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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, November 16, 2021

Day 126

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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New Democrat: 24

Independent: 2

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

10 a.m.

Tuesday, November 16, 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 interest and prejudice, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all.

Please be seated.

Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 80

Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2)

The Speaker: The hon. the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move second reading of Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2).

Mr. Speaker, over two years ago we set out on a bold path to free Albertans and Alberta businesses from the red tape that adds burden on our job creators and negatively impacts the lives of Albertans. We counted all regulatory requirements found in all statutes, regulations, policies, and forms across government departments and in our agencies, boards, and commissions, and we found we had almost 670,000 requirements. This number is what we refer to as the baseline count of our regulatory requirements. I am proud to say that so far we have been able to remove over 122,000 unnecessary or repetitive requirements, or 18.3 per cent, from our baseline count, and we're well on our way to achieving our overall goal of cutting red tape by one-third by 2023.

Bill 80 reflects this ongoing commitment. The changes we are making are practical approaches to get out of the way of our job creators so they can continue creating jobs and fuelling our economy. Like all of our work to reduce red tape, this bill continues to make Alberta the freest and fastest moving economy in North America. If this legislation is passed, job creators and Albertans will see the removal of unnecessary restrictions that act as barriers to economic growth along with more economic opportunities for small businesses, a faster and more efficient review process for human rights complaints, and more flexible oversight of Alberta's credit union and insurance industry, saving Albertans and Alberta businesses time and money. The most important thing, Mr. Speaker, is that our successes would make Alberta an even better place to live, invest, and do business. As we all know, when people invest in Alberta, good jobs follow.

Bill 80 proposes to change nine pieces of legislation across six different departments. If passed, at least 870 regulatory requirements would be removed from legislation, regulations, policies, and forms. With this, we will have eliminated over 3,300 unnecessary requirements through the five red tape reduction implementation bills since the beginning of our mandate.

There are several key amendments included in the bill. We are making changes to the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act to increase revenue and growth opportunities for businesses while improving consumer choice and access and maintaining high standards of public health and safety. We're promoting economic growth by enabling municipalities to establish entertainment districts, designated public areas where adults may responsibly consume alcohol. This will help revitalize communities, promote tourism, and support small and local businesses. We will also be allowing made-at-home beer, wine, and cider to be served at private, nonsale special events, allowing Albertans to enjoy homemade drinks at weddings or family reunions. Licensed cannabis retailers will also be able to grow their businesses by entering the online cannabis market. This is supplemented by allowing the sale of additional items such as merchandise in cannabis stores, which will allow further revenue and growth opportunities for these Alberta businesses.

In this bill we are also helping Albertans protect their rights by modernizing Alberta Human Rights Commission processes. Human rights complaints would be addressed more quickly, backlogs would be reduced, and human rights tribunal hearings would be more accessible for Albertans.

Other important amendments include consolidating the Alberta health care insurance plan rules in one piece of legislation to modernize language and ensure greater legislative clarity for industry and the public, enabling more efficient regulation of Alberta's credit union system by transferring oversight of Alberta Central to the Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation, also ensuring Crown mineral agreements are responsibly managed by enabling a faster and more efficient way to replace designated representatives, and giving the insurance industry the ability, with appropriate ministerial oversight, to set and change fees for examinations, licensing, and continuing education and other activities related to the regulation of insurance professionals.

Above all, Mr. Speaker, I want to leave you with this. Alberta's government continues to deliver on its promise to cut red tape and make it as feasible as possible for businesses to grow, create jobs, and drive Alberta's economy forward, a key goal of Alberta's recovery plan. Cutting red tape helps create the strong, stable, and innovative business environment we need to boost job creation. Given the economic impacts of COVID-19 this is even more important now. This legislation supports economic growth and our commitment to eliminate unnecessary and burdensome regulation, all of which helps drive Alberta's economic recovery. We are working hard to deliver on our commitment to reduce red tape, to save Albertans time and money, and to become the investment destination of choice.

I hereby move second reading of Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2).

The Speaker: Hon. members, Bill 80 will be what we are debating, but prior to doing that – and I meant to mention this prior to calling on the minister, and thank you to the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul for the reminder – I just thought that I would take a brief second to just mention that our thoughts, prayers, and well wishes are with our friends in B.C., who are experiencing significant emergencies today, and also inform the House that I have written a letter to the Speaker offering our thoughts as well to the B.C. Legislature. I'm sure that all members will join me in thinking about them today.

Are there others wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. If I could just confirm. I think that because I'm second speaker, I don't have interjections.

The Speaker: Correct.

Ms Hoffman: Could you confirm my time allowance?

The Speaker: Twenty minutes.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my colleagues for this opportunity to be here today, and thank you specifically, Speaker, for mentioning what's happening in B.C. Certainly, our thoughts, our prayers go to everyone who's directly impacted.

On a lesser scale, we have impacts here today at home as well of severe weather. I've been informed that there is a school bus that rolled on the Anthony Henday this morning. Certainly, I know that every parent's heart sinks when they think about their kids not being able to get to school safely, and I hope that that is not the case for the children who were impacted this morning in that specific incident here in the southeast of Edmonton.

I want to engage in debate on Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2), and I want to begin my comments – because we do have, you know, another 19 minutes, so an opportunity, I think, to unpack this quite a bit. Of course, we're at second reading, which, again, allows for more flexibility. I want to start by talking about how I think that this bill could relate to the critic portfolio I have and one that many Albertans reach out to me to discuss on a regular basis, and that's specifically around education and the impacts that a lot of families are feeling in response to this government as it relates to public education particularly in this province.

This morning some of us were in attendance at the Alberta School Boards Association MLA breakfast here in Edmonton on the south side, something that has become an annual tradition. I think last year was the only one that didn't happen in person in many, many years. I was first elected as a trustee in 2010, and it was already happening at that time, I believe, just up the street here from the Legislature. It's a room where there were fewer trustees than normal but still many, and many first-year trustees were in attendance and are very keen to have a chance to engage and do some advocacy on behalf of the students they serve, the staff that they employ, and the parents that are so deeply invested in the success of their children. I bring this up as it relates to red tape in that there are some specific areas that trustees, new trustees and returning trustees, really emphasized as being significant challenges for them right now.

10:10

The first one that I want to mention, among the three that were top of mind for most trustees who I had the chance to engage with this morning, related to transportation and insurance related to transportation, pressures that are being felt. I know that this government is well aware of many of the problems because I know that the Minister of Education launched a transportation review about a year and a half ago, and the report was turned in to the government about a year ago. I remember thinking that, oh, we'll probably see it before the end of the fall sitting last year. I think that when we engage in reviews of things, Albertans expect there to be at least a sharing of what was learned and, ideally, an action plan on what's going to be done moving forward, but we have not seen that report in any public way.

Arguably, the transportation issues facing Albertans are far greater now than they were a year ago, so a significant lost

opportunity to find ways to address some of the red tape that impacts boards but also to bring forward ways to make things better, faster, cheaper for school authorities. Some districts regularly will talk about opportunities around joint transportation. That is something that there are a number of barriers to right now that they probably would like to see this government work to address, streamlining those opportunities to make it easier for students to get to school more quickly, more directly, and less expensively.

Also, I would say that the biggest pressure facing transportation right now – and I'm sure colleagues in the Chamber, particularly those who represent rural districts, are feeling, I think, an especially intense pinch; those are the bus drivers who have been reaching out to me most vocally – is around significant increases to their insurance costs. Many of them sign multiyear contracts with their employer, with the school districts. Of course, field trips are down, and sporting events are down. Often bus drivers in a typical year will use their bus to drive to and from school, and then in the middle of the day they'll also do other types of charter things like take students to the Legislature, for example, a building that has been closed for students for quite some time and is closed to all spectators and people right now, which I have my own personal opinions on. I think that when you have the honour of working in the people's building, you have a responsibility to make that building accessible to the people that own that building, the people who we all serve.

They definitely talked about transportation and their significant fear that buses will stop transporting their children mid-year because they simply can't afford to continue with the contracts at the rates they signed, because the government has allowed insurance rates to skyrocket so significantly. Perhaps there are some opportunities for ministers and for all members of this Assembly to reflect on the importance of not just reducing red tape, because I do think that there are many opportunities where we can be more efficient, but what checks and balances government has a responsibility to bring in to ensure that we are actually more responsive in serving the public.

I can tell you that many, many, many of the trustees who brought up transportation and insurance costs would love to see a rate cap brought back in, a rate cap that ensures that when their contractors sign a deal with them, they have some predictability about where their insurance rates will be headed so that they can enter into an agreement with the person that they're contracting with to provide reliable, safe, consistent service. The biggest risk right now is that many bus drivers are actually losing money every day by doing their job. Picking people's children up and taking them to school is not a super lucrative opportunity, particularly as it relates to this year, with the increased insurance pressures but also the reduced opportunities for doing additional contract work with the bus, that many of these contractors own.

In terms of red tape reduction I think that there could be opportunities to streamline transportation cost to make it more efficient and easier, but also I think that there is a responsibility to consider adding a little bit of red tape when it comes to regulating an industry that we all rely on. Of course, vehicle transportation, including school bus transportation, is something that is incredibly important for many of us in such a large province, where most of us have personal-use vehicles that we use to get around because of the large space that we have, the lower population that we have, and the lower mass public transit that we have as well. Transportation is one of the issues that trustees raised with me this morning.

A second one that was raised was about COVID and specifically the downloading of responsibility to so many school divisions and municipalities, but today I'm talking specifically about school divisions after having had the opportunity to engage with so many trustees this morning. Some of them said that they have experienced

for the first time – many of these trustees served when both the Minister of Education and I were trustees, so for over a decade. Many of them said, “We’ve never seen the kind of angst from our employee groups as we do right now” and talked about having protests outside of their district offices from their own employees because this government refuses to step up and put clear guidelines in around employment in education.

This government refuses to step up and take some leadership. Some might argue that it is red tape. I would say that for the government to say, “Well, this is what we believe is in everybody’s best interests and what you should be doing” but then refusing to actually demonstrate that leadership themselves is a delegation of authority to the most extreme. Many of them are saying: we wouldn’t mind a little bit of red tape if it meant we had some clarity around our relationships with our employee groups, and our staff would appreciate having that clarity on a province-wide basis as well. Many trustees have encouraged the province to step up and show some leadership as it comes to the COVID response in their education systems.

The third one, of course, is around curriculum. Curriculum is something that I know Albertans have been interested in for quite some time. Most of it started around discussions, in terms of my own interest, obviously, when I was training to be a teacher. I had significant interest in knowing the specific curricular outcomes and making sure that we were being properly supported in implementing those in our classrooms.

There was the launch of the biggest review at the time around Inspiring Education, and that was around 2011, 2012, so about a decade ago, under Conservative leadership at the time to do a big overhaul and to do less siloed learning, so less learning focused on specific subject matters or grade compositions but more integrated learning around conceptual opportunities. That’s something that we continued to engage on under Conservative governments, under the NDP government, and something that the current government has decided to continue to move forward on in terms of curriculum. But I can say that parents and trustees don’t feel like they have been engaged in the proper ways.

There are times to have some red tape, if that’s what the government wants to call it, in terms of putting checks and balances and systems in place to ensure a fair process and a fair way of gathering information, and instead we see a government that has brought in people that they think are experts to guide this process. I can say without a doubt that curriculum has been the most engaged topic from a parent perspective according to the trustees that I met with and my own experience in an elected capacity for over a decade when it comes to the education system.

10:20

I want to say that while this bill here is titled red tape reduction and there are many additional sections – and I do still have time to go in greater detail into some of those other sections – I think that we really missed an opportunity to put one of the biggest priorities that Albertans have right now, which is around the education system, in focus, to find ways to give additional supports and tools to local decision-makers, and also to provide some consistency around implementation of what these three biggest pressures are that most trustees have raised.

Certainly, we saw during the most recent municipal election that curriculum was one of the most hotly discussed topics. Overwhelmingly, people who wanted to trash the current draft, go back to the table with something that was more inclusive, more evidence based, that included teachers in the drafting, not just asking teachers to pilot and then give feedback – that was something that was very vocally articulated during the last election.

I think we could have had an opportunity, in discussing red tape, for the minister to bring forward both opportunities to reduce some of the barriers and cumbersome pieces but also opportunities to support those who the government so regularly tries to turn to to justify decisions that they don’t want to make themselves, right?

When I think about these rural boards who are seeing protests outside their district offices, including protests of their own employees, most trustees and district leaders, including superintendents, didn’t sign up to be in their capacity because they wanted to make huge public health decisions and impact people’s potential to earn. They did so because they wanted to focus on their expertise, which is usually education and engagement, and they wanted to use that opportunity to further their communities and their education systems within their communities.

It would have been great if the government took this opportunity to come forward – they’re amending nine pieces of legislation, I think, through Bill 80 – if they would have thought: what are some of the most pressing issues facing Albertans right now, and how can we bring forward bills that address some of those big strains and pressures? I would have loved to have seen something here on curriculum, COVID and responses in schools and education systems broadly, and to address the urgent transportation needs. This is just, you know, on behalf of the probably 150 people I chatted with this morning. This is a big, pressing issue that the government certainly could have taken an opportunity in this legislation or elsewhere to actually try to combat.

The government does touch on the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act and is moving some pieces around and some language around. I would love to get some clarity from, you know, the minister responsible for this bill, the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction, the former Health minister, the current Health minister, the Premier, any and all around some nervousness that’s been expressed around the moving of the language around health care premiums. The reason why is, to quote Michael Scott from *The Office*: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, strike 3. You’re out.” Right? Fool me twice, strike 3.

People are carrying with them a significant degree of mistrust because many times under Conservative governments in the past they’ve said, “No, no, no, we won’t do health care premiums,” and then when the budget comes out, there’s a health care premium written into it. To date Albertans have been able to push back and get that removed, but any time there are things mentioning health care premiums, rightfully so, Albertans get their back up and want to make sure that the government isn’t trying to unleash, yet again, another jacked-up fee onto the people of Alberta when, obviously, we all need health care regardless of our ability to pay a levy or a tax or a premium, whatever word you want to use. A tax of another name is still a tax.

Another piece that I have some concerns over that I would like to have, you know, any members of Executive Council or the government caucus talk about is the piece around removing the adult learning stream from income support. Again, we have this same concern and anxiety because we’ve already seen in this sitting of the Legislature, in this term of government, a Premier who, during the lead-up to the last election, when the NDP brought in indexing for AISH and income support – the Premier did at that time, when he was in the opposition, actually vote to index and increase AISH and income support in line with the increasing cost of inflation for folks who rely on that income.

When we said in the lead-up to the election, “We are anxious and nervous about whether or not he’ll keep that,” he tried to shame the then government, the now opposition, for inspiring fear in people with disabilities that the government wasn’t going to keep their word and keep the law in place. But one of the very first things the

government did when this Premier was elected – and his cabinet and his entire caucus voted along with him – was to remove indexing, that amount to account for the increased cost of living for people who already live on hardly anything.

They actually said that getting rid of that wouldn't be onerous. Well, maybe \$12,000 isn't a lot of money for some members of the government caucus because they've chosen to give one of their members a raise in that amount, but I can tell you that taking \$100 away from somebody who's living on a very tight fixed income is onerous. When I said to somebody, "Tell me what \$100 means to you," they said, "Well, that's 200 packs of ramen." Right? Like, that's food for a lot of meals. So for the government to say, "Well, trust us; we're going to remove the adult learning stream from income support," one of the natural consequences, in our reading of the legislation, is that those adults will be removed from their actual allowances. Those who are full-time learners won't have the benefit of having the same types of income support that they do currently.

Again, I would love to hear from the government that this isn't an attempt to remove even more support from those who are already vulnerable. I imagine the government understands why people are so mistrusting of a government when they say: well, don't worry; just trust us. We've seen for quite some time that when the government says one thing but acts in another way, there's no way we would be able to, in good faith, say: "Oh, yeah. Don't worry. This is just editing to make things a little bit easier." It feels like there is something deeper and less open and transparent under way here, and a lot of people are really struggling and deserve to have that income support to keep themselves safe and housed.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is second reading of Bill 80. Are there others wishing to join in the debate? I would just remind members that interventions are now open to the Assembly should they choose to wish to intervene and should the member choose to wish to accept. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the call.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and offer my thoughts. I'm glad that the Member for Airdrie-Cochrane is excited to hear me speak. I certainly wish that he would give his leader the same kind of support that he gave to me when I got up to speak. That would probably be appreciated in that respect.

I want to thank my friend from Edmonton-Glenora for her comments regarding this piece of legislation. My friend from Edmonton-Glenora is laser focused on the things that really matter to the people of Alberta, and that was demonstrated clearly in her comments today regarding this bill. I think it really highlights the vast chasm between us here in the NDP opposition and those in the UCP government in terms of where our priorities are and our ability to listen to Albertans and work for a province that works for people while this government continues to waste its time on things like the red tape reduction bill that is before us today.

Perhaps you would say that calling this a waste of time is a bit of an extreme statement, but let me just remind all members of the House exactly what it is that this red tape reduction exercise that the government has embarked upon actually entails, because it spans a spectrum. Most of the activities are happening in the realm of the completely meaningless, Mr. Speaker. We've got an army of civil servants who have been tasked with counting the number of forms and counting the number of check marks required to fill out a form, the number of boxes that are required to be filled in to a form . . . [An electronic device sounded] I'm sure that my friend from Lethbridge-West will indeed make it rain

to the charity of her choice, as indicated, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

10:30

Most of the work that the government has undertaken in this realm of red tape reduction is completely meaningless and an absolute waste of time of a lot of our hard-working civil servants. As I said, they're engaged in this pointless exercise of looking at how many forms people have to fill out to access programs, how many check marks there are, counting up the number of boxes that need to be filled in, and then reporting that number. Then if they reduce the number of boxes that need to be filled in on a form, reduce the number of check marks that need to be entered, they tally up that number and create some sort of fake progress towards a meaningless goal.

When the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction comes in and talks about meeting these fantastic targets, let's just be clear that we're talking about something as completely meaningless as reducing the number of boxes in a form from 10 to five. Then she comes in here and claims: oh, we've reduced red tape by 50 per cent because we've reduced the number of boxes to be filled in on a form by 50 per cent. It's completely ridiculous, Mr. Speaker.

At any time this kind of exercise would be frustrating and ridiculous, but particularly during a global pandemic, Mr. Speaker, it's incredibly insulting that we have hard-working, talented civil servants who are wasting their time and talents counting up boxes on forms when we need to be delivering programs and supports to help the people of Alberta get through the worst health and economic crisis that this province has ever seen.

You know, the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction likes to thump her chest about, oh, how much the work of her ministry has contributed to the supposed economic rebound that the government imagines it's seeing happening right now in Alberta. Let me just remind the House that in 2020 Alberta had the biggest reduction in its gross domestic product of any province in the country. We had the worst performance, we had the worst drop in gross domestic product of any province in the country. Moreover, we became a net recipient of federal dollars for the first time in living memory in this province. What a tremendous accomplishment the UCP has managed. They hate equalization so much that they drove this province into the ground, to the point that we are now receiving net federal transfers from the federal government. [interjection] I see my friend from Lethbridge-West would like to intervene.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. He was just talking about some of the significant economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic here in Alberta, in fact some of the worst economic effects: the largest drop in GDP, the largest drops in overall employment. But now we are hearing the province pivot very quickly to talking about labour shortages and all of these kinds of breathless pronouncements. Generally speaking, labour shortages come as a result of shortages in specific skilled occupations. That's where employers find shortages. I'm wondering if the hon. member can discuss anywhere in this legislation where we see policies that might help that situation or if, in fact, we might see the opposite in this legislation.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much to my friend from Lethbridge-West for the incisive question. In fact, there is one significant section of the bill that moves Alberta away from addressing the supposed skills gap that the government is on about lately, and that's with respect to the changes to income support for adult learners, that I'd like to talk about. But before I get there, I just want to finish the thought that I had in terms of the state of the economy

here in Alberta. We had the worst gross domestic product shrinkage in the entire country, we are now net recipients of federal dollars, and the associate minister wants to pat herself on the back for doing such a good job and claiming that this work of red tape reduction is producing such tangible economic benefits.

Well, if the work of the red tape reduction initiative was producing such tangible benefits, why did the last Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction lose his job and find himself now sitting on our side of the House and, in fact, is so aggrieved that his constituency association was in the news yesterday claiming that perhaps the Premier is not entitled to lead that party anymore?

It would be interesting to see whether or not the current associate minister of red tape learned any lessons from the mistakes of the previous associate minister of red tape and perhaps changed the focus of the work that she was undertaking to see if there is actually anything meaningful in this red tape reduction initiative that could produce tangible benefits to the people of Alberta. I suspect that that's never going to be the case, but we continue to hear this meaningless rhetoric about how much the economy has improved thanks to the good efforts of the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction. It's a complete fiction, Mr. Speaker.

To my friend from Lethbridge-West's question about addressing the labour needs of the province of Alberta, there is a significant change here in the red tape reduction bill that I would like to talk about. Remember that most of these red tape reduction bills are completely meaningless, but some of them veer into the absolutely harmful, and this is one of those changes that will be very harmful to the people of Alberta.

Essentially, what we see here is that the government is phasing out the adult learner benefit by making sure that people enrolled in approved training programs have to be enrolled by April 2022 in order to receive the benefit. Presumably, if people seek to enrol in these kinds of programs after April 2022, they will no longer be eligible for the benefit. Now, I anticipate that the government will probably tell us not to worry about this because they've made other changes to the benefits structure and changes to how they administer apprenticeship programs and those kinds of things. The only problem, Mr. Speaker, with these kinds of claims is that it doesn't actually show up in the annual reports of the government. Not only are we reducing the adult income benefit stream; we don't see the changes appearing anywhere else on the books of the government.

Now, I had a quick tour through the annual report of the Advanced Education ministry, because I think that the Advanced Education minister is probably going to be doing a lot of heavy lifting or should be doing a lot of heavy lifting when these people are kicked off their income supports, but we don't see that showing up anywhere in the budget. In fact, in 2020-2021 the Advanced Education ministry underspent its budgeted amount for scholarships and awards by over a million dollars. One wonders why we couldn't get the budgeted amount for scholarships and awards out the door. We underspent significantly in foundational learning supports, almost \$15 million, Mr. Speaker. The people receiving those supports are going to be people who will be affected by this training benefit being phased out. [interjection] I see my friend from Lethbridge-West would like to intervene again.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, hon. member, and thanks to the Speaker for this opportunity to provide this intervention. Now, I see in this legislation that there are an awful lot of pieces where the minister has sort of claimed that there are, you know, eleven hundred ways that regulations have been reduced, but a lot of this stuff essentially belongs in miscellaneous statutes or is maybe one step above miscellaneous statutes in terms of its overall effect on the policy,

and regulatory, and legislative work of the government of Alberta. But as the hon. member points out, there are a number of people who are actually significantly affected by the biggest changes in this piece of legislation, that otherwise looks like a telephone book. This is sort of a Trojan Horse into a very large piece of red tape reduction, quote, unquote. Can the member talk about that a little bit? [An electronic device sounded]

10:40

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I want to thank my friend from Lethbridge-West. I will have to admit that during her question, Mr. Speaker, I was a little bit distracted because some members of the government caucus had their cellphones go off, and I understand that you have committed them to making a charitable donation as well.

I just want to comment on that further if I could, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, we made a mistake when our side had our cellphones go off, but as we've seen from this government over two years, they are unable to learn from others' mistakes or their own mistakes, right? You would think that after one cellphone went off, everybody would check their cellphones to make sure that their ringers were off. But, no, the government members demonstrated yet again that they are incapable or unwilling to learn from other people's mistakes and just left their ringers on.

The Speaker: Relevance.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I appreciate the call to relevance, Mr. Speaker. I will say that it's absolutely relevant when we're talking about red tape reduction and the government's inability or unwillingness to learn from its mistakes. As we see with this red tape reduction bill, we see the government again unwilling or incapable of learning from its mistakes.

My friend from Lethbridge-West had a question about the impacts that this bill will have on the people of Alberta. I want to say that, you know, in my time as Minister of Advanced Education I got to meet with a lot of people who received the training benefit and income supports that the government is looking at phasing out here through this piece of legislation. These are the people who are absolutely in most need of government support. They are people who have lost their jobs, who don't have the financial resources to be able to go back to school and upgrade their skills or learn new skills in order to get back into the job market without this kind of benefit, Mr. Speaker.

You know, I will remind the House that a significant number of the people who receive these benefits are new Canadians who don't even have the English skills required to be able to participate meaningfully in the job market. It seems to me to be incredibly backwards to phase the benefits out for those people, to make it even harder for them to be able to get the skills that they need to be able to participate in the job market meaningfully.

Certainly, when I was Minister of Advanced Education, the overwhelming response that I had from people who were receiving these benefits was that we need to provide support to more people, right? There are only a few thousand people who are eligible to receive these benefits right now because the financial requirements are so low as to be – you know, people have to be in almost complete abject poverty to be able to accept them. So that leaves a significant number of people who really don't have the financial resources to be able to retrain and go back to school and upgrade their skills or learn new skills. There are a significant number of people who realistically don't have the ability to afford that, who aren't eligible for the benefits. If the government were serious about putting Albertans back to work, they would be looking at expanding eligibility for the benefits, but instead we see that they're rolling

those benefits back and making it even harder, making sure that even fewer Albertans will be eligible to be able to go back to school.

So what will we see? I mean, you know, we hear from the government again that, oh, employment has returned to prepandemic levels, which is not actually true. [interjection] I see the Member for Chestermere-Strathmore. I appreciate her attempt to intervene, but I won't accept her intervention at this time.

We see that the government is claiming that employment is back to prepandemic levels, yet in the month of October we saw that thousands of people just entirely dropped out of the job market. We still have the highest unemployment rate of any of the large provinces in the country, and people are giving up hope of ever being able to find work and dropping out of the job market. [interjection] I expect my friend from Lethbridge-West will have something insightful to say, so I'd like to listen to her.

Thank you.

Ms Phillips: Thank you. To the hon. member: I'm just wondering if you can clarify what some of those supports for foundational learning look like. You talked about language supports and so on. There was underspending there. You fully expected that some of these folks that are dropped from these supports that are contained within this bill would be either trying to access more of those foundational learning supports around language acquisition, for example newly settled refugees or others. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that language acquisition piece.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I thank my friend from Lethbridge-West for the question. You know, it's my recollection that specifically when we talk about people who are learning English as an additional language, there's a whole spectrum of programs that are available. Some of them are funded by the federal government, and some of them are funded by the provincial government. Now, my friend from Lethbridge-West talks about newly arrived Canadians, refugees, those kinds of folks. When they arrive, they are eligible for federal spending – right? – that brings them up to a basic level of English language proficiency. Then beyond that, of course, when higher levels of English language proficiency are required, the province steps in and funds those kinds of programs to a certain extent.

Now, you know, the government is apparently seized with this idea of making sure that professionals from outside of Canada can come to Alberta to work. They have these kinds of legislative showpieces that they say will encourage professionals from outside of the country to come and work in Alberta, but many of them don't have the English language skills needed to conduct their jobs at the professional level that's required, and we don't have the funding in place to make sure that those people can actually have the English language proficiency required to do a professional-level job in many cases. That's something that is a long-standing gap in our foundational learning supports, something, certainly, that this government is not intent on addressing, and in fact it looks like it's going to be making that situation worse by rolling back these kinds of income supports.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, for all of these reasons, I'm proud to not support this bill. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Advanced Education, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought it'd be helpful to rise and speak to some of the provisions within the bill as they relate to . . .

Ms Hoffman: Jacking up fees.

Mr. Nicolaides: Not precisely. I know that the member just loves to talk about jacking up fees, but I don't think that that's on the agenda for today. I think we'll defer that one to another day. Well, maybe later on during question period, I'm sure, we'll probably have the ability to talk about jacking up fees, which I know the member opposite just loves to talk about. [interjection] I'm sure she'll interject on a few more occasions about jacking up the fees. Maybe she even has an interjection or two on jacking up fees, and I'd be happy to entertain that.

That being said, I'm trying to get back on track here. It's always good for a laugh, Mr. Speaker. Now, see, she was incredibly successful at making me forget my train of thought, but I will get back to it.

As it relates to some of the supports that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was speaking to with respect to foundational learners and making some statements to the effect that . . . [interjection] What's that? Yeah. Okay. Just shoot me a note, or you can even intervene if you want. I don't know. You can just jump up and make that comment, but I see the note coming my way. Maybe it'll be telling me to close my mouth and sit down. We'll see what he's got. He's shaking his head no, so I'll keep going. [interjection] Ah, okay. That's helpful. I'll be sure to do that. Thank you for that.

Mr. Schmidt: What's in the note?

Mr. Nicolaides: Oh, no. I can't tell you that.

Anyway, getting back. Okay. I haven't even gotten started, but I do see an intervention. I guess it's going to be a lively – I'm always happy to accept interventions.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much. I'm only taking a moment to intervene to talk about, I think, where you were going with interventions on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar with respect to new Canadians speaking English and the capacity. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, through you, the number of incredible people who are coming from other countries to here I think know more about Canada and probably speak English even better than a lot of folks that are in this Chamber. I was hoping to be able to intervene with the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar in order to correct him on that, to make sure that he understands that those who are coming into this country, whether that's through refugee status or through education or through choosing Canada as a choice, are adding to not only the diversity in this province but including making us better.

Thank you very much for the intervention.

10:50

Mr. Nicolaides: That's very insightful and helpful. I appreciate the intervention, and there may be another intervention. I haven't even gotten going, but sure, yeah, I'm happy to hear this one as well.

Mr. Panda: Yeah. When you talk about the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I have a peculiar relationship. The guy . . .

Mr. Dang: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

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

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very clearly, the intent of the interjections is to comment or ask questions on the content of the speech currently being made. My colleague here the Minister of Advanced Education has not made significant comments on my

colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar's speech. I think that my hon. members should try to keep their comments and interjections to the content of the speech of the Advanced Education minister. If at a future point he does reference those things, then we can revisit that, but I think that at this point these members should limit their discussion.

The Speaker: Well, I am prepared to rule on this point of order. I think it's fairly difficult to ascertain what the hon. Minister of Infrastructure was about to say, and while I appreciate the reminder about interventions being upon the speech currently under way – and I have provided much guidance on this – the hon. member has spoken for less than five seconds. It's very difficult to ascertain what he was about to say. Now, I share some concern and understand the sentiment, but perhaps we can let the minister get a sentence out before we call a point of order.

Debate Continued

Mr. Panda: Well, having heard the concerns, I'll lower my own expectations on what I'm going to say about the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. To be fair, when he talks about immigrants, I know in this House, on this floor, he called out one day, with his usual temper tantrum, that he couldn't recognize my constituency.

The Speaker: I do appreciate the hon. member making an effort to try to make it about the previous speech, but thus far now we've certainly heard a number of sentences about the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar's behaviour in the Chamber, which sometimes he and I have a close relationship around. This intervention ought to be about the minister's speech.

Mr. Panda: Yeah. That's exactly what the Minister of Advanced Education would like to know, how I actually defended the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar at a major media event in India, of all places. To people asking me about his comments, I said: no, he's not a racist, but he's a short-tempered guy who was kicked out of this Chamber by your predecessor for his . . .

The Speaker: Okay.
The hon. minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: I feel like I stirred up a hornet's nest. It wasn't my intention, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to provide some clarity to some comments that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had made. He had made some comments that I was listening to that were suggesting that we're going to be cutting off benefits to foundational learners and other learners. I just want to be very clear. That's absolutely not the case, so I just want to go on record to make sure that that's clearly established.

The member was referencing within the bill that it does speak to a deadline of April 1, 2022. Program eligibility and supports through the Income and Employment Supports Act will no longer be provided after that date because the authority is moving to Advanced Education and to student financial assistance regulations contained under the authority of Advanced Education. Those benefits will continue to be provided, of course, and available to foundational learners in our community, which is essential for their educational and economic prosperity and opportunity as well as for the province's economic prosperity.

What's being addressed here within the legislation is a transfer of authority between the Income and Employment Supports Act to Advanced Education. This goes back to a number of years in which cabinet had provided direction to make this change to help streamline how we deliver supports and benefits to learners and to

Albertans who need these benefits. We had more of a disjointed approach. Some benefits were being provided through Labour and Immigration, others even through Community and Social Services and Advanced Education. We're looking at ways to streamline the delivery of those benefits to Albertans and to students.

We also are making these changes. We heard a lot of feedback as well from a lot of the student assistance officers at our postsecondary institutions, who, you know, have one set of rules when they're looking to apply through Advanced Education for benefits, have other rules and forms when they're looking to apply for benefits under Labour and Immigration or Community and Social Services. This will even help a lot of the administrators on our campuses to have more streamlined rules and eligibility requirements to assist our learners. This will help streamline the process. [interjection] I'm happy to take another intervention.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. You know, I won't take this opportunity, as other members have, to beat up on the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar but, instead, ask a substantive question. I appreciate the minister's statement that he's seeking to streamline funding, but I'm wondering if the minister could address the questions that I asked of him regarding the ministry's inability to spend the budgeted amounts for the scholarships and awards, the foundational learning supports as well as not meeting its budget targets for student financial loans. That's the question here, Mr. Speaker. We've already seen the Advanced Education ministry unable to provide the budgeted amounts for learner supports, and that's why we're raising this issue, that future changes to these income supports will lead to Albertans being cut off from existing benefits. I would hope that the minister could provide us some answers for those questions.

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. We've actually, you know, seen an increase in the student financial assistance. I know that the member is talking about foundational learning, but over the past two years we've continued to fund the budget pressures in every budget for anticipated growth and demand in scholarships and student aid. That hasn't changed, and that's continuing to move forward as we continue to provide that.

On the foundational learning side, obviously, we had seen some decrease in demand for foundational learning programs partly, I believe, from what I understand in conversations with my officials from the ministry, due to some of the impacts of COVID, and the closures of a lot of different activities also meant some limited capacity for some Albertans to be able to access foundational learning, so less demand. I think that we saw some decrease in demand in those areas attributed partly to the pandemic, but as I mentioned, there's no intention to look at shutting off learner benefits. On the contrary, we've continued to fund current levels of assistance to students in all aspects of student aid, not just maintaining that to 2019 or 2018 levels but continuing to fund for increases in those areas to ensure that our students have those resources.

In 2021-22 – I just have the numbers here in front of me – the Advanced Education budget allocated over \$92 million to support 11,000 students. A lot of the resources that are available in foundational learning and in other student assistance are incredibly important to so many Albertans to help them access the programming that they need to succeed and get ahead.

Ms Hoffman: Because of jacking up the fees.

Mr. Nicolaides: Not so much because of jacking up the fees but because of a very challenging economic environment, which I know the members opposite are keenly aware of. During their

tenure as government they contributed to weak economic performance within the province, including driving out investment.

11:00

More and more Albertans need to find the opportunities to reskill, retrain to help themselves get ahead in a changing environment here. Again, I know the member wants to chat a little bit more about jacking up the fees, and we'll have an opportunity to probably do that in question period or elsewhere.

I'm not sure how much time I have left.

The Speaker: Nine minutes.

Mr. Nicolaides: I wasn't intending to use up all of it, so that's fine. I think that I'll end there. I just wanted to provide those points of clarification as to the pieces that are contained within the bill as they relate to learner benefits and the intention behind those benefits.

With that, Mr. Speaker, as I wrap up, I'd also move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 78 Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021

[Adjourned debate November 4: Mr. Feehan]

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join the debate? The Member for Edmonton-Riverview has risen.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to join the debate on Bill 78. Certainly, as the critic for Seniors and Housing I'm happy to speak to this. This is Bill 78, the Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021. We know that we're in an affordable housing crisis in this province. Currently we have 24,000 people on wait-lists across the province for housing, so of course we need action in this area. What is so distressing to me is that this bill is what the government thinks action is. Really, it is a move to privatize the affordable housing system in our province and support their corporate friends to take advantage of a very vulnerable sector of our population.

I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the extraordinary powers that this bill gives to the minister. The thing about this bill – let's see – it's got six pages, so it's not a very big bill. It doesn't have a lot of detail. It's extremely vague. On page 4, section 31.1, it talks about the designation of affordable housing. It says:

Subject to subsections (2) and (3), the Minister may designate a housing accommodation as an affordable housing accommodation if the Minister is of the opinion that in the circumstances the housing accommodation is suitable for designation as an affordable housing accommodation.

It goes on to say:

The Minister may designate a housing accommodation that is a unit in a building as . . . affordable housing.

Anyway, it goes on. Basically, without telling us what the definition is, the minister can now decide what is or is not affordable housing.

This seems bizarre to me. Usually that kind of information would be in legislation. I had the opportunity to be in the technical briefing, and I was listening and asking questions of the public servants who had worked on this bill. They clarified that, well, we don't know what that is, and we won't know for some time. I was able to determine from what they shared with me that it would probably be April 1, 2022, that that would be clarified in policy and perhaps in regulations, but it wasn't necessarily clear.

The thing we know about legislation, at least, is that that enshrines something. It shows us that it is before us here in this Chamber, so there is good transparency and understanding of what that means. But when it's policy, it can easily be changed behind closed doors. If the minister is the one making the decision, it doesn't even have to come to Executive Council. So even the cabinet of the UCP government doesn't necessarily have to put their eyes on any of this. I think that's – I don't know what the word is.

Ms Phillips: Risky?

Ms Sigurdson: That's risky. There we go. Thank you very much.

It's risky to do that because we do need to have some clarity on exactly what that means, because there are all sorts of levels of affordable housing. You know, there's just-below-market affordable housing; there's rent geared to income. [interjection] Go ahead.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the member. I appreciate, particularly with your experience having been the former minister of housing, getting this detailed analysis. I think that sometimes we see the current government focusing primarily on just one type of housing when, actually, it's not even housing. They're talking about shelters when they're talking about people who are houseless and homeless in our province. But, really, those different levels of housing are so incredibly important to different levels of families and individuals who need that additional support. So I'm wondering if the minister – if the member. I almost called her the minister, which seems aptly appropriate as well. Will the Member for Edmonton-Riverview talk about what the importance of those different levels of housing is, who they serve in Alberta, and why it's critical that all of those levels of housing have the appropriate amount of support?

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much to the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. Yeah, I'm happy to clarify that. Certainly, we know that one type of affordable housing is approximately 10 per cent below market. I guess this is probably an area that I'd like to focus on a little bit because this is usually, if at all, sort of – if private developers are involved in affordable housing, it would be at this level, right? Obviously, with this bill, another fundamental thing it does, besides giving the minister extraordinary powers, is to privatize the affordable housing system in Alberta and, really, sell off government assets at a time when they should be actually expanding them.

You know, the private sector isn't going to get into the affordable housing market without being able to make a profit. That's just fundamentally how it is. They need to be able to give their shareholders money. That's why nonprofit or government-owned certainly make much more sense in the delivery of affordable housing. The profit motive takes money out of that system and puts it in the hands of people who already have a lot generally, and we really need to focus on people who are vulnerable.

As I said at the outset of my remarks, 24,000 people in Alberta – and that might not even be accurate. The number might be much higher because it is sort of gleaned from housing management bodies and how many people come in. I think people give up because they're on these wait-lists forever. They often can't access affordable housing. Of course, we know that even though someone can be eligible for affordable housing, they may never access it because it's not legislated. [interjection] Go ahead, Member.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. On that note, when you're talking about the wait-list – in fact, just this morning myself and a couple of my colleagues were sitting in the Public Accounts Committee for the Ministry of Seniors and Housing, and we were talking about that wait-list and the fact that

last year there were 20,000 Albertans who were on that wait-list for housing and that that number has actually gone up to 24,000. What was remarkable about what we heard from the ministry today was that there was very little information about who those 20,000 people are and what their needs are.

In particular, it was shocking to find out that they absolutely kept no tracking information on how many of those Albertans have disabilities and may require special-needs housing or accessible housing. I would appreciate the Member for Edmonton-Riverview's comments on this. How do we get a handle on those thousands of Albertans who never even get that housing if we don't even have an idea of their needs and who they are and how many give up and what ends up happening to them?

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much, Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. It's an important question. Obviously, you know, Albertans have lost jobs, have gotten into some challenges financially due to our economy slowing down dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so many more people are in need, and, as the member said, the wait-list is extraordinary. I stand here to say that it's likely a much longer list, even, than the numbers that we have before us.

The point that the member made about: who are these people? Who are these people who need affordable housing? There's a wide range, but really the ministry knows very little about who needs it. How can you create a program or support for a certain section of the population if you don't understand who you're serving? That is such a key point, and that is something that should be incumbent on the ministry to look deeper into.

11:10

Just for the members in here, for their own benefit, the Edmonton Social Planning Council actually did a report about that, did extensive research on who's on the wait-lists. John Kolkman was a colleague of mine when I worked at the Alberta College of Social Workers; we worked together on the child poverty report for years with Public Interest Alberta. He has since retired, but that was kind of his final report, along with others, at the Edmonton Social Planning Council, and they did a deep dive into who is not receiving affordable housing. They really talked a lot about it not being legislated, and that is something that does concern me because, of course, we hear this all the time.

Like income support programs, we may have a critique of them: they're not enough; we're way below the poverty line. However, they're legislated. So if someone is eligible for that program – guess what? – they get support. It's right there in the legislation. It's statutory. It's important that people receive that funding. But you can qualify in every area of affordable housing, and we'll say: sorry; we just don't have enough. There's sort of no mitigation for that. It's very disturbing that people are in dire straits, but this legislation, of course, is silent on that. I would just suggest to the government that that is a key part of it and that affordable housing should be legislated.

If I talk again about the levels of affordable housing, I'll just go back to that sort of 10 per cent below market, and what this bill really enables, of course, is the privatization of affordable housing. Basically, it means our government is going to give grants to corps who are going to build affordable housing and, you know, they're going to have it at the minimum – 10 per cent below – because they have to make a profit. That's just the reality of the world. And then: how long will that be affordable housing? We don't need it just for 10 years; we need it in perpetuity. We need it for good. It's not like we want them to disappear.

When I was minister, previous Conservative governments had followed that model, that model of the private sector doing 10 per

cent below market housing, and some of those contracts were still in place, and some were expiring. It was very disturbing to me and devastating to see that. All of a sudden I knew that a whole swath of housing would be unavailable again, and it was because of a bad policy. We need not create more bad policy, and this legislation brings in that. [interjection] Go ahead, Member.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. I find that those two comments really kind of go closely together, that issue that you raised of how it's not legislated, so even though you could qualify for affordable housing, there's no actual guarantee that you will ever get it, leave alone in a timely fashion when you need it, with those high needs. And then the comment that you just made about the challenge and, I think, the deeply held concern around privatizing affordable housing, that it can just disappear: I think that what we are seeing and what we know to be the case is that we're not getting ahead of the affordable housing problem. It's just growing, and it's being exacerbated by things like economic conditions and COVID and all of those things.

I don't know how a system can properly plan, all of a sudden, for some below-market housing that suddenly disappears, right? I think it really hampers the ability of government to properly plan and to ensure that Albertans can all have affordable housing, have access to affordable housing, in that model of privatizing.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much for the question, Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. Yeah, that is the deep concern, that the housing won't be there for the long term. It is just there for a period of time. And it's disturbing because, of course, the government does fund it. They have to incentivize corporations to actually build that housing or create that housing, so they give grants to them. I must say, you know, that the bill says it very clearly and certainly the government's media release regarding it. They talk very much about: we're moving from an owner of affordable housing to sort of a developer creating it by funding it. Yet the funding is, like, minuscule. They're saying \$238 million over three years to do this. That's a drop in the bucket. I mean, when we were in government, we put \$1.2 billion, and that wasn't enough, to be frank. We had such a deep hole to fill from years of Conservative governments that really starved the system.

I remember talking to a CEO of one of the management bodies, and he said to me, "You are the very first government" – and I think he had been CEO for a period of time, a while, maybe 10 years or so or maybe longer – "who's ever actually increased our operating," you know, their operating costs. There's no question. The cost of living had gone up, and these units, we know, are aged. I think the average age of housing management body units is, like, 35 years old.

The extraordinary work that the housing management bodies do to maintain those facilities, to retrofit and green them – that's another thing that we did as a government, our ambitious climate leadership plan. We gave millions and millions of dollars to housing management bodies for fundamental things that made a big difference in terms of energy efficiency like putting on doors that fit, fixing windows, roofs, and energy-efficient furnaces, and that's all gone. That's all gone. As soon as the UCP government came in, those programs were gone and they had to stop that.

I mean, the Minister of Seniors and Housing continually likes to talk about inefficiencies, "It's not working," all that stuff. Well, it's not working because it's starving. It can work. It's just that the government has to show up. The government has to care enough about this to invest in this area and support these housing management bodies to do the important work that they do. You know, regardless of the decisions of the UCP government, I know there's extraordinary work going on and, of course, during a

pandemic, so I just really want to thank the housing management bodies for their extraordinary work in very difficult circumstances under a government that doesn't support them.

Just to talk further about this issue of privatization, like, we see it a lot in seniors' housing. There are these big corporations, AgeCare, places like that, who take care of seniors, and guess what? They receive grants from the government, tons of money, millions and millions of dollars over the years to incentivize them to have higher level care, whatever it is. They have contracts with AHS. It's very lucrative for them, so lucrative, in fact, that that whole sector – they call it the financialization of seniors' housing – is seen as a place to build wealth. Investors now want to own seniors' housing because they make so much money for their shareholders. Again, that's just the financialization of this sector. I'm afraid that's going to happen in all affordable housing because it's going to be about making a profit.

Just to give you a clear example, AgeCare, who I've already talked about, had four facilities that in about February or so were sold to a company called Axium out of Montreal. This is, like, you know, a wealth development company, and it's worth billions and billions of dollars. So these AgeCare facilities were sold to this company who doesn't care about seniors' care. The focus is not on that. They care about wealth development – that's their goal – and then sort of squeezing the staff to do more and more at very minimal pay. We saw the devastating results of that during the pandemic, where almost 1,400 seniors in continuing care died from COVID-19 because of a myriad of issues in the seniors' housing system. That is extremely devastating.

There is a huge issue with the privatization of affordable housing that could create, again, financialization of the sector if that's not already happened. Certainly, the housing strategy that the minister released in December 2020 – you know, they had some key people who are certainly interested in the financialization of affordable housing. One of the panel members was the chairman of Boardwalk. That's a real estate investment trust, a REIT, it's known as. Certainly, they're a multimillion-dollar, perhaps billion-dollar, I suppose, organization that's interested in making significant money and, I think, missing the focus and missing the goal perhaps of what affordable housing should be about. I really think we've opened sort of the portal or the door to some significant disasters, too, because if things sometimes don't work out in the private sector, what happens? Government has to come in and support that, or obviously many people will not have the support they need in affordable housing.

11:20

It is a deep concern about this whole financialization, privatization, the P3 model of affordable housing. We know that there are lots of concerns about P3s. Certainly, our public school system experienced a lot of difficulties with the way contracts were set up or the private industry was not being responsible for the maintenance of the facility afterwards even though that was supposed to be part of the contract. Anyway, I think that we've – you know, certainly, there's been a significant amount of information in the media regarding the many, many issues about P3s. Certainly, this privatization of affordable housing is not going to solve the problem; it's going to make it much worse.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for St. Albert has the call.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 78, Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021. Interestingly enough, just before we arrived at the Chamber to debate the bills

before us, we were actually in Public Accounts reviewing the annual report for Alberta Seniors and Housing for 2020-21. Now, we didn't get a lot of answers, as usual, but we got some, and some of them were somewhat alarming in the fact that they just didn't have answers because it wasn't something they thought about or monitored or provided oversight to. So when I look at this piece of legislation, I'm thinking back to some of the things that happened this morning.

[Mrs. Allard in the chair]

Let me sum up a little bit of the housing situation in Alberta. There's insufficient housing – we know this; this is factual – insufficient affordable, accessible housing all over the province. In the big centres, mid-size cities, rural, remote: insufficient accessible, affordable housing. Wait-lists: there are massive wait-lists. In fact, we hear from some people that they don't even put people on wait-lists anymore because their wait-lists are too long. In one year during a pandemic people waiting for affordable, accessible housing grew by 4,000 people.

Now, we know that the number of people that are sleeping rough, sleeping outside, sleeping in camps is escalating. I think it's doubled right here in the capital city of Alberta. We know it's happening all over. I was just in Wetaskiwin last week, and I stopped by the camp there to meet some of the folks that were staying there. It's just unbelievable to me, Madam Speaker, that these camps are now where people – that's what they call home. We have a massive problem at every end of housing.

We have got incredibly poor oversight on our housing stock. Some of our questions this morning were around: "Okay. Well, let's talk about your wait-lists. You've got 24,000 people on a wait-list for housing. Let's talk about how many of those people, let's say, for example, are disabled. How many have mobility issues or use wheelchairs, something like that, need some form of accessibility?" Answer: "We don't know. We don't track that." They don't even know how big the problem is. We know it's growing, we know it's bad, but we don't know how big the problem is.

Now, let's roll back to a couple of years ago, when this government, every single person, voted in favour of deindexing benefits, which is a cut. Two years later the earning potential of people with disabilities, low-income seniors, people that are just poor – some of them are destitute. They're trying to raise their families; some are singles; they're on income support: they can't do it. And every year that goes by, they have less buying power, less and less and less. Their need for housing, affordable housing, goes up and up and up. People without homes go up and up and up. What is the government's solution to that? Let's privatize – because that's worked out so well before – which is just unbelievable to me, Madam Speaker. It is unbelievable to me that there is so little imagination on the other side that this is their solution, that this time this is their solution.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you to my friend from St. Albert for her thoughtful questions. I had the chance to participate in that committee meeting this morning as well. I'm wondering if my friend from St. Albert can talk about the concerns that she raised about cuts to AISH, cuts to Alberta seniors' benefits, cuts to other benefits that would push people into homelessness and what we heard from the deputy minister at the Public Accounts Committee with respect to those questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. He's quite right. During the meeting this morning we were asking the officials. We asked in particular the deputy minister these very questions about: okay; your focus of your ministry is to anticipate

the housing needs, provide oversight to existing housing, prepare for the housing needs, invest, direct the investment. So, you know, our questions were: what was it like? With the other ministries that you partner on – obviously, it's right here in the annual report; they talk about how frequently they partner with these other ministries – what discussions did you have in terms of policy when you were deindexing benefits that we know, that we all know, are going to exacerbate the problem? What discussions did you have? What risks did you identify? What plans did you put in place? Answer: "Yeah, we don't really know. Probably not much at all."

[The Speaker in the chair]

We've asked for those documents or minutes to be tabled, so we'll have to wait and see what we get, but it was incredibly sad that a deputy minister for an entire ministry that is responsible for housing could not answer that question. This is significant. When you are increasing the poverty felt by – what? – 70,000 people on AISH, when you've got about 60,000 people on income support and I don't know how many tens of thousands of low-income seniors relying on benefits, that's thousands and thousands of people. You are increasing the depth of poverty that they live in, yet you're only going to focus on affordable, accessible housing, because everything else is, you know, someone else's problem.

Then this government, in their brilliance – and I'm saying this sarcastically – is going to introduce a plan to: let's just sell it off, because that's worked so well in the past. So we've lived through a pandemic. We have learned a great deal, particularly around seniors who live in congregate care settings, who live in long-term care. We have learned how vulnerable they are. After decades of neglect – decades of neglect – in terms of funding for staff, for the facilities themselves, whether it's HVAC, whatever it is, we learned just how incredibly vulnerable that group was, and a lot of them died. I think they make up about 80 per cent of the fatalities during the pandemic, which is tragic.

We all know that the private operators probably bore more responsibility than the nonprofits. Why is that? Well, there are a lot of reasons for that. I certainly don't have time to outline them all, but one of the things is – it's very simple – that if you think about what drives, what is the motivation, it is profit. It is all about profit margins, is it not?

I'm going to relate it back to disability supports. There are companies that are private. There are companies that are nonprofit. I can tell you that some of the for-profit companies are quite good, but they are driven by profit margins. They are driven by: "Let's pay staff less so we can make more profit. Let's staff less. Let's make the ratios higher." That is the mindset, so when you are faced with a housing crisis like we are – we are faced with a crisis of people that don't even have a safe place to sleep at night – and this government's solution is, "Let's just sell it off . . ." [interjection] Oh. Go ahead.

Mr. Schmidt: I want to thank my friend from St. Albert for raising this issue of the particular vulnerability around seniors. Certainly, one of the concerns that I've heard from the many seniors who live in Edmonton-Gold Bar is that they don't know what the future of their residence will be. They live in buildings that are currently owned by the provincial government, situated on land that's owned by the city of Edmonton. They are afraid about what is going to happen to their home with the changes that the government is contemplating. I'm wondering if my friend from St. Albert has heard these concerns and what she's said in response to those concerns.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. I'm sure, like other members in this Chamber, I've certainly heard from seniors in St. Albert that are very concerned. They're concerned that they can't even right now

manage the cost of housing, and they are concerned about what is going to happen in the future.

11:30

You know, one of the ones in St. Albert that I spend a fair amount of time at is Chateau Mission Court. The housing management body is Homeland Housing, and they do a great job, but the individual seniors that live there are really sort of unsettled – unsettled by this government, let's be honest – about what the future likely holds. What they've seen so far has been disastrous.

Now, I want to go back to this piece of legislation. You know, I'm hoping that at some point there are some amendments introduced that this government has the humility to even listen to, to think about the fact that we're actually recommending these, suggesting these to make this bill less awful. I hope that at some point the government just listens and makes it a little bit better.

One of the things that bothers me is that this bill doesn't require that the money the government makes from selling affordable housing remains in affordable housing. Now, that's worrisome because we've seen this little trick before. It happened with some of the different lottery funds, that now just, like, disappear into the dark hole that is, you know, general revenue. So that is worrisome. If, in fact, this happens and housing gets sold off, how can Albertans be assured, know for sure – because this is a government that is very secretive and, really, kind of opposed to transparency – that the funds are being invested in housing, in affordable, accessible housing?

Now, even in the government's own annual report, on page 31 – and it's one of the items under outcome 2, which is about creating affordable and accessible housing. This is the government's own report.

Recommendations two and three from the Affordable Housing Review Panel's final report are to create a plan to manage and transfer provincially owned land and buildings. Work is underway to develop a real estate asset strategic plan. This plan will identify opportunities for the sale, transfer, or redevelopment of ASHC-owned assets . . .

Now, here's the important part.

. . . while recommending all proceeds from the sale or transfer of assets are reinvested in the affordable housing system.

That, to me, is oversight. That's called transparency and oversight.

This is the Ministry of Seniors and Housing. It seems to me that this would be the authority that you'd want to listen to. If they are recommending this work, that this Crown corporation do this work, be involved in this, why would you not put it into the legislation in very clear terms so that we could all understand? If these get sold off, where do those funds go? How are they reinvested? How can Albertans be assured that the money will be reinvested?

My colleague talked a little bit about, you know: how also can we be reassured that housing will remain affordable for a long period of time? Sadly, we have seen agreements with providers where after a certain amount of time housing that was perhaps 10 per cent lower than market or whatever the agreement is goes back to just standard market rent.

These are some of the things that are really important, but we don't see any of this information in the bill. Once again it's a really sad example of this government saying: "Don't worry. You know, it's just enabling legislation, really. We're going to sort all this stuff out behind closed doors and make some regulations. Don't worry. It's all good. It'll all be fine. We're making life better." Well, this government has a track record over two years of not making life better, certainly not making life better for Alberta seniors, certainly not making life better for low-income seniors, low-income people, and disabled Albertans.

I would suggest that if this government is in any way, shape, or form interested . . . [interjection] Okay.

Mr. Schmidt: I just want to thank my friend from St. Albert for her points. I know that she's been working on issues around providing supplemental rent benefits and those kinds of things. I'm wondering if my friend from St. Albert could talk about the work that she's done advocating for people who've had those benefits removed and what kind of impact that has had on the people that she's hearing from about that issue.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Yes. You know, this goes back to my comments earlier. It's almost laughable that this government is talking about making life better, providing more affordable housing after the destruction of the last couple of years in terms of attacking the income of low-income people and of seniors. It's astronomical to me. We all know that benefits were deindexed. No real pain at the time that it happened, but every year that goes by, they are losing ground. We all know that the cost of everything has gone up, whether it's rent, whether it's utilities – thank you very much for that – whether it's insurance, and thank you very much for that, too. Food prices have all gone up. Everything has gone up, but benefits have stayed the same, so people's buying power is less.

But to add insult to injury was something that this government did I think it was just over a year ago now. What they decided to do was take income support, right? Core benefits for a single person in Alberta on income support that has barriers for employment is under \$900. I think it's, like, \$860 or something. You can't even rent an apartment for that, really. Let's be honest. Anyway, those are the core benefits. Now, there was this supplemental that made it actually possible to live on income support, and it was a \$300 supplemental top-up for accommodation. You know, the way they like to spin it: well, we didn't really cut anything; we just changed policies, or we're just adhering to policies. However you want to spin it, however you want to say that you did it, whatever, the end result was that thousands – thousands – of people lost a \$300 support benefit, a supplement to a benefit that was already grossly under the poverty line. They lost that, and as a result people don't have homes.

So for this government to talk about, "Well, you know, we care about people that don't have homes, that are homeless, that are houseless; we want to create more affordable housing," what they have done is that they have failed to do the most basic things, and that is to eliminate poverty as best you can. You've increased poverty. You've made it worse for tens of thousands of people, many of which are low-income seniors. It's really hard to take this government seriously when they talk about their commitment to ending – well, they don't actually say that they want to end homelessness, unfortunately, or they don't actually say that they want to eradicate poverty, because that would be too bold. But it's really hard to take this government seriously when they talk about wanting to make life better for Albertans by creating affordable, accessible housing.

I just want to say one more thing, Mr. Speaker. I'm incredibly disappointed by this legislation in that nowhere in here does it talk about the need for accessible housing and what that really means. Accessible means a lot of things. It's a lot of things. One of the things this government is not good at doing is defining what accessibility is for people that have mobility issues. They don't talk about it. They don't measure the problem. They don't know how large the problem is. They don't know what the need is. There is no targeted investment. There isn't even a rating system that is very clear so that someone with a disability could pull up a website and say, "I want to see if the Legislature Building is accessible to me"

and look quickly and see: "Here's the rating. The Chamber is not accessible, but you can come in the west door" or wherever. There's nothing like that. There is no rating plan, so for somebody who is low income, who's looking for affordable housing, it's really difficult for them to determine what portion of the housing stock is accessible.

They can't get it right for the housing that they already manage or are responsible for, but they're going to pass it on to the private sector, and they'll get it right, no problem. You can imagine why people are skeptical, why I am skeptical that this government is going to get it right when it comes to the most basic outcome that they claim they want to hit, and that is making life more affordable and accessible for Albertans. I don't see this piece of legislation doing it. What I see is them taking the work of their consultation – I'm not even going to get into the shortfalls of that consultation. [interjection] Yeah. Consultation UCP style and then creating a what-we-heard document or the recommendations, that really are a rubber stamp for what they really wanted to do all along, privatize this sector as much as possible, during a pandemic no less. After deindexing benefits, after cutting benefits, after increasing poverty, making life more expensive, making life less accessible, they're going to add to that by privatizing. It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

I can tell you that there are a lot of concerns that I'm already starting to hear about, and I have no doubt, as this moves forward through this place, that all of us will start to hear more and more from our constituents about what concerns them about this legislation. Sadly, there is not a lot of meat . . .

11:40

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I heard a little bit of chatter, so I thought that maybe, just maybe, someone from the government side would want to stand up and speak to this piece of legislation, this proposed piece of legislation, I should say. I find it always quite intriguing when they're not interested or willing to speak to their bills, particularly when, you know, my fantastic colleagues who have great expertise in the area, the members for St. Albert and Edmonton-Riverview, have shown some of the grave concerns they have with this bill. I'm always the optimist, but it is quite interesting why it might be that these government members aren't willing to defend this piece of legislation.

Now, you know, I just had a sip of coffee prior to standing up, and I can't help but think about how many people on the streets of Edmonton and across this province right now don't have the luxuries that all of us in this Chamber have: warm coffee, a roof over our heads.

Ms Hoffman: Washrooms.

Member Irwin: Washrooms, food: the list goes on.

I'm going to use this opportunity – obviously, it's second reading, and I know I have some latitude, but I will tie it back to the bill – to just talk about the dire need for housing and supports for houseless folks. What an opportunity this government had. Again, I mean, one day when I have time, I'll go back through *Hansard* and think about the number of things I've said multiple times, the old adage about a broken record. What an opportunity this government had to be bold, as my colleague just said, to be bold and to be leaders when it comes to supporting our unhoused neighbours. Instead, we have this thin piece of legislation. I can't show it to you because I do everything digitally. This piece of legislation I have in front me: I can tell you again that my

colleagues, who I have much respect for, have spent many hours poring over this and over the housing file. Yes – thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora – it’s a very thin piece of legislation indeed. Thank you for that.

Ms Hoffman: You’re welcome.

Member Irwin: Both of my colleagues have outlined just how inconsequential this will be to support folks who need it the most but also just how much it’s going to set us back when it comes to housing. [interjection] But before I get into my next comment, I’ll defer to the Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I’ve spent a considerable amount of time in my hon. colleague’s riding here with her and have seen first-hand some of the challenges that we have in that area. I guess one of the comments that I was wondering if she could elaborate on and one of the issues that I think is interesting is hearing from actual providers in the area who have to deal with clients and users every single day and how this legislation basically fails to address their needs. Perhaps if the member could talk a bit more about her experience with her stakeholders and with the people who reside in her riding, because it is so important that we have systems in place. It is so disappointing that we see such a thin piece of legislation that really fails, I think, in many ways to address the real concerns of our communities, particularly in our cities here.

Member Irwin: Yes. Thank you to my colleague. I won’t say that the challenges are limited to one part of my riding, but certainly I know the member has spent time and that we’ve shared a lot of wonderful connections with folks in Chinatown in particular and in the Boyle Street and McCauley neighbourhoods as well. You know, we do. We have a concentration of services. Absolutely. We do also have the highest number of visibly unhoused folks in that area in my riding. Yeah, absolutely. The member asked about what I’m hearing from providers, what I’m hearing from stakeholders. I’ll get to the provider piece later. But stakeholders: I’ll tell you what I’m hearing from stakeholders because my most important stakeholders are constituents, even my constituents who are unhoused, of which there are many.

Just on Saturday I joined the Chinatown transformation collective. It’s a wonderful new organization of a lot of young Chinese community members here in Edmonton. They’ve been organizing garbage cleanups. Folks who know me know that I do love a garbage cleanup. But more than that, I love connecting with community members. It was actually quite nice because it was at this cleanup on Saturday that I got to welcome our city councillor for that area. Her name is Anne Stevenson. I’ll give her a shout-out. Her and I paired up, and it was a good opportunity. I said, “Oh, this is great, Anne,” because we were planning to meet. You know, I have a number of issues on my list of things that I wanted to talk to her about. Housing, houselessness, the opioid crisis: three of the top ones. All of those three, of course, are interrelated. Her and I set out to embark on our cleanup with about 37 other volunteers, which was incredible to see. A lot of young community members as well.

You know, we started talking and walking, and one of the first people we encountered was a fellow named Robert. He came over. Of course, this was a gorgeous day still on Saturday. Robert came over, and Robert is unhoused. He shared with us right away how challenging it’s been. He’s lost his benefits. I believe he was talking about his shelter benefits. He didn’t have all the specifics, but he said, basically: I’ve been housed, I’ve been unhoused, and now I’m back again to being unhoused. He talked about how he feels like he’s lost any sort of support. I said: “Hey, guess what? You’ve got the right people right here. You’ve got your city councillor and your

MLA, and we’re here to help you.” He just felt like he’s been totally ignored. He doesn’t want to be on the streets. He doesn’t choose to live in a tent, but that’s where he is right now. I shared with him. I said: your story is one that we’ve heard from a lot of folks who for various reasons in their life have ended up where they are, and they’re feeling even more left behind by the government right now.

I can’t help but share with you that he also shared his background. You know, I won’t share all the specifics just because I didn’t ask him to share his whole story although he asked if he could pose for a photo with us and everything, too, so I’m sure he doesn’t mind his story being shared. I will just mention that he did mention that he had been a residential school survivor. He was at one of the residential schools that had been in the news, where we’re talking hundreds of children. He talked about that, too. We got to learn a lot about his life. I can tell you every single day I can meet people like Robert on our streets who have incredible stories to share, who have children, grandchildren. He’s nimosôm. He’s got grandchildren, and you could see him getting emotional as he talked about his grandchildren. I think about Robert. I think about all the folks who aren’t being served right now, all the folks who right now on this incredibly cold, snowy day don’t have a roof over their heads.

You know, people ask me about what brought me into politics. Let me tell you a little bit of a story. It’s not the only thing, but it was a big motivator for me. I lived in rural Alberta. I won’t share my stories of Bawlf and Forestburg. You’ve all heard me regale those tales multiple times.

11:50

Ms Hoffman: Tell us again.

Member Irwin: I won’t this time, but I promise I will. I grew up in rural Alberta. Right after I finished my undergrad at the ripe old age of 21, I went back to a different part of rural Alberta. I lived – I’ll admit to all of you right now – a pretty sheltered life, because when I moved back to Edmonton, my eyes were opened up. When I moved back to Edmonton, I was car free. Every day I ran to and from work. I was living in the Highlands neighbourhood. Rain, shine, days like this: I ran to work. My cardiovascular health was a lot better back then, let me tell you. Especially on snowy days that’s a hard run.

One of the first things that really just shocked me and made me realize my privilege. Every day folks who know the Highlands neighbourhood . . . [interjection] Let me finish my story, please. I would run along 112th Avenue and along the Stadium LRT line. Anybody who knows that area, right now, this very day, head over there, Stadium LRT line. You will see a whole number of tents set up. You will see a whole number of folks who are unhoused. This was about 10 years ago. I couldn’t believe at that time that in a province as wealthy as ours there were so many folks who were unhoused.

Let me tell you. There were a lot fewer tents than there are today, but it was enough to open my eyes. I’m not saying – and my colleagues here who were in government won’t mind me saying – that of course this government, our government, could have done more. Absolutely. But the change that we’ve seen since that time has been astronomical. To my colleague from Edmonton-South’s point, you can talk to housing providers, you can talk to front-line workers, you can talk to folks experiencing houselessness, and they will tell you the same thing. When we hear this government come back at us and say, “Well, why didn’t you do more?” you know what? I don’t care. We need to move forward. I guarantee you that if we don’t invest in housing, affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, if we don’t invest in it immediately, more people will die. Mark my words.

I just had – I'm going to say it again – a constituent, an unhoused person die in the ravine near my house, Kinnaird ravine, a person who was discovered by someone who was out walking, a person who was living in a tent. Last year just near Commonwealth Stadium, where there is going to be a significant event tonight, a soccer game, someone died. Someone froze on the streets of Edmonton. This government, that has an opportunity to invest, to prioritize people before profits, is choosing not to. Instead, they're supporting private industry. That is not going to help the folks right now, blocks from here, who are on our streets and who are struggling. [interjection]

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I want to start by really thanking my colleague for her passion and her comments today. I'm going to comment a little bit on her speech. I think it's been really informative for this House. It's been very important for this House to recognize how real these impacts are. We're talking about real people, right? We're talking about human beings that are living in our cities and in our province. I think it's been illustrated so vibrantly by my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood here how abysmal this government's record has been on this and how abysmal their policy continues to be on this and how this legislation does so little. I really wanted to get up and say that it's important that we listen, that the government listens, that the government actually attempts to understand the struggle that is happening every day. I just wanted to thank my colleague for that.

Member Irwin: Yes. Thank you. You're absolutely right. We're talking about people. Obviously, I'm as guilty as anyone of partisan politics. I just truly don't want to be here in this Legislature in a few weeks, a few months talking about the fact that more people died on the streets. I really don't want us to be there. I know the minister is saying, you know, to stay tuned, and he was hoping to chime in here. [interjection] I don't want more words. I want action. I want investments, and we're getting laughing, people laughing on that side of the Chamber.

Mr. Hanson: What did you do?

Member Irwin: What did I do? Well, let me tell you what I did. I didn't . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Hanson: Four years of doing nothing.

The Speaker: Order. You have every opportunity to share your opinion when you are on your feet. When you're in a sedentary position, you will keep your opinions to yourself. I think this is a perfect example of what happens when we don't speak through the chair. The hon. member knows that full well.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is the only one with the call.

Member Irwin: Mr. Speaker, the member from – where's this member from?

Ms Hoffman: Your hometown.

Member Irwin: My hometown? No. [interjection] The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, for the folks who didn't hear that at home, asked me what I did. Well, you know what? I didn't have an opportunity to serve in government. Sure as heck hope that I'll have that opportunity soon enough. But I'll tell you, you know, just like probably anybody in this House, I feel like I haven't done enough, absolutely, because I see it every day. I see every single day people who are struggling. I try every single day to talk to them, to reach out. On Sunday I saw a woman in a bus shelter laid out. I stopped. I talked to her. I asked her if she needed anything. I gave her new mitts and a new toque because I've learned I need to travel with those because people are absolutely ill-equipped to be out in this weather. Absolutely. I'm not doing enough. I'm going to keep pushing. I'd love to hear that member stand up and tell us what he's done because I'm sure it's a lot. [interjection] Do you have another one? Oh. Okay.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I think that one of my thoughts, when I'm hearing the commentary on what is being done or what has been done, one of the really important thoughts to think about – and I applaud my hon. colleague's passion here, certainly – here is to think about the actions of this government versus the actions of the former NDP government, right? Currently this government threw away \$1.4 billion on a gamble on an American election, and I think that's actually a very similar amount of money to that which the NDP government had spent on affordable housing and had spent on capital investments in affordable housing.

When we're talking about the impacts and we're talking about actually supporting our communities and actually investing in our communities, I think that my colleague here and our whole caucus here has a great record, and we know there's more to do. But what this government refuses to accept is that that work is important and that we need to continue that work. I think it's something that is not just upsetting, but it's disrespectful.

Member Irwin: Absolutely. You know, I'm not here to be critical of just one order of government. Addressing houselessness in our society has been, absolutely, a choice or a lack of a choice made by consecutive governments at multiple orders. Absolutely. It is. It's a failure of decades of inadequate housing policy. But we have an opportunity now to be bold and to support our unhoused neighbours, our friends, our family members, right? In this Chamber we all know people who at any time could be unhoused.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(1) the House stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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