have gone on now to of course be some of the same folks who are avidly antimask or have been pushing against public health restrictions over the last few months, including the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, who actually launched a court case against this government over the incredible overstep in seizing power that they had taken for themselves.

It's been interesting to watch, Mr. Speaker, how we ended up having our committee then, where I had the opportunity to participate, where we ended up doing a full review of the act to cover for the fact that the government didn't want to simply just apologize and admit that they had made a mistake. So we had the creation of an entire special committee to try to cover again for the government's mistake and to bring us to this point now, where we are essentially repealing what the government insisted was absolutely necessary just about a year ago. At that committee, continuing to, I guess, look for opportunities for the government to try to quiet things down with a section of their base that they feel that they need to maintain – again, a government that's been focused largely on its own political issues over the greater good of the province, indeed the public health of Alberta, as we've seen.

Again, as many of these individuals, over the last few months, who also rightfully were against Bill 10 but, unfortunately, are mistaken on many other aspects of what is actually constitutional, have been pushing back against public health restrictions and have been met with next to no or very little enforcement until just recently, over the last three weeks, when we finally saw some significant action taking place as this government began to realize just how much political damage they had done to themselves in allowing this third wave to again get out of control, putting us in a position where Alberta was the worst jurisdiction in North America for COVID case numbers, Albertans were rightfully getting incredibly frustrated with things like thousands of people showing up at the antilockdown rodeo, with seemingly no response from government, a government that claimed they could do nothing to actually encourage enforcement though suddenly that seemed to change over the last three weeks, when we saw a sudden pivot, certainly, at least as reported in the *Western Standard*, apparently, the Health minister even saying that he had directed enforcement, according to that publication. Of course, I wasn't there in that room. But, certainly, we have seen a marked difference since this government felt the need to retreat from this Legislature and hide from Albertans for three weeks.

What we have here is this government again trying to deal with the political impacts of its own poor decisions, of its choice to rashly push forward with policy that it had not fully thought through, so we have on the floor in front of us right now a hoist

saying that this bill should be held for six months. Now, you might ask why, I guess, we would be asking to hoist a bill of which I have just spent several minutes saying that I agree with some of the major tenets. Well, Mr. Speaker, the fact is that we find ourselves now in the midst of a third wave, during which we have seen unprecedented impacts on our province, record numbers in our ICUs, record numbers of hospitalizations, record numbers of Albertans infected, far younger generations being infected and potentially facing serious if not debilitating – one-third of them, as much as one-third of them face that from long COVID, long-term consequences that we do not yet fully understand.

I'd have to say that perhaps there are still some opportunities for what we can learn from this. Perhaps this is not the time to complete these changes to the Public Health Act until we've had an opportunity for a full understanding of what has proven to be the worst of the three waves we have experienced as a province so far. This government has not declared another public health emergency, so the powers that they have given themselves through Bill 10, which are appropriately being rescinded through this legislation, are not, in fact, in effect currently. We have an opportunity, I think, to take a moment for sober second thought and ensure we've got it right.

11:10

Indeed, there are many aspects of this legislation that were considered at that committee, and indeed we made a number of recommendations which are contained in the minority report, appendix A of the report from the committee, outlining our concerns or suggestions for other areas in which the Public Health Act could be improved, because, Mr. Speaker, while this was done, again, to put out the government's own political tire fire, which it had started, and its own political issues it had created amongst its base – while that was their reason, certainly as long as we were opening the Public Health Act, there were opportunities to consider and look at other aspects, so we certainly made a number of recommendations, the majority of which were rejected by government members of that committee.

There also are remaining questions which have not been fully answered by the government in our debate on this bill. Now with, again, the certainly welcome enforcement that we have finally begun to see against those who were flouting the public health orders, endangering Albertans and encouraging many, many others to do the same, indeed, as 17 members of the government caucus themselves undermined those health restrictions, suggested that they were not needed even as case counts reached record numbers, even as the jurisdictions that they themselves represented led the province in per capita COVID case rates, even as some of those rural areas in the province see some of the lowest levels of vaccine uptake, this is a time, I think, when we should be considering carefully the government's proposal in this bill to recover enforcement costs, awarding themselves now the power for an individual or an organization who is found in violation of a public health order and fined as a consequence to be subject to significant additional costs, to bill for all of the costs associated with that enforcement.

Now, to be clear, Mr. Speaker, I have no sympathy for the owner of the Whistle Stop Cafe or for the folks that organized the anti-lockdown rodeo or, frankly, the leadership at GraceLife church and those who have deliberately and flagrantly chosen to flout public health regulations, that are there to save lives and protect Albertans. But, certainly, I think we want to think carefully about all of the implications that are involved in taking on this new power, understand fully how this works. Are these costs in addition to the fines that are levied? How will that impact, and is that going to be

the case for every group that's involved? Is that the cost of police, public health officers, their time, their use of equipment? This is a significant change in approach, and indeed we want to do our due diligence, ensuring that we understand what impacts this will have.

Again, I fully support the power of government to enforce. Indeed, we heard repeatedly, from the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Health, the Premier, that all of the tools that they needed were available to them, that there was nothing hindering any of the inspectors or public health officials or RCMP or anyone else from taking action. But we do here have a significant change in that regard, and I think we should fully understand the government's intent.

For that reason, right now, while I certainly do support a number of things that are being done in this bill that, frankly, should have been done by never having passed Bill 10 in this House last year – that would have been the ideal circumstance, Mr. Speaker, but the government chose not to do that and chose to blunder through this for over a year and take the political damage that they deservedly have as a result.

I think that certainly this act is one that is worthy of consideration and certainly needs to be fully debated in this House and, perhaps, given the opportunity to pass, but with the amendment in front of us right now I would suggest that perhaps we could consider that six months from now as opposed to immediately. At this point it's my hope that all members in this House will support our amendment to give us the opportunity to do that, to consider the other issues that may be at play and work towards ensuring that we are taking the best steps for all of the people of Alberta.

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 Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to speak to HA1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows has risen.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise in the House and add my comments on the amendment to Bill 66, Public Health Amendment Act, 2021. I will speak in favour of the amendment. I think this is a very reasonable amendment that proposes this bill not be debated in the House for the next six months. The reason why I'm saying this: we actually had a similar experience on this bill last year when initially these matters were discussed, debated, and passed by the majority of government members under the piece of legislation called Bill 10. Bill 10 was widely criticized by Albertans, professionals, researchers, activists, and the opposition as well. The government then definitely failed to read the writing on the wall, but it definitely seems they have met with their lessons from it, that before even enforcing, enacting the law, we're discussing those same matters again in Bill 66.

Bill 10 did not even provide reasonable timing to the opposition in the House so they could effectively look at it and provide their feedback and arguments and listen to their constituents' concerns and bring them back to the government, but the government did not listen. One of the concerning parts of that bill was unprecedented, authoritarian powers handed to the individual Executive Council member, the Minister of Health. It was warned by the opposition. It's not only damaging the democratic process of our province, but it is also opening a very wrong path for the future.

Soon after we have seen the minister's controversies, arrogance, fighting with doctors, even in such a case where the minister just literally went to a doctor's house to fight with him personally on his different perspective and different views on such issues as the way this government wanted to handle it. So to date the doctors are still

waiting for the respectful dialogue and for their agreement to be signed, and they have totally lost trust in this government and specifically in the Minister of Health.

11:20

The government listened to it – I think they saw the mirror – but still did not learn the lessons they should have. So we are glad they saw this in the mirror, that the amendments that the opposition were trying to propose to address Albertans' minimum concerns with regard to Bill 10 brought a new way into this bill to help do what I'd say was trying to control the damage that has damaged their reputation, the way they're trying to run the operations and failing Albertans every step of the way. It's a bit of relief at least. They can see that within a year Albertans are not going to accept the authoritarian behaviour that was portrayed in Bill 10 a year ago by this UCP government.

What the issue with this bill is is that they are not completely understanding the number of matters that this bill is proposing. They are very unclear. Albertans are facing health restrictions and doing every possible thing to contain the spread of the virus and to save the lives of their loved ones, their families, and the government has failed to address those very issues that, basically, Albertans are facing right now. They're out of jobs, the people need help, people are falling sick, and they are struggling to choose between putting food on the table and isolating themselves to save their lives or save their families, save their children. The people are worried, and they are struggling between providing child care to their kids – so a number of those issues.

The government lacked clarity during this whole challenging time since the beginning of 2020 once we got into the public health orders, since March 2020. The Premier specifically showed a continuous lack of clarity in his statements, said one thing, bragged about one thing, and ended up doing another. That jeopardized the safety of Albertans, not only the safety and viability but also put the greater risk on our economic recovery as well. That posed great risk to everyday working people, small-scale businesses.

The changes in this bill are also related to the issues that this government was unable to address, and this bill is showing the continued behaviour of this government in the same pattern. This bill proposed, actually, that the government will be able to recover the damages, the enforcement costs from individuals and organizations who are found in violation of public health orders and are fined as a consequence of breaking the law or not following the AHS orders. The government has not been clear on this. First of all, day one, the Premier said that this pandemic is not as dangerous as the influenza, tried to send a wrong, confusing message to Albertans. Before that, they said that the opioid health crisis is actually more serious than the challenge we are facing of COVID-19 spread, another confusing message to Albertans. The government kept confusing people. They failed to send one clear message that Albertans could follow, and probably the lives of many Albertans would have been saved.

The opposition did propose initially that Bill 10 not hand these authoritative powers to an individual, to look at that if you are so convinced in the ability of your own minister, but even the majority of Albertans show they do not trust the minister anymore. Look at the pattern you are setting up. Look at the directions you are going in. You are basically damaging the very democratic process, that one person should not be able to make decisions single-handedly.

That is how the government of Alberta and the Health minister tried to ignore the research-based, fact-based information from doctors, scientists on the COVID-19 virus and its danger to the general public and tried to confuse Albertans under the name of the chief Alberta health officer, that every announcement the

government was making was based on the recommendations of the chief medical officer of Alberta. And then Albertans spoke up. The opposition repeatedly called the government on this, to disclose the information. The Premier said that that was their political decision.

11:30

There's a lot of confusion in this Bill 66. It still does not address all of those concerns Albertans showed about Bill 10. I say that this is a very reasonable time to support the reasonable amendment to not discuss and debate this bill for another six months. Let's go back to the stakeholders and do thorough work before we discuss and debate this bill in the House.

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 member.

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this morning to speak to the amendment for Bill 66, the Public Health Amendment Act, 2021. I have to say that generally we are in support of this piece of legislation in the fact that it reverses Bill 10's power grab. However, there are still some outstanding questions that I think need to be addressed, and I think that by supporting this amendment, by having it not read and brought back in six months, it gives the government an opportunity to address some of those questions that are outstanding.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

We saw that a committee was put together to talk about public health, we saw that recommendations were made, and now we see this piece of legislation that doesn't address those recommendations, that has this new recommendation that adds to the ability to retain money above and beyond the fines that are affiliated with a breach of the COVID restrictions. When this is being proposed, I'm curious what the thought process behind it is, how this came to be the solution for what I would hope would be to reduce COVID. I would hope that the intention behind this piece of legislation, of increasing the ability to recoup cost would be because they believe, the government believes, that this would actually impact violations of the restrictions that are in place. However, I have questions about that.

I haven't heard from the government talking about the barriers that are in place that are perhaps impacting those individuals that want to comply but can't. That's something that I think really needs to be explored.

When we're talking about COVID and we're talking about the things that people need to do to stay safe, not just themselves but to keep others safe, there is a huge movement of people that are protesting the wearing of masks, that are protesting the restrictions involved with public gatherings, whether it's indoors at a house party or whether it's outside. We hear stories all across the province where people are outwardly expressing frustration and defying the regulations that are in place, and they're very vocal about it. They're very intentional. They advertise. We saw it happen with the rodeo, where people said: let's come together and support each other in defying the public health regulations. Why? I'm curious if this government has done any sort of assessment about what's prompting these behaviours, these outward rebellions.

I can guess that some of it is directly because of the government opposing some of these regulations. We've seen open letters from members of the government saying how the restrictions are ridiculous, that there needs to be fewer intrusive measures put in

place. When you have a government that is on one hand saying, "Please comply; please be safe," yet their own members are in opposition to that, what kind of message does that send to Albertans?

[The Speaker in the chair]

Well, we're seeing it. There's a rally happening today here at the Legislature to oppose the health restrictions. That's happening because this government can't even support their own recommendations. We see members that are openly opposed. We've seen members openly question whether COVID is a real thing, whether masks actually help or not.

We've seen a government that has been confusing the message. It hasn't been clear; it hasn't been consistent. There's no way to determine what government is going to do when it comes to restrictions. Are schools open? Are schools closed? They deny the science about transmission, blame Albertans for not complying but then can't be clear with what the measures are.

We've heard from so many across this province talk about wanting to be part of the solution. They want to be at the table. They want to help, but they're being ignored. Is the solution bringing in the ability for government to impose further costs onto Albertans? I don't know. I don't know if that's something that would be effective. We think time is needed to actually assess that. When the outcome is healthy Albertans getting back to some sort of normalcy, is this a solution? I think time is needed to really look at what the recommendations were from the committee, to get some of those players at the table to talk about what the solutions are.

What are the barriers to those that are having difficulty in being compliant? Is it a sense of entitlement? Is it a sense of being frustrated? We don't have those answers. I haven't heard from the government that that's being asked. When there is defiance, outward defiance, of the public health regulations, is anyone talking to those individuals that are organizing these things, that are attending those things, saying: what can we do to support you? What are the barriers in place that you need removed so that we can all be compliant with the health recommendations?

I know that some of the suggestions that I've heard are that there are organizations across the province that want to be able to provide their services, but they're unclear about what the regulations are. They have nowhere to go that clearly identifies what is being asked of them, what the requirements are, and they're not being listened to about what some of the solutions could be to implement their activities in a healthy, safe way. They reach out to Biz Connect to find out what kind of services are available, what sort of restrictions, and they're not getting responses, or they're getting a letter that says: don't worry; by July we're going to have limited capacity increased so that more people can gather, and by August it should be good. That's a concern when we're giving these messages to organizations and to Albertans about what the projected plan is but not seeing any sort of plan that would support that reopening. It's very confusing for people that are trying to be compliant but don't know the rules.

I have so many individuals in the community reaching out saying: how do we access this information? We can refer them to the website. We can refer them to Biz Connect, to reach out to the ministries to find out, you know: if we do this, are we in breach, and what are the expectations? But people aren't getting responses. They don't know.

11:40

So some of these, I am concerned, could be well-intentioned people that are authentically trying to be compliant, but it wasn't clear, so now they're at risk of being in breach, being fined. What

does that look like? We know that there are precautions that are put in place where perhaps a public health inspector would come out and try and educate. If there has been a report that someone is not compliant, they come out and they try to educate about what they need to do to fix that. Is there a fee associated with that education component? Does this piece of legislation give the government the ability to fine that establishment or individual or organization for simply coming out to talk and educate? Or is it only if there is a fine actually given that those other fees are increased and calculated?

I think that when we're looking at barriers, we're seeing so many things that are happening in this province. There are many that are compliant. There are many people out there that are eager to get the vaccine, have already been vaccinated, or have a plan to get themselves and their family members vaccinated. We're hearing from communities that there are solutions that they see that could increase those vaccination rates. We have organizations like a mosque that says: "Let's run a vaccine centre out of here. Our community naturally comes here. They trust us. It's provided in their own language. We want to help." Are these things being considered? Is the government considering ways to remove barriers that give people access to the health care, the vaccinations that they need?

I'm hearing from communities that they have so many solutions that could help eliminate some of these barriers that are causing infractions, that are causing health and safety, but I'm not seeing them being listened to. They're telling us that they're desperate to be part of the solution, but they're not being consulted with. Instead, the government comes up with the Public Health Amendment Act, that gives the ability for the government to impose more fines. I don't understand why this government wants to hurry this through. There are already fines in place. It's very clear, if you're in breach, what the fine is, but having these add-ons – where does this come from? Who was consulted with? Is this really going to be a deterrent? If you were to ask the hosts of the rodeo, "Would this be a deterrent?" – we don't know because it wasn't asked.

We have so many Albertans that are fearful – they're afraid – and so many that are desperate for a solution, so many that need to see that support that is being offered. Our government proposed yesterday an emergency debate on the ability to have paid sick leave for Albertans. That is a solution to help those be compliant. Some people feel that they can't miss a day of work because they're not compensated, so they go to work and they expose their peers, their colleagues, or co-workers. When we're talking about real, genuine ways to reduce the spread of COVID, to get our economy back and running, those questions need to be asked. What could the government do to support that?

I think supporting this amendment that we've put forward gives the government that opportunity to have those discussions, to answer some of those questions, to look at what's going on in Alberta that's preventing people from wanting to be compliant. We're not talking about what the issue is; we're talking about what we think a solution is. Is fining – and we've seen over years that our government reduced some of those fines when it comes to, let's say, issuing warrants for someone that didn't pay a bus ticket. Well, when you look at why that person didn't pay a bus ticket, there are so many other barriers in place, but adding a fine to that isn't the solution.

By delaying this bill, we're not saying that we're opposing it – we are so appreciative that a lot of the Bill 10 power grab was reversed in this piece of legislation – but more thought and more insight is needed. We need more consultation. We need answers to the many questions that people have about what this actually is going to do. There need to be other ways to help deter, and until we

can fully understand what is causing the hesitancy or the outright defiance, I don't know that this is the solution. I think that delaying it and doing some more research and understanding what's happening for those Albertans is really important.

I know that the number one resource for helping people understand the importance of stopping the spread... [Ms Goehring's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

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

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday on the amendment.

Mr. Carson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the amendment that is before us, that this legislation not now be read a second time and that we review it in six months. Now, I have appreciated the comments that we heard this morning and specifically around the concerns about, well, first of all, the dramatic power that this government and this minister, in particular, have tried to previously give themselves through Bill 10 and, of course, secondly, as we've heard much discussion about this morning, the importance of clear direction and clear public communication when it comes to protecting Albertans, when it comes to informing them, educating them in the midst of this global pandemic.

You know, what we've seen in Bill 66 compared to what was originally presented to us in Bill 10 is drastically different. As members on this side have said, we can appreciate the changes that we're seeing here, again specifically around what was previously drastic power given to the minister. Unfortunately, as we review what we have before us in Bill 66 and the opportunities that had been before us through the Select Special Public Health Act Review Committee – of course, that was as a result of Government Motion 23 previously, and this, just like Bill 66, was a direct response to the public outcry from Bill 10. It was easy to see, from the discussions that happened on the arrival of Bill 10 to the committee meetings that were taking place, that these changes and this process and the decision to strike this committee was completely political in nature. It wasn't about supporting the wishes or, I guess, the best wishes of Albertans.

As we look through that process and as we see in the minority report that was put forward by the opposition caucus at the end of that process, which I would call a very undemocratic process, we see at that time – and for the record, Mr. Speaker, when we put forward recommendations to reverse Bill 10, especially the powers that the minister was giving himself, we saw several UCP MLAs vote against that recommendation, specifically looking at the Member for Lethbridge-East, the members for Banff-Kananaskis, Leduc-Beaumont, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, Livingstone-Macleod, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright, and, finally, the MLA for Camrose. These were all members who voted against our recommendations to reverse Bill 10.

This government is clearly trying to have it both ways, Mr. Speaker. On one hand, they're saying that Bill 10 was the right decision. On the other hand, we've seen since then several UCP MLAs come out and speak against the public health orders that have been put forward. It's striking to me when we look at those MLAs who voted against those recommendations, with just 17 days between then and when a statement came out from the Minister of Health explaining that he had in fact given himself too much power and that they needed to change course on Bill 10, and now we have Bill 66 before us.

11:50

At the beginning of my statement, Mr. Speaker, I commented that one of the best things that we can do is ensure that the public messaging that we're putting out is not confusing, that it's clear, that it's informative, that it's educational, but the fact is that this government and this minister haven't even been able to signal to their own members what the direction is through the process of Bill 10 and, subsequently, Bill 66.

It's very hard to, again, take this at face value that all of the proper decisions have been made through that process when you can see from that minority report and the process of that committee that it was incredibly dysfunctional, the UCP using their majority to cut meetings short, to change directions, especially around the original decision to bring in the chief medical officer and, after that point, to actually come back with another motion to not do that. Again, this committee, this UCP government does not even know what their own priorities are other than trying to do what's best for them politically.

With that I would, again, say thank you to the member for bringing this amendment forward. I hope to see all members support it, and with that I will take my seat.

Thank you.

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

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to speak to amendment HA1?

[Motion on amendment HA1 lost]

The Speaker: Hon. members, I am required to place all necessary questions before the Assembly for the disposal of second reading of Bill 66, Public Health Amendment Act, 2021.

[Motion carried; Bill 66 read a second time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 this afternoon.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:53 a.m.]

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