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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, June 8, 2021

Day 111

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

10 a.m.

Tuesday, June 8, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Ondres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 62

Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021

[Adjourned debate June 3: Mr. Hunter]

The Speaker: The hon. the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction has approximately 15 minutes remaining should he choose to use it. No?

Are there others wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Happy to rise this morning here on third reading of Bill 62, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021. I guess one of the first things I'll start off with is that I'd like to thank some of my colleagues, who, earlier in the debate in Committee of the Whole, had introduced a couple of amendments on my behalf, that I was hoping would be accepted to make the bill a little bit stronger and try to alleviate some of the concerns that I have around certain sections of the bill. Unfortunately, that was not the case, so those concerns still continue to linger around Bill 62. I think that some of my comments this morning will address some of those things.

One of the first things I do want to do, of course, is – I was watching the last set of debate, and I've always said that I'm willing to provide praise where it is due, so I do want to thank the Minister of Service Alberta for his comments. There's actually a genuine effort to try to address concerns or questions that members of the opposition have. I'm appreciative of that, and I think that allows for debate to be much more cordial. Certainly, I would encourage all the other ministers on the government side to look at that example and perhaps try to duplicate it. I've always heard that there seems to be a desire from members opposite to improve the level of debate, so I'm suggesting that such an act by other ministers would certainly improve that. I'm appreciative of his comments around Bill 62. I still don't think they completely address my concerns. We might be in one of those situations when we may just have to agree to disagree.

One of the first, I guess, concerns I have is around the changes to the Alberta Utilities Commission Act. I still don't feel like those things have been addressed. I'm wondering, ultimately, how these changes will affect Albertans and what kind of a position it's going to place them in. I don't feel that the comments that I've seen thus far from the associate minister of red tape address that, so that still

lingers on there. I'm also wondering how this potentially affects, I guess you could say, the due diligence that needs to be exercised by the commission if we start interfering in timelines and things aren't studied properly enough, looking at, as members of the UCP always used to bring up in opposition, all the unintended consequences. I think that sometimes if we try to, you know, speed up the process just simply for the sake of getting to a decision faster, we are going to start to see a lot more of those problems crop up. I don't feel that that has been properly addressed.

With the changes to the Alberta Utilities Commission Act, since the introduction and now the subsequent start-up of the Select Special Committee on Real Property Rights, I am now starting to wonder what kind of implications that that section has, you know, starting right at 17.1(1), around time periods and whatnot. I'm concerned, Mr. Speaker, that potentially we have a situation here where – by passing this section before the committee has its chance to do its work and to study all of the effects of real property rights for Albertans, is this going to be a case where the committee is now, in essence, going to be forced to have to somehow make sure that its decisions and its recommendations line up with the changes that are being proposed here? Is that not, in a sense, presupposing the outcome of the committee? That is now a genuine concern that I have with Bill 62, right on page 1 of the bill. Perhaps the committee should have looked at this in the course of its work. I guess we'll see if something can possibly be considered for that section.

The other changes that I see in the bill, of course, around the builders' lien, the prompt payment: certainly, something that I know the former NDP government had started; I'm very pleased that the current government finished that work off. The act itself, of course, hasn't actually been proclaimed yet. We do have some changes that are in there, you know, before it actually got proclaimed. I must say that I have to wonder: did we actually completely do our due diligence, then, with regard to that when we're already starting to amend what was done? We have seen a pattern from the government of pushing through legislation in a very almost reckless way, and here we are now trying to potentially fix something. I'm not necessarily saying that the changes proposed here are bad, but why rush through when clearly the language that we had worked on before wasn't thorough enough?

I am curious because there is one section within here that seems to exempt the province from prompt payment. We've certainly seen, you know, companies across Alberta that haven't been very diligent in paying things like their property taxes to municipalities, and there hasn't seemed to have been any action by the government to try to speed that process up, Mr. Speaker, so that municipalities can get the money that they need to operate everything that they need to deliver services to Albertans. So when I look at this, I'm starting to wonder now: does the province now not have to be on the same hook for paying their bills in a prompt manner?

I mean, we've seen here, just as of yesterday, you know, that the wildfire workers that keep Albertans safe, try to protect their property, haven't been getting paid. I understand that when a newer system comes in, there are always bugs, there are always glitches. You try to address those things as fast as you can. I get that. But once you get to a certain point, you just have to kind of call it, get out a pen, get out the chequebook, physically write the cheque so that these people can get paid. I even suggested yesterday that I'd be willing to spring for the pens to be able to write those cheques for those hard-working firefighters, just to speed the effort up here. At the end of the day, pay your bills. I'm concerned around this, exempting the province from being able to pay its bills and stringing things along a little bit, which then takes me to the point of some of the other sections of the bill.

10:10

Now I'm going to just jump right ahead to the changes around labour standards and what's being proposed, and I listened very, very intently to the comments from the associate minister of red tape around why this change is being made. I guess I could say that I can understand the intention that it seems he has around helping our small businesses work more efficiently so that they're not wasting time, wasting money, they can concentrate on their business. My hope is that they would take the money that they save, perhaps invest that in their employees in terms of higher wages, better benefits, sick time, things like that. The problem that I have with what's proposed in the language in Bill 62 is that it's not directly for small businesses. The language is broad enough that it can encompass any company whatsoever, which includes the great big, profitable corporations that this government – one of its first acts was to give a great big corporate handout.

When I think about my experiences back in the labour world and the grievances that I had to file with one company – you know, it's amazing, Mr. Speaker, when you actually have to have language in a contract imposing financial penalties for not handling scheduling appropriately and not handling payroll problems in a timely fashion. I almost start to wonder if this government has maybe taken a page out of that book a little bit around handling paying people promptly. I've filed those grievances on behalf of those workers to try to get these things corrected in a timely manner. Here I see language that would allow that particular company to not have to keep track of their workers. Now, the associate minister said: well, when you're working a regular schedule. I already know that individuals in this company that are working a regular schedule have problems with their schedule, and there's language in place to try to deal with that.

What's proposed and what the minister is talking about aren't lining up, so I have significant concerns with this, because essentially what it does is that it allows any company whatsoever in the province of Alberta – as long as they record something once in the year, they've actually fulfilled what's in this. Any problems that crop up in the meantime with an employee: well, they've fulfilled it, and now there'll be a delay trying to get something resolved, going back and figuring out what those hours may or may not have been, you know, and all the wrangling and arbitrations and everything else that goes on, which cost not only the companies themselves but Albertans.

As we all know, the great big, massive corporations – of course, my favourite, that I like to point out, is Walmart, Mr. Speaker – don't exactly do what they could do for their employees. They could do much, much better, but this will allow them to do even less for their employees, people that want to participate in the economy, that want to be able to go out to all the small businesses, spend their money, drive the economy around and create jobs. Again, it's all about those unintended consequences that my friends opposite used to love to bring up.

We've also seen some changes to things like the Family Property Act, the Fatal Accidents Act: you know, maybe not necessarily a problem with regard to that.

I must admit that I was a little, I guess, disappointed. I know we want to transition to a faster paced world, use technology wherever it's available. But, really, we can't print off five copies and table it in the House? Really? I understand trying to remove red tape here, Mr. Speaker, but, I mean, come on. Let's be real here. How long does that actually take? I kind of try to equate that to some of the other red tape reductions that I've seen, touting to Albertans about: well, you know, you don't have to pay your \$5 this year to go and

cut down your Christmas tree; you still have to fill out all the paperwork.

Mr. Schmidt: You have to pay \$90 to hike to get it.

Mr. Nielsen: Yeah. My friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar, that's an interesting revelation. I hadn't actually tied those two together. You still have to fill out the paperwork so you can go and cut your tree. You don't have to pay the \$5. But if you're going to go and get it maybe in Kananaskis Country somewhere, now you're going to pay \$90 to potentially go and cut it down. That sounds like a great deal, Mr. Speaker. Maybe not.

I've seen changes, you know, under the whole umbrella of red tape that don't seem so much like red tape reduction. I constantly seem to see the ministry being given, as I referred to earlier, hand-me-downs from ministries that either could be handled through a statutes amendment act or, quite honestly, where there are more significant things like the Utilities Commission Act or the Real Estate Act, really should have probably stayed within the ministries themselves. At the end of the day, when Albertans are going to have questions about this, we already know, because we've already seen it, that they're going to call up the red tape ministry, because that's where these changes came under, ask their questions, and the answer is going to be: that's a great question; you need to call the ministry. So why didn't that specific ministry handle that?

This now brings me to the real estate changes. Again, I do know that the Minister of Service Alberta tried to address these questions that I had and that some of my colleagues had. I still remain unconvinced because in the conversations that I've had around this, there are some concerns around lumping everybody together under this board. There are certainly stakeholders that make absolute sense that they should be there; other stakeholders maybe not so much. It's funny because when you look at the composition of those different industries, I guess, that will fall under that, some of the smaller stakeholders may get run roughshod over by the bigger ones.

The parallel that I can draw to this is that back before I was elected, working for Lucerne Foods at the ice cream plant, we were located right in the very middle there on Yellowhead Trail of the two Macdonalds Consolidated warehouses, all of it owned by Safeway. During bargaining times you would see all these warehouses bargaining, and because of our location we used to bargain with them. Many times the company would say: well, we're going to put this language in there. Members would say: yeah, okay; that actually makes some sense. But then we at ice cream were like: this doesn't work for us at all; it does not apply to us.

I see similar problems potentially happening with this, where you're going to see decisions being made by the larger stakeholders that do make sense for them, but for some of the smaller players it's either not going to apply or it's going to negatively affect them, and because their voice is smaller, they're not going to be heard. I think that creates a problem.

10:20

Currently I find myself in a situation where, yes, I see some good things, but I also see some very, very bad things contained within Bill 62. It's putting me in a position of having to choose between the two. It's too bad that we maybe couldn't have broken this up a little bit, the good stuff, the bad stuff, and maybe voted on some of this stuff separately. Perhaps if the amendments had been accepted, it might have made this a little bit more palatable. But because of the concerns that I do have that are contained within Bill 62, I find myself in a position where I would rather vote against some of the good stuff to prevent some of the bad language that's contained

within Bill 62 from being passed. I'm unable to support this at this time, but I will listen intently to the rest of the debate through third reading.

The Speaker: Hon. members, third reading of Bill 62 is before the Assembly this morning. Is there anyone else that would like to speak to it? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to join debate in third reading for Bill 62, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021. I think that we had this before, but previously it didn't include the word "implementation," so there is a bit of a distinction from the previous one.

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

It is similar to the previous one in that it is an omnibus bill. It covers nine acts across six ministries. Whenever a bill covers several ministries, of course, we know it as an omnibus bill, and it kind of throws a whole bunch of diverse, I guess, issues, concerns, things that this government wants to address into one bill. You know, that creates some difficulties with cohesion and whether it really even makes sense. I know that the UCP government has created this ministry of red tape reduction, but really it kind of is a ministry that – I don't know – I think creates a lot of confusion in that ministries that should be leading the charge on some of these changes are not. I think that sometimes the depth of understanding of what the changes are, why they're being made – ministers are not speaking to their particular ministries that are in this omnibus bill, and I think that that's a bit of a sad note for democracy because, really, that's who should be leading the charge. I just wanted to make that point.

Let's all acknowledge that we're in this very, very difficult time, Mr. Speaker. We're 15 months and counting into the COVID-19 pandemic, and obviously Albertans are suffering in many ways, and one of them, of course, is financial. Albertans have lost their jobs. We've had very high unemployment numbers in our province, and a very sad statistic that we know of now is that we have some of the highest rates if not the highest – I think we're tied with perhaps Newfoundland and Labrador – of long-term unemployment. These are folks that have been, really, looking for work for over a year, and that number is about 3 per cent. That is really a red flag. That's a very big concern certainly for us here in the opposition, and I hope it is also for the government because that is tough. If anybody has ever been out of a job, if you're out of a job for such a long period of time, you can really take a hit to your self-esteem, your well-being in general.

So these are the circumstances where this Bill 62 is presented. I guess that I, probably like many Albertans, certainly like many people in this caucus, am concerned that this is what the government sees as important, that this is what has risen to the top, and that this is what they are focusing on. There are a lot of things that they could be doing that, unfortunately, the UCP are not.

This bill, as I said, does go over those nine acts and six ministries, and it really, I think, misses some of the significant issues that are happening in our society and where legislation needs to go. I mean, just to talk more specifically about our economy, we know people have used the term "she-session" because women have been hurt much more due to COVID-19 and have not recovered. Actually, the research is showing that women are continuing to not do as well in terms of employment because of COVID-19. They haven't recovered. So I just commend to the government to take that into consideration when they're presenting bills and, you know, focusing on sort of the disadvantaged group, gender-specific of women in the workforce. Now is the time to introduce legislation

to support women in the workforce, but unfortunately the UCP is not doing that.

If I talk specifically about some of the sections of the bill, for example the Employment Standards Code, which my friend did also bring up just before I had the opportunity to come up and speak, on page 9 of the bill it says that it's amending RSA 2000 cE-9, 4(1) the Employment Standards Code is amended by this section, (2) section 14 is amended (a) in subsection (1)(a) by adding "for each work day" after "hours of work" and then (b) by repealing subsection (3).

What does that all mean? That basically is saying to us that employers no longer need to actually record the hours of work of their employees. They're supposed to track them, but they don't have to record them. I'm curious what that means exactly. What does a track look like as opposed to a record? I think that this is a significant issue with this legislation.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Like, what is the logic in this? Why is this not deemed important, that the hours of work of someone employed are not tracked? I mean, this is often the fundamental marker of how people are paid. You know, you get paid so much an hour. If this record no longer exists, what will that mean to people?

Certainly, I've heard it many times in this Legislature from this UCP government that, you know, all employers are stellar. I'm being facetious really in this, but this is what they are saying. They seem to present that no employers ever make mistakes or treat their employees unfairly, and that's why it's good to make it as easy as possible for them through changes to the Employment Standards Code. Of course, also something that isn't in this particular bill but has taken away devastated by this UCP government is the labour code, so taking away rights of workers.

I guess I just want to speak certainly from my own experience and from, you know, friends' and family's experience that that's not always true. Employers do make mistakes, employers do unfairly treat their staff at times, and this is an issue. It's good to have standards. It's good to have employment standards. I would say that this would be fundamental – fundamental – to making sure that that employee is paid properly. If businesses no longer have to record the hours and they simply track them – I mean, I guess I'm curious about a definition of what that exactly means. Perhaps that's something that the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction can help us to understand because I'm not sure what that means.

10:30

For me, just on the face of it, it looks like somehow that's not important anymore, the actual number of working hours of your employees, yet I think that that is. You know, that's very important. Oftentimes that sort of gives you a gateway to perhaps a promotion. You've worked there this many hours, so you may get an increment in pay, those kinds of things. Why wouldn't that continue to be recorded? It just seems like there's some kind of, perhaps, reason for this – I don't know – lack of accountability on the part of the employer that that no longer has to be recorded. I really do ask the UCP: why exactly is this so important? It seems to take away some of the rights of the workers. That is a question for the minister if he chooses to answer that question.

Of course, we are in a difficult time in Alberta. We have had, you know, really, a wholesale change in our oil and gas sector. Things are changing. We had a price shock in terms of the price of oil some time ago. It is coming back, but we know that it's a finite resource, and we also know that there's a move away from investment in the oil and gas sector. There's much more of a move to diversify energy and have all sorts of different kinds of clean energy, and that was

something that certainly our government did work very hard on. Our climate leadership plan really was a very broad and deep plan to shift things in Alberta. Certainly, our oil and gas sector is very important, but also really changing and enhancing sort of green energy, those kinds of things, is very important.

I'm just mentioning that because I'm just concerned about the workers in that industry, in the oil and gas industry, and I would say that many of them are those people who are part of the long-term unemployment rates that are so, so high in Alberta, that are really a very big red flag to all of us or should be. Workers are already hurt, workers are already vulnerable, and, you know, the industry as a whole is not doing well, yet I know in this omnibus legislation the government sees fit to somehow think that the working hours of people actually aren't important. It doesn't make sense to me, and, as I said, I really would appreciate if the minister would respond to that question.

One of the sort of big questions, I suppose, in any government is: what is the individual responsibility, and what's the collective responsibility? Certainly, I think the NDP caucus sees, you know, individual and collective responsibility much differently than, I would say, the UCP government does, but that is kind of what legislators really should grapple with. Who should individually be responsible for something, and why should we step in as a government and collectively put in legislation to support citizens? This is a really important question, I think, for any government. Certainly, we would say right now, I think, that COVID-19, this global pandemic, is not something that someone can bear on their own. An individual shouldn't be expected to carry that on their own, so that's why it's so important that governments step in and support people. These are forces way beyond what an individual can handle.

Same with what's happening in the oil and gas industry. What do we do? Hopefully, we make sure people have the supports they need. We invest in small business. We make sure people have access to the vaccine, to investment in health care, those kinds of things, and I think make sure that people have access to jobs, you know, which I think this government could spend a lot more time focusing on and focusing also on gender-specific jobs for women, because of, as I said, the she-cession.

I think this government has kind of left a lot of collective responsibility that should be on them on individuals in Alberta. This is just one more example of – what? Like, it doesn't make any sense to me. Why should, like, workers sort of be left perhaps having to advocate: hey, those were my hours; don't you have a record of that? Now they're being told: oh, well, we're tracking it, but it's more global perhaps. I guess that's why I'm confused by all of this. I certainly don't see it as an individual responsibility. That should just be a fundamental part. So having it, you know, amended in this way I think is a mistake, and the government needs to be collectively responsible to make sure that employers fulfill on that.

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

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to speak to third reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the call.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and offer a few of my thoughts on Bill 62, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021, here at third reading this morning, but first of all let me just thank my friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Riverview for their thoughtful comments on this legislation. I want to thank my friend from Edmonton-Decore in particular for his incredibly good work at holding the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction to account, because I think he does

have a lot to account for. I think the public is well served by the efforts made by my friend from Edmonton-Decore in that regard.

I want to focus my comments today on a couple of different topics: first of all, the failure of these red tape reduction initiatives in general and then highlight some of the particular failings of the red tape reduction initiatives contained in this bill. Now, as my friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Riverview pointed out, when this government was elected, it was elected on a platform of creating jobs and restoring the economy. They had quite a detailed plan to restore jobs and the economy, and that consisted of a number of parts.

The first part, of course, was the so-called fight-back strategy, which now lies in tatters and has done nothing but completely embarrass the government and cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Another part of the economic recovery and job-creation plan was the so-called corporate tax cut, the \$4.8 billion that the government has given away to the most profitable corporations in the province. Then the third part was this so-called red tape reduction.

Part of the problem – well, not part of the problem, Mr. Speaker. The whole problem is that the members of Executive Council have not accurately analyzed the problems with Alberta's economy and then have applied solutions based on that faulty analysis. In my comments on Bill 72 I went on at length about the fallacies upon which the fight-back strategy was built, so that is no surprise, that we have seen no results from that fight-back strategy, because it was built on a faulty premise.

10:40

The corporate tax cut, too, was built on a faulty premise, that just by reducing corporate taxes from 12 per cent to 8 per cent and giving \$5 billion to the most profitable corporations in the province, jobs would magically reappear. That isn't true. In fact, we have compelling evidence from the world community that there's a world-wide realization that we can no longer engage in this race to the bottom when it comes to corporate taxes. I note with some interest that the Treasury secretary for the current President, Joe Biden, managed to convince the G-7 countries, which include Canada, that we have to have a floor for corporate taxes because continually slashing corporate taxes does nothing to create jobs and restore economic activity and does everything to line the pockets of shareholders and executives at these profitable corporations. The world community is realizing that we cannot continue to let our economies operate this way, where those at the top are given evermore money and those at the bottom, the rest of us, have to fight over the remaining scraps.

Those are two parts of the analysis of the problems that were wrong, and then the third part is this idea that, you know, Alberta's economy was just tied up in too much red tape, that if we just got rid of the regulations that were holding back job creation, jobs would again return to the province of Alberta. Well, we've seen no evidence at all that this strategy of reducing red tape has actually created jobs.

In fact, if one were to look at the evidence, one might even jump to the conclusion that reducing red tape has actually resulted in jobs being lost because right now we have 200,000 or more Albertans who are out of work. Even more have given up looking for work, no longer participate in the job market. We've got a huge number of people right now who are underemployed. This is after 18 months of this government diligently pursuing its red tape reduction agenda under the faulty assumption that by reducing this so-called red tape, jobs would appear. We have no evidence to date. In fact, the minister doesn't even have to justify the measures in this bill as to how they'll create jobs.

My friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Riverview mentioned some of the failings, you know, questioned some of the so-called red tape that's being reduced as to how that will create jobs. I would like anybody to stand up. I would like anybody from Executive Council to stand up and tell me how exempting the government of Alberta from prompt-payment legislation will create a single job in the province of Alberta. In fact, I would suggest that it might destroy jobs. If the government isn't paying its bills, companies will have to lay people off because they can't afford to keep them working.

We have a number of other changes here in this legislation, changes to the Business Corporations Act, that'll allow the commission to make orders "respecting any class or classes of persons, companies, corporations, [et cetera] . . . permitted to make a determination under section 3(3) or . . . whether or not an application has been made under section 3(3) or 151(a)." Well, I'm sure that these requirements were irritating to the people who the previous statute applied to, but how will this change return any single unemployed Albertan to work? I've certainly heard no answers from the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction on that manner nor from any of his colleagues in Executive Council on that matter.

The changes to the Employment Standards Code. My friend from Edmonton-Decore went on at length about how this makes life for employers a lot easier. It may in fact increase profits for employers, profits for employers who are already likely doing very well. Let's not forget that there are a bunch of corporations in this world who have profited mightily during the COVID pandemic. Not everyone is suffering the way the average Albertan is. Why is the government committed to making sure that those who are currently profiting off the world's situation enjoy even more profits without any single guarantee that by doing so one Albertan will be put back to work?

We see changes to the Real Estate Act, and I have a number of concerns with the changes to the Real Estate Act that are in this. My friends from Edmonton-Decore and Edmonton-Riverview and other colleagues have highlighted those during debate on this piece of legislation, but how will these changes put a single person back to work or even make life more affordable for Albertans? Are these changes going to make it more affordable for an Albertan to buy a house? I don't think so. If it is, we certainly haven't heard this kind of explanation from the minister opposite.

Changes to the Securities Act. Well, Mr. Speaker, it's fine to allow a bunch of bond traders and stock traders to have an easier time managing the elaborate financial casino that they engage in, shifting money and paper around to their own personal profit, but the associate minister for red tape and his colleagues in Executive Council have not indicated how making these changes will create one single job in the province of Alberta.

It's extremely frustrating, Mr. Speaker, that, you know, at a time when Albertans have grave concerns about their economic future, the government doesn't take the time to look at how things are going and evaluate whether or not it's time to change course. You would think that 18 months of continued job losses, an economy that's floundering, the worst in the country, one of the highest unemployment rates in the country: you would think that the government would take a moment and ask itself if these plans that it put into place were working and maybe re-evaluate if things could be done differently, but this is not the case. It's extremely frustrating to me that we won't ever know – we won't ever know – if any of these so-called red tape reduction measures that are contained in this act will lead to more jobs for the people of Alberta.

My friends and I just came from a Public Accounts meeting, and every annual report that comes before Public Accounts these days goes through this song and dance of talking about how much red

tape they've reduced, you know: oh, we had X thousand number of regulations in the department, then we decided to reduce a certain percentage of those, so now we have X hundred fewer regulations. And: oh, what a good job we've done reducing red tape. And that's it. That's all we hear. We don't hear what kinds of regulations or red tape measures have been changed or eliminated, and there's no requirement on behalf of the government departments to even report on how it's improved their processes or created jobs. Nothing. They're just meaningless numbers on a page that give government members something to talk about in order to avoid asking hard questions at Public Accounts. It's extremely frustrating.

This morning, Mr. Speaker, we just reviewed the annual report for the Agriculture and Forestry ministry, talking about how it's reduced so-called red tape in our food inspection system. I had the opportunity to ask the executives of that department what assurances we can have that our food inspection system is safe. How does the public know that our food inspection system is safe? The short answer, the short version of their answer, was: well, we don't really know. That should be extremely concerning to every Albertan.

10:50

So here we are engaged in this right-wing performance art of coming up with a fake number of red-tape regulations and then reducing them by some arbitrary number and then talking about them at length in Public Accounts because the government has nothing else in their record that they want to talk about, apparently. No requirement on the part of the minister or Executive Council or anybody in government to actually show to the people of Alberta what value has been created by these measures. Who has benefited? How many jobs have been created? How is life better?

Mr. Nielsen: Well, we got a letter grade.

Mr. Schmidt: Oh, yeah. We got a letter grade from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. That's a fine scam that the government is running, create these Astroturf groups that are friendly to the government to give them fake awards. Well, congratulations, guys. Job well done.

The Speaker: Prior to calling 29(2)(a), I might just provide some caution to the hon. member. I think that previous Speakers have provided much commentary about accusations of the government running scams, so perhaps he will consider that in his future comments.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone would like to add a brief question or comment.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise in third reading of Bill 62. I think this is the third version of a red tape reduction implementation act that we have seen in this Legislature. I want to begin by picking up on that note and on the comments made by a number of my colleagues on that very issue, which is that this is the third time or fourth time – I can't remember – we've seen a red tape implementation act come before this House.

[Mr. Amery in the chair]

We've seen multiple pieces of omnibus legislation come forward, and once again we see that the primary, I guess, output or achievement by this government is reams and reams of pages of pieces of legislation that they've passed. We know that the Premier takes great pride in showing stacks of paper to prove how much his government has accomplished over their time in government. What

they can't show and what they can't produce are any meaningful results on the three things that they promised Albertans as part of their election platform: jobs, economy, pipelines. We see very few outcomes or results. In fact, in all three of those measures we seem to be doing worse in Alberta since this government has been elected, but, okay, they've got reams and reams of paper to show for their work.

You know, listen, Mr. Speaker, I totally appreciate that there are nuts and bolts of government. There are many, many pieces of legislation. There are administrative things that need to change, and there are, of course, changes to legislation that might be not pressing for a lot of people. They may not be aware of them or that there are details that need to be updated. That is the work of government. That is the work of the Legislative Assembly, to sometimes process that information and make those changes. I don't disagree with the idea that we want to make sure that our legislation is up to date and that it is reflective of any changes happening in corresponding legislation. It is important that our laws are clear and transparent and understandable and relevant.

However, Mr. Speaker, as a member of this Assembly I can tell you that I do feel a sense of frustration that once again I have to spend my time in this Legislature speaking to multiple pieces of omnibus legislation that do not make a difference for the people that I represent or the people of Alberta in any meaningful way at a time when this province and people are calling for real action to improve our economic situation, to provide a vision for an economic platform going forward, to make their lives a little bit easier, a little bit better, which should be the objective of any government, yet once again that is not the priority of this government.

Instead, we are facing another piece of omnibus legislation, much of which is tinkering around the edges, much of which is actually correcting or making further changes to legislation that has already been before this Assembly, brought forward by ministers who didn't catch something, who then did further consultation, which calls into significant question the consultation they claimed to do the first time around. Here we are, once again, spending our time in this Assembly on omnibus pieces of legislation that will not make any difference to the lives of my constituents or Albertans generally.

It is frustrating, because I note that this Bill 62 covers a number of different pieces of legislation, I believe nine pieces across six ministries. As I mentioned, many pieces of this legislation have already been before this Assembly. I can tell you with absolute certainty that I have not heard once from any of my constituents to make any of the changes that are part of this, that are part of Bill 62. It is frustrating because we had an opportunity to make some of these changes the first time this legislation came up before us.

I have to mention that there are a few pieces of legislation that are amended by Bill 62 that have already been brought forward, specifically by the Minister of Service Alberta. I'm starting to be concerned about how that ministry is making its decisions and choices and how the minister is directing consultation within that ministry because, once again, this is, I believe, the third or fourth time that we are in this Assembly in two years changing legislation or considering changes to legislation that was previously brought forward by that same minister. Once again, it's only been I believe six, seven months since, before this Assembly, the Builders' Lien (Prompt Payment) Amendment Act, 2020, or the act itself, was introduced and debated fulsomely in this House, and I do note that many of the members of this Assembly were in support. I believe all of us were in support of that legislation, yet here we are six or seven months later and there are amendments to it. That act has not even been proclaimed and been put into effect.

Now, I heard the Minister of Service Alberta indicate that the reason for that was that they were doing further consultation. Now, when we heard about, when the original act was brought before this Assembly for debate, we heard at that time that it was a result of fulsome consultation. So either that consultation, the first time around, was not fulsome, and there were representations that were made about that consultation that were not accurate or – I don't have another explanation because I don't understand why these issues would not have been addressed and raised that first time around, but here we are. The same thing happened with the Vital Statistics Act. The same thing happened with the Residential Tenancies Act brought forward by the Minister of Service Alberta, where we are continuing to amend the same legislation over and over and over again. You know, the same is true of the Business Corporations Act and the Securities Act.

None of the changes that are part of Bill 62 would have come up the multiple other times that these bills, these pieces of legislation have been before this Assembly for consideration. I fail to see why these weren't addressed the previous time around, and I also don't see how any of these do what the title of this bill claims to do, which is reduce red tape. I am frustrated, Mr. Speaker, that we are not turning our attention to the multiple things that are on the top of Albertans' minds right now, of which, of course, number one, is jobs; 200,000 Albertans not working or not at full employment. I appreciate the comments made by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, who highlighted, as we have over and over in this Assembly, that women in this province are seeing historic drops in employment rates, that we are back to 1984 levels of employment for women. None of these pieces of legislation address that.

My constituents write to me, Mr. Speaker, and ask about the curriculum their children are going to be learning. They ask about coal development on the eastern slopes of the Rockies. They express concern about the future of their jobs. They talk about the stress that they've experienced having families either being sick because of COVID or that they're front-line health care workers. They talk about climate change. They write to me about renewable energy. What is the future of this province? They talk about the concerns that cuts, repeated cuts, gutting our postsecondary institutions in this province – that's what they talk about. They don't address the issues that are, once again, part of the omnibus pieces of legislation that come before this House, and it frustrates me.

11:00

Even those top issues, which I've mentioned that my constituents are talking to me all the time about – you know, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned this morning that we were in Public Accounts Committee, and we heard that there was very little public reporting at all that goes on from Agriculture and Forestry when there is an E coli outbreak, which was shocking to many of the members in that committee this morning. We were actually flabbergasted to find out, for example, that there had been an E coli outbreak in the 2019-20 fiscal year and that there seemed to be very little reporting on that. There actually didn't even seem to be clarity about what reporting was required.

[The Speaker in the chair]

That might not seem like something that's on my – my constituents might not even be aware of that, but they are aware of caring about the safety of their food. Those kinds of legislative changes, I think, would be relevant for Albertans to hear about. Why aren't those kinds of changes being brought forward? Instead, we are faced with once again tinkering around the edges.

I've expressed in this Assembly already multiple times, Mr. Speaker, my frustration with this red tape reduction exercise – and I think that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar put it very well – which is that we're seeing these numbers being thrown out. I've worked in a ministry, in a department under previous Progressive Conservative governments, where there was this big push to reduce regulation. I've commented before about the establishment then of a ministry that had the acronym of RAGE. It was designed to do precisely what Red Tape Reduction, this ministry, is supposed to do, but it was a sham, really. Like, I remember working and the minister being told: we have to count all the pieces of regulations and policies. And it was: well, do we count by the number of lines? Does it matter if a piece of legislation has 85 sections? Does that count as 85, or does that count as one? And what if it has multiple subsections?

It is a ridiculous exercise designed to make it look like something is happening when we have very clear evidence that nothing is happening, that this government is making no progress on addressing the very pressing and real issues that are facing Albertans. I understand that it is my job in this Assembly, as a member of the opposition, to speak to the legislation that is brought forward by this government. I understand that as the government it is their prerogative, it is their right to determine what legislation will be introduced in this House other than private members' bills, although I'll leave that aside. That is the prerogative of the government, to do that. I don't get to choose.

But on behalf of my constituents and, I believe wholeheartedly, the constituents of all of the ridings in this province represented in this Assembly: can we start doing the work in this House that actually will make a difference for Albertans? Can we start doing the work of putting people back to work, creating jobs, having an economic vision for this province to move us forward? Can we do the work of making sure that the public services that Albertans rely on to have not just an adequate quality of life but to be able to be fully participating and contributing to the economy – as we've learned over this past year from the pandemic, we cannot have a healthy economy without having healthy people. We cannot have a healthy economy without a strong education system, without child care, early learning. Can we do that work in this Assembly? That is what I ran to do, to do that work, not talk about tinkering with legislation that makes no impact on Albertans' lives.

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

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 56

Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

[Adjourned debate June 2: Mr. McIver]

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone wishing to speak? The hon. Member for St. Albert is on her feet.

Ms Renaud: Great. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 56 at third reading. I have not had a chance to speak to Bill 56 in quite a few days, so I'm going to summarize some of the points I made in earlier debate. But I just wanted to start with a general overview of what this particular bill does. As usual, the title of this bill is somewhat misleading in the way that it states what it will do. Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act really sounds innocuous. I mean, you know, it's not going to really harm anyone, but what is actually contained in this piece of legislation is going to inflict a great deal of harm on municipalities and the people that live there in a way that is actually shocking given the circumstances that we currently find ourselves in.

We are, hopefully, at the tail end of the pandemic. We are struggling economically all over the province. We are bleeding jobs. Businesses are on their knees. Schools are struggling. Everybody is struggling, and what does this particular government decide to do? Yeah, let's make life just a little bit more difficult for municipalities. This piece of legislation will literally cut hundreds of millions of dollars to municipalities. In turn, these municipalities will be forced to do things like cut services, increase taxes, and of course there will be another tax on people's cellphone bills, all of these things under the guise of – you know, I'll see government members regularly stand up, whether it's at pressers or in debate, and say: we're making life better for Albertans. Absolutely, this is the opposite of that.

You know, we have seen municipalities struggle and, likely, some of the larger centres. I know that people are struggling there, too, but I think, just the nature of scale, that they maybe feel it less directly. But I know that municipalities that are smaller, that are rural, certainly the municipalities that are remote are going to feel the effects of this legislation very quickly, and it's going to be deep.

Already municipalities are struggling with COVID, with this changing of rules. You know, it's difficult to keep up with what the public health orders are, how municipalities need to enforce, what they need to do to provide services to their citizens. Of course, then you have a government that regularly trots out their leadership, that is the poorest example of following the public health orders I've ever seen. Citizens are confused. Businesses are confused. Businesses are fearful. Businesses are not being supported. I would suggest that more are falling through the cracks every day because of this government's just patchwork of programs that don't directly meet the needs. And I would say that, once again, it's because of their incredible failure to actually listen to Albertans that they continue to get it wrong. This is just one more example of that. The UCP's solution to the struggles that municipalities are facing: well, let's just make it a little bit worse.

I'd like to give you a little bit of perspective from the community that I represent, and that is St. Albert. St. Albert is very close to a large urban centre, which is Edmonton. You know, they are not the smallest municipality in Alberta, but they aren't huge, and they are going to feel the effects of the changes.

Now, I find it very odd that the government – you know, what I've learned in this place, Mr. Speaker, is that when you listen to a government announcement or you listen to a government member stand up and speak to something, the first few lines always sound pretty good, but it's what comes next or what they don't say that's really important. As we question them and talk about the funding that will be cut to municipalities, what you constantly hear back from them is: but wait, we're giving them so much more this year; we're front-loading it; it's going to be great; we're going to put people back to work; we're going to get all these projects started. What they don't tell you is that the impact of doing that is that there are going to be huge cuts in the subsequent year. They don't talk about that. They don't talk about the impact of that, and they don't talk about what that will do to the citizens that live in those municipalities.

Once again I'd like to quote from an article – and I will table it at my next opportunity – from St. Albert Today on April 14. It says, "Provincial decisions to cut down municipal funding while increasing education taxes and city responsibilities over the next few years is leaving the City of St. Albert in a state of uncertainty for the future." Now, that is a high-level statement, but what was really interesting is that the director of finance, at a later committee meeting, said, "The city's current assets are valued at over \$700 million." What that means is that St. Albert would need to contribute \$32 million per year to support those assets in the future.

St. Albert collects \$12 million in taxes, so there would need to be a 1.5 per cent tax increase over 20 years to close the gap. That is a 1.5 per cent tax increase over 20 years.

11:10

Now, I know that the people that currently are in office in St. Albert work very diligently to do the best they can to run the city, to manage the city with the taxes as they are. Obviously, they have to make tough choices about where they're going to invest for the future, but what this government has done is just continue to download costs to municipalities, leaving them no options. I don't know. It's incredibly frustrating to me.

What I would like to draw your attention to is the fact that, yes, people might say, "Well, you know, it's just 1.5 per cent, not such a big deal," but it's important to look at the big picture, and this has been a process with this government. In two short years they have downloaded so many costs to municipalities and diluted so many services, which adds additional stress to municipalities. It's really difficult to justify at the best of times, and it's almost shocking, when you think about the state that we're in right now, that this is what this government is choosing to do.

Let me give you one example. Family and community support services: most of the members in this place will understand precisely what that is. That is an 80-20 partnership funding between the government of Alberta and municipalities, and that is for family and community support services. In many of our communities this is the funding that municipalities and communities rely on to provide services to people. In St. Albert what that pays for are things like the St. Albert Food Bank, Community Village, Neighbourhood Watch, St. Albert Family Resource Centre, the seniors association, the SAIF Society, neighbourhood connections.

I want to stop at neighbourhood connections. Now, this might not seem like a big thing, but this is actually a number of different programs that actually build neighbourhood connections, and we all know that when you build neighbourhood connections, you increase neighbourhood safety, you reduce crime. There are so many other things that happen, but they rely on funding. They rely on funding that is an 80-20 split from the government, but we know that this funding for the last two years under this government has not increased at all. It hasn't increased for cost of living. It hasn't increased due to additional pressures because of COVID. Nothing has increased.

This funding pays for so many other programs, yet instead of realizing that, yes, there have been additional pressures on all of these organizations, on all of these programs, what we're going to do is that we're going to sort of play a little shell game and say: "Yes, we're increasing the funding for municipalities in this year. We're going to reduce these other years, but trust us. Everything will be fine." I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that it has not been fine. There are so many concerns in the city of St. Albert.

I know that the Member for Morinville-St. Albert likely gets some of the same e-mail that I do because I'm copied on them, and most of the e-mail that I get is not: "Hey, great job, government. You're doing a great job, really meeting my needs. Really encouraged by the direction that you're going in." That is not what I receive. What I receive are e-mails that talk about desperation and fear, about job loss. They talk about fear of losing their home. They talk about fear of being unable to afford their home, unable to find affordable housing. They talk about seniors that think about leaving St. Albert because they can no longer afford it. All of these things are the pressures that people are feeling in communities like St. Albert, with additional cost pressures that will be introduced if property taxes are increased, which they will have to be in order to meet these expenses, to meet the needs of the city. The city still

needs to operate. They still need to provide emergency and protective services. They need to provide environmental services. They need to provide things like city cemetery supports and services. They need all of their municipal services, whether it's the library, whether it's, you know, a front desk to get your taxes paid. Whatever it is, all of these services need to be there for the citizens of the community of St. Albert and every other municipality in this province.

What this legislation, Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 – it sounds perfectly fine. You know, what could be wrong with this? They're just jiggling with some statutes. What this will do is add pressure where it is at a breaking point. Municipalities and the people that live there are at a breaking point. They are stressed.

You know, I think that the government is likely feeling some of that, looking at recent polling, looking at comments from municipal leaders from all over this province that are telling the government: "You are getting it wrong. You need to listen to us. This is not what we need. You are making things worse. Stop what you're doing." But again and again we have seen this government act as if they know better than anybody else. There is a failure to apologize or recognize a mistake or an error until the public pressure is so immense or there is someone in your own cabinet that pushes you to it, that you have no choice but to do something. Albertans from all walks of life, from all communities around this province are saying: stop what you're doing because you are harming people and you are harming communities.

This piece of legislation is just one more example of that, one more example of a government unwilling to listen to the people and unwilling to do what's right. They were totally ready to give corporations a big tax break. They were totally ready to bet over a billion dollars on a pipeline that was contingent on Donald Trump being re-elected. I mean, really? I am just flabbergasted by the decisions that this government makes. [An electronic device sounded]

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, I understand that the government has to slash and burn things in order to pay for their agenda, to pay for a \$10 million referendum, to pay for, you know, billions of dollars in corporate tax cuts, to pay for a pipeline that isn't going anywhere, to pay for any number of processes and consultations that really just underline what they want them to say.

Mr. Speaker, it is just one more disappointment in a long line of disappointments from this government, that is making poor decisions for the people of Alberta, good decisions for themselves. You know, they'll continuously tell Albertans: oh, no; we did this, we're doing this because it was in our platform. Well, what I'm telling the government and I think what Albertans are trying to tell this government is that you got it wrong. That was a different time, perhaps, but you got it wrong.

The people of Alberta are hurting. They have been hurting. This last 15 months have been brutal. It has been incredibly difficult. Municipalities are struggling. What they do not need is a cut. What they need is stability. They need transparency, they need planning, and they need honesty. That is not what they're getting from this government, and that is certainly not what they're getting from this piece of legislation. This piece of legislation does nothing to support the people of Alberta. This piece of legislation supports the mandate, that is very self-serving, of this government, that does nothing to make life better for Albertans, certainly does nothing to encourage job creation. Well, it doesn't do anything about pipelines, jobs, and the economy; it just causes a lot of harm.

You know, I wanted to go back to one thing I said in earlier debate. When the NDP formed government, in the last year one of the things they did for St. Albert or with St. Albert that was really positive was that they saw the vision that St. Albert had to diversify their own local economy. As you know, St. Albert is heavily reliant on residential taxes. What they wanted to do was expand the Ray Gibbon Drive. Actually, it was phase 2 of Ray Gibbon Drive. There are still phases 3 and 4 to come, and actually that planning takes us all the way to 2029, I believe.

11:20

What they knew that would do was diversify the economy in so many ways. It would open up investment opportunities right along that corridor, and certainly we all know that would increase safety, traffic flow, and all of those things. It did immediately. Once construction began on phase 2, we immediately saw investment into St. Albert, historic investment, as a matter of fact. We saw that. We knew that there was opportunity. We knew that sometimes you need to invest.

Now, certainly, when they had the formal ribbon cutting, the government had changed, so we had some UCP members show up, you know, with the giant scissors to cut that thing. You know, it was hard to watch, I guess, because I knew who had got the work done. It was the city of St. Albert, and it was the NDP government that got it done because we saw the vision, and we agreed with the city of St. Albert. But more than that, we worked with the city of St. Albert. We were transparent. We provided them with stability and solid answers about the future.

Now, what this government has turned around and done – they're happy to show up for ribbon cuttings, but they are not happy to work with the cities and the municipalities, whether they're rural, remote, whatever they are, to work with them, to say: you can count on us for stable, reliable income revenue. They aren't doing that. Instead, they're saying: "Trust us. Trust us. We're going to front-load this. You're going to get this much money, but then you're going to have these massive cuts for the next two years. It'll be fine. Trust us."

The cities are saying: "No, this is not okay. We are going to eliminate services. We are going to cut infrastructure projects. We don't even know how we're going to manage all of the maintenance that we have to do." We all know how much deferred maintenance costs in the long term, yet that is what this piece of legislation will force municipalities to do. That's unfortunate. That's unfortunate. If, indeed, the goal is to make life better for Albertans, this piece of legislation is not getting that done.

You know, I'm going to say one last thing about this piece of legislation. I don't ever think it's too late to make changes. Until this finally passes, I don't think it's too late to change this or to amend this somehow or to change the investment. I mean, we heard the Premier sort of make an apology yesterday for his behaviour and choice although I won't get into how he qualified that. I don't think it's too late to make changes to this piece of legislation. My colleagues have quoted leaders from all over Alberta that have pointed out the problem with this legislation and with the cuts that will come with it. It is not too late for this government to say: "Okay; well, maybe we got it wrong. Maybe we didn't consider this. We still are in COVID. We understand people are hurting. We can make these changes. We can look at stable, reliable, transparent funding to municipalities because we know we've already added pressure."

Whether that's cuts to policing, the cuts to, you know, how fine revenue is divided between municipalities and the province, this government – it is not too late to say that we made a mistake, that we're going to make some changes so that, actually, municipalities are viable now and into the future. Most will be fine. You know

what? They will pass on the cuts to the residents, they will cut services, they will reduce the work that they were doing, they will reduce the growth that, in turn, reduces the number of jobs that are created, but they will survive. But some will not. Some won't survive this. Some will not be able to survive the increased pressure that this piece of legislation will put on them. I think we've heard from those municipal leaders over the course of this debate.

If this government truly does care for every single municipality and community around this province, whether it is the remotest community in northern Alberta or southern Alberta, I encourage them to stop what they're doing and make changes to this piece of legislation that I will not support.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? There's no Standing Order 29(2)(a), depending on if you'd like to speak otherwise, as the hon. Member for St. Albert was the second speaker.

Are there others that would like to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West has the call.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity and to my hon. colleagues for speaking to this piece of legislation. You know, I think the first thing to start off with is: is there, in my view, any reason to be moving forward with this at this time? We know that the reason that this is moving forward at this time is to give practical effect to a budget in which we have an accelerated corporate tax cut. We have a massive chasm of silence around the actual costs of the giveaway to TC Energy in the form of a bet on a Donald Trump White House; billions, potentially, in the plural, on that. We have a number of ways in which revenues have been compromised and/or expenditures have not been consistent with what a reasonable expectation of good public policy might be. Instead, we need to then turn around and pass legislation such as this in order to reduce the amounts that go to individual municipalities.

I think it's fair to say that this approach, in fact, is not at all supported by the affected municipalities, in particular those who are looking to make sure that they have stable, predictable, long-term funding arrangements such that they can engage in a capital planning process that has some substance and has some bearing on the actual reality of the resources available to them and such that they can make a very credible case to their respective electorates come October, when it comes to future expectations around residential property taxes, commercial property tax arrangements, and other ways that municipalities plan for their fiscal future. Now, what we find here is that these reductions to MSI will in fact mean that municipalities have far fewer planning tools and far less ability to go to their respective electorates in October and say: here is what you can reasonably expect.

Certainly, there will be candidates across the province who are saying to people who are going to be making choices in October: we don't have that kind of certainty; we don't have what you are looking for in terms of predictability on your property taxes or your user fees or your expectations for improvements, either to capital infrastructure or to operations. The reason for that – we can't tell you, you know, how much your property taxes are going to go up and what is a reasonable level of service to expect because not only have we reduced the amounts going to municipalities in favour of a corporate handout, but also we have made changes to the fine revenue, we have made changes to the police funding formula, and we have made changes to a number of other arrangements with municipalities, including things like specific, dedicated capital infrastructure upgrading projects such as the Alberta community

resilience program, which is, of course, a program that's almost been entirely reduced, which was grants to municipalities for fixing water infrastructure, Mr. Speaker.

You know, far from, I think, the ebullient times of April 2019, when I think it was thought by quite a few conservative types: "Oh, I'm going to run for city council, and I'm going to run based on a very close relationship with this current government. I'm really going to try to make sure that I'm nice to them and engage them and that people know that I really support the UCP and the government." There's going to be all these municipal councillors now who are rethinking that strategy, I tell you, Mr. Speaker, and the reason is that every user fee, every tax hike, every reduction in service is a UCP user fee, tax hike, and reduction in service. For example, the Lethbridge police service was reduced by a million dollars this last year. A million dollars for our front-line services. There have been reductions in services around emergency medical services, and now we are also going to be charging people for 911. Again, we have UCP reductions in service, UCP user fees, and they are enabled by this legislation.

11:30

It'll be pretty tough to run on that record in October. I wish those UCP cardholders well. Something tells me that they're going to be, you know, scrubbing the party colours adjacent branding off their leaflets in favour of something slightly more neutral given the deep unpopularity of initiatives like we find in this bill.

Now, the other thing that this bill reflects is a shocking level of actual engagement with what municipalities are saying. They didn't find any municipal validators for any of this. One did not see a phalanx of municipal councillors and Reeves and others standing behind the minister, dutifully nodding at every point with which they agreed when this legislation was released. Oh, no. No, we saw nothing of the sort, Mr. Speaker. This is a government that can engage in none of these usual expectations of political communication because no one agrees with them. No one wants to stand up and hitch themselves to this particular rickety wagon that is not just a recipe for fiscal uncertainty, for imbalances between municipalities, and uneven regional development and ability to attract investment and attract people like doctors and others to our communities – it is not just a recipe for that – but it is also, as has become very clear, a recipe for political instability given the deep unpopularity of this government and its leader.

The other piece that is undermined by such an approach is, in fact, the ability to ensure a long-term approach to some of the federal infrastructure investments that are being made. When municipalities have fewer resources, they have less ability to be able to engage in some of the cost-sharing or other programs that may be available. In fact, that too is being undermined by the provincial government with such an approach to reductions in municipal funding. Now, perhaps, you know, this is sort of part of some kind of bizarrely executed long game in which large cities especially are frustrated in their efforts to engage in some of those partnerships with the federal government for matters of pressing public concern.

I'm thinking here of projects such as the green line. It has been abundantly clear to me, you know, that every step of the way the UCP is fundamentally uninterested in delivering this project to their constituents. They have not engaged in that process in good faith despite the fact that there was a previous provincial government commitment to do so, and there's been a long-standing federal commitment for same. Certainly, the city of Calgary, when their MSI is reduced and other elements of uncertainty are introduced, cannot provide that very important piece of public infrastructure, creating 20,000 jobs. Many of them – I would endeavour to guess

even most – are good-paying construction jobs, unionized construction jobs.

The way we know this is because, certainly, the city of Edmonton was fortunate enough to have concluded many of their funding arrangements before 2019 and the federal piece, where we see now thousands of jobs being created with the valley line LRT. I was just advised very recently by our friends in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers that hundreds of these positions are, in fact, good-paying, unionized electrician jobs, which is what I aspire to, Mr. Speaker. What I want for people in this province is for folks to have access to good-paying jobs that are structured in a way that they can be home at night to take their kids to soccer practice, where they are paying into a well-managed pension fund, where they are safe and they come home at night. That is what these kinds of infrastructure jobs can be, and that can be our approach to building our cities but only if we actually want to.

What we see in Calgary is that there remains absolutely no motivation. It is curious, indeed, given the fact that the Calgary public has been very, very clear that they want the green line, that they want, you know, the serial efforts to frustrate that project to end, and that they want a clear plan for how to get people to work and to school and to their medical appointments and everything else that is the situation that prevails in other urban centres of such a size and consequence as we see in Calgary.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, my comments reflect the position not just of the four municipalities who have not provided their support to this initiative at all. They are conspicuously absent in, really, anything that I see that the government does, particularly on the fiscal side. This is a government that is fundamentally disinterested in an ongoing engagement with municipalities, you know. There is no question that these conversations can sometimes be difficult, and there's no question, too, that municipalities don't always get what they want. I used to say this all the time: "Okay. We're in a meeting. Tell me what you want. You're very likely to not get even half of it, but this is how we engage in good faith." Sometimes it becomes a negotiation, but really it's just an engagement. It's a mutual understanding of each other's reality.

Really, what that comes down to is building trust. How do you get trust? Through respect. You get trust by being open and honest with people, telling them exactly how it's going to be and then doing what you said you were going to do. These are the basics of human interaction. You know, after about six years in this business I have concluded that most political skill comes down to relationships and an ability to simply be frank with people. There are a lot of words that people use to describe me. I have heard many of them, and some of them are parliamentary, and some of them are not. The one that I like the best when it comes up from stakeholders and, in particular, municipalities when I would have to go in and sometimes tell them how it was going to be, because that's what governing is, is "candour."

There is absolutely no candour. There is nothing but guile in how this government engages with municipalities or, really, anyone else. You know, that will not serve the public interest. It is a very poor demonstration of character, for starters, in terms of a countenance of government, a posturing of government. We shouldn't be driving towards artifice in our relationships with either our constituents or with other levels of government or simply doing things for performance art purposes or trying to move money around in some sort of shell game where, at the end of the day, the only people who make out better is the corner office and those who are the recipients of share buybacks who are not here in Alberta. That should not be what we strive for in our engagements with municipalities or, really, anyone else, but that is what we see as, essentially, the

driving value and principles of this government. It reflects poorly indeed, and it will indeed reflect quite poorly in October.

You know, I notice that we are headed towards, potentially, a number of ballot questions in the fall in and around the municipal election, and I would invite the government to ask themselves whether all of the anger that has bubbled up at this government will in fact manifest itself with those ballot initiatives in the fall in the way that they want.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Seeing none, anyone else wishing to provide comments? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen.

11:40

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity this morning here to provide some additional comments around Bill 56, the Local Measures Statutes Amendment Act, 2021. I really think that we should have taken an opportunity, as I had mentioned earlier, to maybe modify those – you know, you see some bills that have the brackets after the title. We should have maybe added in there: we're not done shortchanging municipalities. I still believe that that is true at this moment as well. We have seen the government's actions over the course of the last couple of years that have put municipalities in a position to make tough decisions that will not be for the benefit of their residents. I think it's a little bit of a way of passing the buck here by the provincial government. It's, like: well, we don't want to make these tough decisions because it might anger Albertans, and we want that anger to go to somebody else, not us.

Right from the beginning the former Minister of Municipal Affairs told municipalities in this province that, well, you know, they had to get their fiscal houses in order. Mr. Speaker, when I hear about that kind of thing, I see this government constantly pointing fingers everywhere else, at everybody else except themselves. They're not willing to point a finger when the decisions they make are not prudent ones. All we have to do is look at, as now the Minister of Justice likes to say, the facts. They always want to look at the facts. Well, the facts are that the government made a bet on an election, which, of course, as we know, failed, and now Albertans are on the hook for at least a billion dollars, maybe more. We don't know because they won't tell Albertans. How is that being fiscally responsible?

I think about the war room, that not only couldn't get one logo right but couldn't get two logos right and now, you know, are busy fighting a mythical cartoon character at the cost of \$30 million a year. How is that fiscally prudent?

I think about the corporate tax giveaway to companies like Walmart and how it hasn't created jobs. As a matter of fact, just last month we lost some more. We have more Albertans out of work. As we've seen earlier in debate this morning on another piece of legislation, you know, we have over 200,000 Albertans out of work right now. Yet the promise right from the hop – even before that, for that matter – was jobs, economy, pipelines. They failed on the jobs. The economy is stalled or has even slid back slightly, with not a single pipeline to speak of. How is that fiscally prudent?

You know, there were always jobs taken at the former NDP government, especially the Member for Calgary-Buffalo, the former Finance minister: the worst Finance minister in Alberta history.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, I hate to tell you this, then, as the members opposite cheer wildly for that: your Finance minister has now seen more credit downgrades than any other Finance minister in history. The deficit that was projected by the former NDP government, Mr. Speaker, was double under this Finance minister currently. How is that fiscally responsible? [interjections]

Ms Renaud: Laugh it up.

Mr. Nielsen: You know, as some of my colleagues have pointed out, they're laughing away; this is funny. I think that Albertans don't find it funny, and very likely they won't find it funny in 2023 either. I look at how Bill 56 is putting local municipalities in a very, very tough position, and I can't help but think of the residents of Edmonton-Decore and how this is affecting them. As I've mentioned time and time again, the decision that this government has made has not made the lives of Albertans better; it's made them worse. It's costing them more money, and we've seen that.

I've had constituents come to me talking about their utility bills going up. You know, over the course of the weekend, at our convention, we were talking about making our province a powerhouse in renewable energy. The members opposite thought that was all funny. Well, if it's so funny, why are my constituents' utility bills going up, have gone up, because of the decisions, the fiscally responsible decisions that you're making? I'm happy to have anybody stand up and explain that to my constituents in Edmonton-Decore that have come to me.

You know, explain to the constituents of Edmonton-Decore who have seen their income taxes go up because he de-indexed it. How has that made their lives better? They now have less money to spend in the economy because that money, of course, is going to the government to, as I said, have a fight with a cartoon character.

Insurance premiums. This has been a big one, you know. I think about the last gentleman that was in my office, a senior on a fixed income who admittedly – he said: "You know, I've been fortunate. I've made decisions. I have a comfortable lifestyle, but why is it that my auto insurance is going up by 46 per cent?" Apparently, the NDP government ruined everything around that.

An Hon. Member: Hear, hear.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, then please stand up, as they cheer, and explain to him why his automobile insurance went up by 46 per cent in this last year.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also like him to explain to that same constituent why his condo insurance went up by 56 per cent. Please explain that, how the fiscally responsible decision you've made around insurance has caused his rates to rise, and for many others. I'm sure they'd love to hear why that's happened.

We've seen the fiscally responsible decisions that have been made, increasing tuition for our young, emerging leaders, including higher interest rates on their student loans. How does that set up Alberta to lead on the world stage, making it harder for them to go and get that education?

Bill 56 is going to put municipalities in the position to likely have to increase property taxes. I've already seen decisions that affect Edmonton-Decore specifically around bus service. There is no longer going to be any bus service up and down 82nd Street, right through the middle of the riding. Please, those that were cheering, stand up and explain to my constituents in Edmonton-Decore why the fiscally responsible decisions that you've made have made their lives better. I especially think the residents of Edmonton-Decore who have disability challenges, especially mobility – because we all know that a snow- and ice-covered sidewalk becomes an almost impassable object for those folks that one time only had to maybe

go a few hundred feet to a bus stop and now may be going a couple of blocks. If it wasn't a hard enough challenge now, what do you think it's going to be like when we pass Bill 56, assuming it gets passed? I never, of course, predetermine the decision of this House.

Why have child care expenses gone through the roof? My good friend from Edmonton-Whitemud over and over and over and over again has tried to explain to members opposite that the lack of good, affordable child care affects the economy negatively. How is that good fiscal responsibility? I don't see how we can point at municipalities, saying, "Well, you need to get your fiscal house in order" when clearly this government can't get their own. My gosh, they can't even handle a working dinner on a patio. Oh, I'm sorry; it was a social gathering.

11:50

Feel free, anybody. Step up and explain to the residents of Edmonton-Decore how that has made their lives better and how passing Bill 56 will make their lives better. I'm telling you that it's going to force municipalities to make decisions. Obviously, you don't want to. They're going to be limited to what decisions they can make, things like simple bus service. We all know that municipalities can only raise money in two different ways; it's either property taxes or user fees. Probably a combination of both trying to spread out the anger a little bit. Again, I challenge anyone to stand up and explain to the constituents of Edmonton-Decore why it was a good idea to give away \$4.7 billion in corporate handouts to places like Walmart, why it's a good idea to fight with *Bigfoot*. I suppose maybe the argument could be made that that decision actually was good for that film. It wasn't getting much attention at that point, so I guess that's helping the film industry.

Mr. Schmidt: Not Alberta's film industry.

Mr. Nielsen: Oh. It wasn't in Alberta. See, I'm constantly the optimist here. I was hoping that maybe that was the case.

You know, we see all these panels that are being formed, costing Alberta taxpayers' money, just to see decisions that were already alluded to in the beginning anyway. How has that made the lives of the residents of Edmonton-Decore and others better? We're going to be spending money on referendums for, potentially, questions the province can't do anything about. How is that fiscally responsible decisions? All this finger pointing that I see at municipalities around them having to get things in order – I would maybe suggest, Mr. Speaker, that this government, this UCP government needs to get its house in order.

I guess before it gets its own house in order, it's trying to get its internal furniture in order. All the infighting and disagreements, worrying about standing orders instead of the things, as my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud in earlier discussion pointed out, that we should be focusing on: actually focusing on legislation that creates jobs, actually focusing on legislation that grows the economy. Maybe we should look at panels that actually consult on things like: how does coal affect our drinking water? My gosh. I mean, this one just frosts me something incredible that in the 21st century not all Albertans have good, clean drinking water. Why aren't we focusing on legislation just to get that done? Forget waiting for the federal government. Let's get that done. Now, we've got to talk about how coal mining won't poison our drinking water that we have now? Come on. Do better.

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

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to join in this discussion today on Bill 56. I was shocked to be able to get into this debate. I thought for sure the members opposite would want to join in. Of course, I'm being sarcastic. I just find it quite intriguing, you know, that my colleagues – the Member for Lethbridge-West, the Member for St. Albert, of course, my articulate colleague from Edmonton-Decore – all really asked some very poignant questions, shared in particular the impacts on their communities, Lethbridge and St. Albert. They did so as well in second reading and in committee if I remember correctly. I'm blessed to be on a shift with these folks, so I do get to hear a lot of what they say.

I find it interesting, at least from my recollection, that I've not heard the members opposite stand up and defend Bill 56. You know, I think about the Member for Morinville-St. Albert, who has heard multiple times in this Chamber some of the significant concerns from my fantastic colleague from St. Albert, yet I've not heard a defence. I've heard some heckling from him and from other members, but I've not had a chance to hear them defend this bill. Always the optimist, I'm hopeful that before they push through this bill, they will answer some of the questions we've raised, perhaps stand up and do what they were elected to do, which is to represent their constituents. Again, I'm hopeful – got to be hopeful – but time is, of course, running out. [interjection] That's right.

It's clear from this government that there's a pattern of attacking and gutting Alberta's municipalities. I think that any one of us could and likely will on our side of the House stand up and just talk about how this bill and how this government's approach continue to hurt our constituents. We are seeing and we are hearing from our constituents that they've been hit hard from so many angles. My colleagues have spoken about it at length, you know, talking about things like – oh, I don't know – provincial park fees, property taxes.

I appreciated some of the comments my colleague from Edmonton-Decore talked about, just the impact on services. Cities are having to make really tough decisions, and my colleague talked about bus services as an example. As someone who lives in a very mature neighbourhood, a block south of 118, where transit is incredibly important and so many of my constituents rely on it, it's really troubling to see that a number of transit routes have had to be removed and cancelled. Particularly for folks with mobility issues, seniors, they rely on those services. And I don't blame – I don't blame – the city of Edmonton for having to make tough choices; I blame the province that's putting the city of Edmonton in an incredibly tough situation.

We've urged this government multiple times to re-examine their relationship with municipalities. Of course, I'm focused a lot on the city of Edmonton because those are the constituents I represent, but, as my colleagues have shared, it's not just here. My colleague from Lethbridge-West talked about the impacts on Calgary and talked about the green line. Again, you know, I would love to hear from some of those government Calgary MLAs, just what they're hearing from their constituents, with the impacts of Bill 56 and other pieces of legislation that this government has rammed through, what the impact of those bills has been, because I can't imagine that they're hearing a lot of positives from their constituents. I guess it's another reminder or perhaps a warning to this government to think deeply . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to interrupt; however, pursuant to Standing Order 4(2.1) the House stands adjourned until 1:30 this afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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