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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, November 17, 2021

Day 127

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Deputy Government House Leader
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New Democrat: 24

Independent: 2

Vacant: 1

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Rick Wilson	Minister of Indigenous Relations
Muhammad Yaseen	Associate Minister of Immigration and Multiculturalism

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, November 17, 2021

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to call the committee back to order.

Bill 74

Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

The Chair: We are on amendment A1. I am seeking some speakers to the amendment. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise and offer some comments on the amendment that's before us this evening. Now, before I make my remarks, I just want to thank all of my colleagues for their thoughtful interjections into the debate up to this point. I want to specifically highlight the work that my friend from Edmonton-North West has done as the critic for Advanced Education. I think that he has done a remarkable job of consulting with stakeholders, listening to people who are concerned about the future of postsecondary education in this province, and advocating for the things that they have been telling us that the postsecondary sector needs.

I must say that a strong advocate like my friend from Edmonton-North West is sorely needed right now because this is a government that has seemed to have singled out Advanced Education as the ministry that will be the hardest hit when it comes to financial cuts. It certainly received much more in the way of budget cuts than any other department in the government since this government was elected in 2019. I know that a lot of students and parents of students, faculty, staff at postsecondary education institutions have been really delighted to have somebody like my friend from Edmonton-North West on their side in fighting for a very strong and resilient postsecondary education sector, that's critical to setting Alberta on a successful path in the future.

You know, never let it be said, though, that I think that the Minister of Advanced Education is a bad guy. I mean, we're all well aware of his passion for jacking up fees, matched only by his passion for cutting budgets for postsecondary education institutions, but at the very least he has engaged thoughtfully in the debates around this bill and with the red tape reduction bill as well, that cuts adult learners off benefits.

I guess this is what people are talking about when they think of a compassionate conservative. He does terrible things, but he does it with a smile on his face and, you know, with a thoughtful look in his eye as opposed to the other brand of conservative, that seems to populate the front benches, who do terrible things to people but are also really mean-spirited about it. That's what we call... [interjections] Yeah. I see the Advanced Education minister pointing to the agriculture minister, the Indigenous Relations minister. He's absolutely right; I am talking about those other people when I'm talking about mean-spirited conservatives. I see the chairperson is asking me to bring my comments back to the amendment, and I will do exactly that, Madam Chair.

While we have seen the minister being willing to and able to engage in thoughtful debate around this issue, what we have not seen him do is be able to take good advice or even, in fact, seek good advice when it comes to the future of the postsecondary

education system. The government has spent a significant amount of money and time already coming up with recommendations for the future of the postsecondary education system in this province. We saw Janice MacKinnon file her report shortly after this government was elected. Now, her report didn't deal just with the Advanced Education ministry, but it did single out the Advanced Education ministry as one that should bear the brunt of most of the financial punishment that this government was seeking to impose upon the people of Alberta. Certainly, the Advanced Education minister took Janice MacKinnon's recommendations to heart when she said that it was a smart thing to do, to cut the budgets of institutions in this province so significantly and turn around and jack up fees for students. He seemed to listen very closely to Janice MacKinnon in that regard.

But I guess the minister can't go for very long without getting advice, because shortly after the MacKinnon report was filed with the government, he turned around and hired McKinsey for the low, low price of 3 and a half million dollars to spend – I'm not entirely sure how long it took the McKinsey report to be generated, months and months, and we heard about how they did over 100 one-on-one interviews. So what's that? Thirty-five thousand dollars per one-on-one interview, I think that works out to. Anyway, it's quite clear for any objective observer that the minister was taken to the cleaners when he hired McKinsey to generate this report for 3 and a half million dollars.

If recollection serves me correctly, Madam Chair, he was so proud of the work that he paid for, he never even released the report. At the very least, we saw the report that the government published, this vision Alberta 2030, which was based in large part on the McKinsey report if I am not mistaken. We heard the minister go on and on about, you know, the pillars that would serve as the foundation for the Alberta vision 2030, and what we saw was a 3 and a half million dollar rehash of all of the problems that everybody in the postsecondary sector knew existed and have existed since the postsecondary system was essentially created in this province. These are age-old problems that everybody who has spent any time in the sector knew had existed, but apparently the minister only values that advice that is incredibly expensive for him, so he didn't want to believe, or maybe he didn't even ask until he was given the 3 and a half million dollar invoice, that these were the issues that he should spend his time dealing with.

Madam Chair, it's my contention that the minister has probably received enough expensive advice about the future of postsecondary education. We don't need a piece of legislation to set up yet another advisory body that would create some amount of additional cost to the taxpayers of Alberta. I don't know if the minister has ever been forthright with the amount of money that the people of Alberta would be on the hook for if this council were implemented. I would suggest that, you know, if the government is keen to protect the pocketbook of the province of Alberta, this advisory council is not necessary. That's why I'm supporting this amendment today.

You know, it's interesting to me that the minister has, when it comes to setting up this council, excluded a number of classes of people. He says that the council cannot consist of any faculty or students or presidents of postsecondary institutions, or at least they couldn't have served in those roles recently. It begs the question, then: who the heck does he think he's going to ask for advice on the future of postsecondary education? Who would we justifiably pay for their time and efforts to provide advice if they didn't come from this class of people?

7:40

I mean, surely, the minister doesn't want to hear from – you know, it's our job as elected officials to hear from everybody, their

opinions on all of these matters, but there must be some reason that he wants to select people to fill these council roles, these advisory roles. So if they're not in these categories of people, what kind of expertise will they bring to coming up with recommendations on the future of postsecondary education, expertise that is so valuable that he's putting taxpayers on the hook by implementing this council in this piece of legislation that is before us? I haven't heard the minister come up with a suitably convincing answer to that question.

Why can't he do that with the existing resources that he has as the Minister of Advanced Education? You know, I had the privilege of serving in that position for three years under the Premiership of the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, so I'm well aware of the resources that are available to him in the Ministry of Advanced Education, or at least the resources that were available to him as far as April 16, 2019. I don't know how many people he's fired from his department since then, nor do I know how many people in his department have been set off on these meaningless red tape reduction initiatives. He's taken good people who are doing productive work for the people of Alberta and set them to working on counting the number of boxes and blank spaces on forms and adding those up and then coming up with a way to reduce them and then calling that a red tape reduction initiative. I have no idea how many people he's set down that pointless and, I'm sure, soul-crushing path for whoever it is that's engaged in that.

Regardless, Madam Chair, I know that there are still a lot of good people in the Ministry of Advanced Education who are absolutely capable of setting up any kind of consultation that the minister sees fit with the existing resources that they have. This is entirely redundant, this advisory council that's being contemplated here in this legislation. I'd like to hear the minister tell us why he can't do this work with the existing tools and resources. You know, if he's going to engage in this debate this evening, like I hope he does, I would ask him to elevate his game a little bit, try to convince us, because the arguments that he's already made have not been convincing to this point.

I remember when we were discussing this bill at second reading. I think it was in response to something that my friend from Edmonton-Decore was saying in debate at that point. He had raised some concerns around this ministry's advisory council, and one of the things that I offered by way of an intervention was this idea that perhaps this council is letting the minister off the hook. Right? It is his responsibility as the Minister of Advanced Education to be consulting with all of these stakeholders and people who are keenly interested in what the future of postsecondary education in Alberta will be. He shouldn't be turning this over to an advisory council. It's his job to consult with postsecondary presidents and faculty associations and students and staff and parents of students and people who have already gone through the system and are paying back their student loans. Those are the people that he should be talking to directly to see what could be improved in the postsecondary education system. He shouldn't be turning this over to an advisory council.

I can only speculate as to why he might be wanting to abdicate his own responsibilities and turn this over to some other organization. I understand that things are not well in the UCP camp these days and that ministers are, you know, spending their time on other pursuits, shall we say. Rather than governing, they're consumed with all this palace intrigue that seems to be occupying certainly the Premier's office.

[Mr. Amery in the chair]

We don't know the extent to which it's occupying ministers' offices although it's interesting that the Minister of Indigenous Relations seems to be wrapped up in it. Certainly, his EDA had some critical things to say about the job that the Premier was doing and . . .

An Hon. Member: You've got it wrong.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, apparently, the thing that was published and written for all to see was fake news according to the Minister of Indigenous Relations. It's in there in black and white, and in fact they had a press conference to talk about it, so I'm not sure why the Minister of Indigenous Relations wants to discredit himself by claiming otherwise.

The point is, Mr. Chair, that I suspect that a good deal of the UCP MLAs and cabinet ministers are not really willing or able to spend their time on actually minding their portfolios because they're so consumed with all of this palace intrigue and the infighting that seems to be happening.

The minister is turning this over to an advisory body. Now, to give the minister a little bit of credit, at least he seems to be leaving someone in charge. Certainly, the people of Alberta would have been grateful if anybody had been in charge from – what was it? – the 9th of August to the 30th of August, when the Premier was nowhere to be found and COVID was taking off like wildfire. If the Premier had set up some kind of advisory council to actually take action in his absence, then perhaps we wouldn't be in the mess that we find ourselves in right now. At least, you know, the minister has the presence of mind to say: well, I'm not capable or willing to do the job; I'm going to turn it over to somebody else and let them mind the shop for a while while I'm consumed with all of these other things.

I don't think that that's what the people of Alberta want the minister to do. They want him to be engaged in his portfolio. They want him to talk to stakeholders and people who are keenly interested in the future of postsecondary education. They won't accept that the minister will just turn all of these responsibilities over to some advisory council. I think we're doing the minister a favour here by proposing this amendment which would eliminate this section of Bill 74 that creates this advisory council and actually turn the responsibility of running the Advanced Education ministry back over to the Advanced Education minister.

I certainly hope that all of the members here in the Chamber tonight vote in favour of this amendment and, in fact, take the lesson to heart that the people of Alberta want their elected officials to lead and run their own departments. If the government does see fit to accept this amendment, then I certainly hope that they learn this lesson and apply it to other ministries so that we have ministers who are actually engaged in their files and concerned about governing and actually working very hard to make sure that the people of Alberta are well looked after in this time of need. We live in hope.

Certainly, that's what I've heard from the people of Alberta, that they want their government ministers actually governing. Here's an opportunity for the government to actually demonstrate that it's interested in governing. Vote for this amendment, strike down the idea of this advisory council, let the Minister of Advanced Education actually do the job that the people of Alberta elected him to do, and get back to governing in the public interest, get Alberta back on track. You know, if the government decides not to vote for this amendment, that will send a clear message to the people of Alberta.

Thank you.

7:50

The Acting Chair: Hon. members, we are on amendment A1. I see the Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Regrettably, I didn't hear too much there that would encourage me to vote in favour of the amendment. I'm going to encourage members to vote against the amendment. I really can't understand why creating an advisory council that can continue to think in a proactive manner about the changing nature of skills in our economy, the changing workforce demands that'll exist in our society through a long-term lens is a bad thing. That's exactly what the member opposite is suggesting, unfortunately.

I think we need to keep our eye focused on the future. We need to keep our eye focused on how skills will change and understand how skills will evolve and adapt through our time of technological change and what the skills of the future will look like. We need to understand what the jobs of tomorrow will look like. We need to ensure that our postsecondary system is adapting and responding to these. These are much more long-term strategic items that we need to be very concerned about. Unfortunately, as we all know, government operates within the context of a four-year election cycle, which doesn't always lend itself – it isn't always the best model when we think about long-term strategic planning.

I really can't understand why we wouldn't create such a body to help provide advice to the minister and the government of the day as to how to keep moving our postsecondary system forward. It's not an alien concept. In fact, it used to exist here in Alberta in a form, that I have discussed previously, that I had mentioned was not very effective and also exists in many other jurisdictions around the world. Ontario, as an example – I'm sure I can find more examples, but it just comes to mind off the top of my head – has a higher education and skills council that provides a lot of in-depth research and analysis and independent policy advice to the government of the day. Many other jurisdictions around the world have similar entities.

You know, if we reflect back on the establishment of our modern postsecondary system in Alberta under the banner of Campus Alberta and this concept of creating a campus, that our entire postsecondary system in Alberta would operate as effectively as a single, unified campus, what was also developed in that concept was what was called the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee. As it's clear in its name, this body was supposed to provide strategic direction to the government, to the minister, to the postsecondary system. However, it didn't operate, I believe, as intended. There are many reasons for that. There are many ideas as to why it wasn't effective.

Mr. Schmidt: Tell us.

Mr. Nicolaides: I will in just a moment.

Through our engagement, through the Alberta 2030 – I know the member opposite mentioned McKinsey. McKinsey was brought on for many different purposes. They obviously have insight and expertise into higher education globally and have worked in strengthening and supporting higher education systems around the world. They were able to take that global lens and bring it right here in front of us, to Alberta, and help us learn best practices from other jurisdictions as to what's happening. They were also incredibly helpful and effective in facilitating what I believe to be the most extensive consultation effort in Advanced Education, at least in over a decade, and through that effort we identified a lot when it comes to postsecondary system governance and the need to look at the development of such a body.

Again, through that effort – not to get off track – and in conversations with postsecondary presidents, student leaders, other groups, and others who have former experience, former ministers and others in our higher education system, one of the things that was mentioned was that when it relates to the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee, it didn't have the ability to really operate and think in a strategic manner. One of the reasons that I heard consistently through our consultation was because every single postsecondary president was a member of that committee.

I think there's value in having all of those individuals there, but some of the feedback that I heard was that what happened is that it became an advocacy body and that every postsecondary institution using their seat at the table used it to advocate for their own priorities and interests, which is not a bad thing. That's what our postsecondary presidents are supposed to do, advocate for the interests of their institution, but it may be why the body was ineffective in helping to provide strategic direction. It's not just my opinion or that of the MacKinnon panel. In fact, the Auditor General has had a number of recommendations relating specifically to the lack of a strategic plan in postsecondary education.

Again, I believe it's incredibly important and essential for us to develop this body that we can task, as we have detailed in the legislation, with continuing to think about the strategic needs and interests of our postsecondary system, our economy, and the skills and needs of our society and providing advice and direction. It's certainly not doing the job of the minister, as the member suggests. The minister, of course, continued to engage in that work.

I believe – I genuinely believe – in the principle of independent, third-party, nonpartisan, unbiased, objective views, and that's precisely what this body is established to do. I think we can all agree that that is always something that is beneficial, and regardless of what political stripe you wear, having the ability to hear unbiased and independent and objective views and opinions is an effective approach to consider regardless of whether it's in advanced education or in health or in any environment. Again, I can't see why we wouldn't do this.

Now, I know that earlier in the afternoon some members opposite were concerned about the cost, which I found a little funny, to be quite honest, because it seems like every day when we're in this place all we hear from the members opposite is to spend more, spend more, spend more, more funding, more funding, more funding. But now, when we're seeking to reimburse some members for driving from one place to another, the occasional transportation allowance, or meal allowance, they object that it's a waste of taxpayer money, that it's unnecessary. I can't understand that.

I think the member as well mentioned that we'd be reimbursing these members. It's not true. The legislation actually says that they cannot receive compensation. They will be reimbursed for travel expenses going to and from meetings, which I think is appropriate. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I just want to point out that there's that discrepancy there.

Nonetheless, again, I don't see the real, essential objection to this body. Why not engage in and establish a body that can help us think proactively about the future? Why not establish this body to help us think about the long-term needs and interests of our postsecondary sector? I really don't see what the drawback is or what possible negative implications could be derived from doing such a thing. I really can't. If it turns out to be ineffective, then we can amend the legislation and change it.

As I mentioned in this Assembly before, for over 15 years Alberta has not had a strategic plan for our postsecondary system. I can't understand how we haven't had one for 15 years, but that's beside the point. Let's develop one, and let's move forward. Let's establish a body to continue to keep their eye on the prize and task them with

that responsibility to continue to think about what strategic plans we have in place currently and how those are evolving and how we are adapting and changing for the future.

I wanted to provide those comments. I'm sure I'll have the opportunity to provide more comments throughout the evening. Again, I'm listening intently, but I just haven't been able to hear convincing arguments as to why we shouldn't establish this body.

8:00

I know that the member opposite was suggesting that this will simply give the minister the ability to not do their job or they're downloading their job. Absolutely not. I think an important part of any ministry is receiving advice and guidance and policy ideas. I do this all the time, of course, as I think every minister in any government always does in connecting with their stakeholders to hear ideas, to hear views. Of course, I continue to meet with and listen to our students, our faculty representatives, postsecondary presidents. I hear their views, and I understand where they're coming from. But I also believe it's important to have some objective and impartial views coming to the table.

Again, I cannot for the life of me understand why we wouldn't want to create an environment where we can have more objective and impartial views coming to the table. The only outcome of that activity is that we create stronger postsecondary policy, and that will help improve our society and improve our economy and give young people in this province greater opportunity. Again, I really can't understand why we wouldn't want to do that, but I'll cede the rest of my time. I'm sure there will be more opportunities, Mr. Chair, to chat in more detail this evening.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Hon. members, we are still on amendment A1. Is there anyone else who would like to speak?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Acting Chair: We are back on the bill, Bill 74, Advanced Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2021.

Seeing no speakers, I am prepared to call the question.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 74 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Acting Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Chair: Opposed? That is carried.

I see the hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I move that the committee rise and report Bill 74 and report progress on Bill 75.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Amery in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 74. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 75. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Anyone opposed? That is so ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 77

Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021

Ms Ganley moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment November 15: Mr. Getson]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise in second reading on this referral. I believe it's an amendment for a referral to committee on Bill 77, the Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. It's my first opportunity to speak to this bill. I think it's actually quite timely to be talking a little bit about municipal governments and sort of what municipalities are asking for and needing right now. Along with many of my colleagues here tonight and some who are not – I'm not naming any who may not be here or there – I was pleased to join a number of municipal councillors and representatives at the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association convention earlier this evening.

It was actually a great opportunity. It's probably one of my first times being back out in these kinds of meet-and-greet type settings. We haven't done a lot of that, of course, because of COVID. But, of course, everybody had their vaccine passports checked before we went in. I was pleased to see so many participants wearing their masks, so it felt like a pretty great environment and wonderful to see each other face to face again. I had the pleasure of speaking to a number of municipal councillors in the brief time that I was there this evening, including some councillors from Grande Prairie, from Westlock, from Edmonton, from Calgary, and from Red Deer as well. It was kind of a nice perspective from some of our municipal councillors, who are our most local representatives, right on the ground, of course, hearing what's going on in their municipalities.

What was great was actually the variety of different conversations that we were having, the topics that came up. You know, municipal councillors and municipal councils in general have been really struggling in the past couple of years. It's no secret, I don't think, Mr. Speaker, that there has been a pretty strained relationship between the current UCP government and municipal councils, both urban and rural, across this province right now on a number of fronts.

[The Speaker in the chair]

As I mentioned, even while I was there, there were so many conversations about different issues. I remember speaking with one

councillor from Westlock who was deeply concerned about homelessness in his community and that there were no supports right there in the community for homeless Albertans there and mainly the closure of income supports offices. This was actually new information for me, Mr. Speaker. I was not aware that income supports offices, that front-line, face-to-face opportunity for those who are in urgent need of emergency services and supports, at least in his community – and he indicated that there are at least 19 other municipalities in rural Alberta who are facing the same thing – that those income supports offices are actually closed.

Of course, I'm looking at the Member for St. Albert, the critic for Community and Social Services, and she is incredibly aware of this situation. Not surprised she is. I know I was pretty shocked to find that out. And as this municipal councillor indicated to me, it's a pretty shocking thing to ask somebody who is in an emergency situation to have to call a call centre to get emergency supports. He said that many of the individuals he knows who have tried to didn't have phones, and when they did manage – he said that he knows somebody who tried to go and buy a phone for the purpose of doing this, yet still wasn't able to reach anybody. I know that he was very concerned and representing a number of other municipalities about the lack of direct supports on the ground for people in most need in their communities.

That was certainly one topic that came up as well as issues surrounding child care. Of course that's top of mind for a lot of people this week, but for many Albertans it's been top of mind for years. We had a good conversation about the challenges. It was something I'm very aware of. I've heard from a number of Albertans over the last two years who are concerned about the lack of access to child care in their communities. One of the interesting things that I think has come about as a result of the agreement for \$10-per-day child care, which is very welcomed across the province, is that it may encourage a number of unlicensed day home providers to actually seek out and become licensed providers.

8:10

I know a number of day home agencies who – let's be clear. In rural areas day homes are the primary form of child care. It doesn't make sense to have a child care centre where there are not enough people having to travel out to get to a centre, so day homes are the most commonly used forms of child care. But they were saying that because of this new agreement, it might mean that a lot of unlicensed child care providers might actually seek to get licensed, which is great news, I think. If we can have more licensed providers that can prove that they are meeting safety and health and quality standards, that is deeply important for parents and for kids, and I know that's top of mind for a number of municipal councillors. I was pleased to hear about that conversation today at the AUMA convention.

I think what we're seeing before us today in Bill 77 and why we are recommending or are seeking to have this bill referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship is that this issue, which this bill is trying to address, of municipalities, particularly rural municipalities, who have not been able to collect taxes from oil and gas companies that have gone bankrupt, has actually been a long-standing issue. We're all aware, I'm sure, in this Chamber of some of the decisions that came about that resulted in, I think, some stunning news for municipalities. Basically, it was court decisions which indicated that a municipality could not really place a lien on oil and gas companies that have gone bankrupt to collect unpaid municipal taxes.

Of course, that's a real problem. It's been a problem throughout Alberta for some time, this idea of, you know, we see these oil and gas companies come in, they go through tough times, they go

bankrupt, and unfortunately it's often the municipalities and the landowners who are left on the hook. [interjection] Oh. I'll give way to my colleague.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I really do appreciate the concern that municipalities have had regarding some of this and the impact it has on revenues for municipalities. I know I was hearing about some of that today as I also attended a lot of the AUMA this afternoon and into this evening before I came to this wonderful place, Mr. Speaker.

To my hon. colleague. I think one of the big questions I have is: what have you been hearing on this topic? It's clear the government didn't listen to municipal leaders around this. At AUMA have our stakeholders, have people in municipalities across the province also been telling you today that the government has failed to consult, failed to listen, and really failed to engage in a meaningful way with the municipalities and failed to collaborate with municipalities in a way that would allow us to have strong and sustainable communities across the province and would allow us to have a system that would have municipalities that would have sustainable revenues into the long term? I know I've been hearing time and time again about this.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to my colleague the Member for Edmonton-South. Yes. I mean, I think, as I mentioned, the strained relationship between municipalities and this current provincial government is well known. It's why we've seen some changes in the front bench of the UCP in terms of who is acting as Minister of Municipal Affairs. I think we've now seen three different ministers, and I think we're hearing over and over again that the municipalities across this province, both urban and rural, are struggling to find a way through to communicate with this government and actually be heard, whether it be, you know, the big-city charters, which were ripped up, almost one of the first acts of the UCP, but then the ongoing pressures of the cuts that this government has made that have fallen onto the shoulders of municipalities who are already struggling.

We've seen policing costs being pushed down on to municipalities. Of course, you know, it's been one thing after another from this government, and then this is actually why this topic is of great concern, about collecting these unpaid municipal taxes, because municipalities have had to pick up so much over the last two years as a result of what's been off-loaded and cut from this current provincial government. These unpaid municipal taxes – and these are linear taxes placed primarily on pipelines and other developments like that that are going unpaid; I think we've heard from municipalities who've said that they are close to breaking the bank, that they're going to go under because they can't afford to provide their services that their constituents and their communities rely upon when taxes are not being paid.

Now, one of my concerns, Mr. Speaker, is that this particular concern about these unpaid taxes goes back, you know, to the beginning of the UCP's term, yet it's taken them two and a bit years, two and a half years almost, to actually bring this legislation forward. I don't know if that's because there's an ethical struggle that this government is having about, you know, who they are acting on behalf of, who they are serving. Is it municipalities and the people who live there, or is it the oil and gas companies?

For whatever reason, we've seen so much legislation brought forward by this government – during a pandemic, might I add, when there are pressing concerns facing this province, and we're facing dire economic situations as well – and we've had so much fluffy legislation about pet projects from this government, very little of it which actually serves to make life better for Albertans or improve our economic recovery, which we are in desperate need of. Yet this one sat for over two and a half years. I think part of the challenge is

that we know from these municipalities that they're saying that there's roughly \$245 million in uncollected, unpaid taxes from these companies that have either gone under or are close to going under. We don't know how much they'll actually be able to recover as a result of the changes that are proposed here today in Bill 77.

Bill 77 responds to the concerns of the courts, who struck down a provision that allowed municipalities to place a lien because they said that the provision was too ambiguous and wasn't very clear. That left municipalities in a really difficult situation, where they were going to fall behind other creditors who are in line to collect when a company goes under or goes bankrupt. It pushed them further and further behind, and at that point – let's be clear – most municipalities are not going to collect a thing from a company that goes that far behind. This bill does propose a change to kind of clarify that wording, to put it back in place, so that municipalities will come behind the Alberta Energy Regulator in terms of collecting as a creditor. That's important, and I'm not going to argue that this is not something that needed to be done in Bill 77. I am questioning the length of time it took for this government to do it.

I'm also concerned as I'm hearing from my colleague the Member for Calgary-Buffalo, who is the critic for Municipal Affairs. You know, he was a former city councillor himself for many years and has been obviously on the front lines talking to municipalities of all stripes from across the province. They are saying that this bill goes some way to address that concern. It doesn't actually help them collect a big portion of the millions of dollars that have gone unpaid, and we don't yet know how much of that \$245 million that's gone unpaid can be collected as a result of these changes because these changes are prospective. They go forward. They don't apply retroactively. They're only now going to be able to place a lien as of whenever this bill is passed. They're not going to collect a lot of the money that has been lost already.

Of course, one of the key changes that I understand that municipalities have been asking for is actually for the Alberta Energy Regulator to be, I guess, applying more strict standards when it's actually granting licences to oil and gas companies to do these drillings and to initiate these projects and to be a little bit more careful about approving licences for companies that maybe have a bad financial track record or are clearly at risk of going under, because when they do go under, it falls on the municipalities.

Let's be clear. Municipalities are people. It is the individuals who live in those communities. It's their ability to have the roads built and to have the municipal services that they rely on every day. Those decisions have direct implications on the members who live in that community. I think it's really important that we don't lose sight of the fact that here we're talking about some technicalities in terms of liens and creditors and bankruptcies and oil and gas and linear taxes, but what we're really talking about is the ability of municipalities to serve the people in their communities.

I have not yet heard from the Minister of Municipal Affairs or the Minister of Energy whether or not there's a willingness to consider other alternatives that will be key to helping municipalities collect their taxes, like the one that I've just mentioned, which is about ensuring that the AER is more scrupulous about how they are granting licences and to be making sure that they're not putting municipalities at risk of actually dealing with the potential loss of revenue to their communities.

8:20

You know, I don't know why the UCP has delayed so long in doing this. I don't necessarily disagree with what's happening here, but I think that there are some other situations and some other

suggestions that have come from municipalities. I want to highlight again that municipalities are only feeling this pressure because the UCP continues to off-load and download responsibility. [interjection] I'm just going to cede way to my colleague here.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I think it is really one of those things – when we talk about downloading and we talk about the impact that this government has had on municipalities, it is so important to realize that this is really a sector-wide approach this government has taken, right?

I'll comment briefly. I don't know if I'll have a question, but hopefully my colleague will be able to rest a little bit. I think it is so clear that this government has made it a pattern to defer and make any excuse they can to not have to stand up for communities. They've gone out there and they've gone out of their way to ignore so many of our communities. Indeed, today, when I was at AUMA, I heard that from councillors, from mayors. I heard that time and time again. Some of them even said to me: "You know, we have one, maybe even two UCP MLAs that represent our community. We just don't think they're being heard in the government caucus. We just don't think that this Premier is listening to their own backbenchers." I think that when we talk about downloading and we talk about the impact, it's so important to realize this.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to my colleague the Member for Edmonton-South, and I appreciate the commentary from my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar as well. He often provides very colourful and necessary commentary, insightful, might I add, as well. Mr. Speaker looks less convinced, but I've got to tell you that I'm convinced.

You know, I think that's really interesting. I think it's very clear that there are a lot of municipal councillors – when I was speaking at AUMA today, it was very clear that they are looking to be heard more by this provincial government. I'd say that almost every councillor that I heard from . . .

Mr. Getson: Intervention?

Ms Pancholi: No.

. . . was asking me to bring forward something as a member of the opposition because they were feeling unheard by the UCP. That was absolutely a consistent theme from municipal councillors over and over today.

I continue to be sort of baffled by the fact that the UCP government would consider municipal councillors – they treat them like an enemy. Now, we know that that's this government's way. They treat everybody that they battle with as an enemy. [interjection] Go ahead. Sorry.

Mr. Dang: Yeah. Thank you. I think that on that note, treating people like enemies, just in the last few days we've heard from government backbenchers that they seem to be the opposition. I'm a little bit offended by that, Mr. Speaker. I'll admit that I like to think very highly that that is our job. You're sitting in the opposition benches? The government backbench, once they take on that role, then they'll have that opportunity in just a few years, but right now I think that's something that we are hoping to be able to do a good job of.

That's why we've been engaging with stakeholders when this government won't. That's why we've been going out and talking to stakeholders when this government won't. I think it's so important that we continue to hear from municipalities. My colleague has done such a great job iterating their concerns. It is very clear that even if you have a UCP MLA in your constituency, even if you have a UCP minister in your constituency, this Premier isn't

listening, this government isn't listening, and your priorities are not being heard.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the member. I agree with you. Thank you for building upon my comments. Thank you for building upon the comments I was already making and for sharing your perspectives on that. I deeply appreciate that, to my colleague.

You know, I certainly, actually, have to say that I feel that as a member of the Official Opposition we've actually made some remarkable strides over the last two years, even in our role as opposition. In some ways I feel like people across this province, individual Albertans, are starting to see that they can't rely on this government to really represent their views or to get things done and make a difference in the ways that they need them to make a difference in their lives.

More and more we're having Albertans reaching out to us to try to effect change because I think they're seeing that we are effecting change. I know I certainly feel that way in terms of my role as Official Opposition critic for Children's Services over this past little while. I think we have made some great strides in this province as a result of our advocacy, and I can't wait to see what we'd do if we were given the opportunity to be government again.

I think that, more than anything, I'd like to see the UCP stop treating municipalities and the people they serve, who are also the constituents of all of these MLAs, as people to be adversarial with and to have those combative relationships with. I think this government got off to a bad start with the Municipal Affairs minister, who thought everybody was somebody he had to be combative with, and municipalities are still feeling the sting of that and certainly are feeling unheard and unsupported. You know, I appreciate, perhaps, that that's maybe something that this government was trying to address by bringing forward this legislation finally, but it's a little late, and it's not responding to all the needs that municipalities have been expressing. I hope to hear a lot more from those municipal councillors soon.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, second reading of Bill 77, on the referral. Is there anyone else? The hon. the Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the referral portion of this debate for I believe it's Bill 77, the Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. I like to sometimes think of bills in terms instead of their numbers, which I can never keep straight. This one I have renamed the Better than Nothing Act. This one, I think, goes a very small step towards what municipalities might want and recognizes that in order to do the things that we ask municipalities to do, which is invest in infrastructure, make sure that we have safe communities, communities that are vibrant, where we can raise our families, where we have both social and physical infrastructure to run our businesses, to provide services, all of those things that support public life, whether it's in a small town or a larger city, this matter of unpaid taxes from a number of industry interests, numbering some \$245 million now, at last estimate that I heard, anyway, from the RMA, is really prohibiting the careful planning and growth for municipalities, particularly smaller ones.

I think that if we feel inclined to dismiss the important work of municipalities, which, of course, we would never do, particularly not in a week that the AUMA is meeting, if we were inclined to say, "Oh, well, you know, it's an order of government where they don't have a fancy table and a Clerk and a Speaker and all of these various things" – they maybe make smaller decisions, one might think – I

would invite those folks to look just across the border. The dike and berm system that was holding back the water from that river, which starts with an N – I can't remember the name of it – that comes up from the United States into Abbotsford: that dike broke last night, and the water pumping station has now, by all accounts, failed in Abbotsford, in that Sumas prairie area.

Member Irwin: Nooksack.

Ms Phillips: Yeah. The Nooksack River.

That area is amazing agricultural land, but of course it is a drained lake, so it has always had water management issues. Oftentimes this type of infrastructure is shared between municipalities, particularly smaller, rural municipalities, and the provincial government. If you want to know what the key role of a municipality is, in particular in water management, look at that threat in that area and the 3,000 people and farmers who live in Sumas prairie with the threat of being three metres under water last night. That is the type of infrastructure that taxes go to pay for, so people need to pay their taxes, because you can't live in a place that is three metres under water.

That's why, you know, responding to these types of emergencies that we've asked municipalities, large and small, to respond to here in Alberta, having a tax base to do so is so crucially important to be able to fund and maintain that infrastructure. That's why it's sort of depressing in many ways that simple things like directive 67 . . . [interjection] I will yield to my friend.

8:30

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity to just maybe explore some of what you've already shared and ask some questions regarding that. I appreciate very much the new title you gave this bill, the Better than Nothing Act. I think that is apropos, so that's quite witty and fun. As you've said, you had a specific number: \$245 million in unpaid taxes. We certainly know it's much more than \$200 million, so that is a significant amount of money that municipalities are without, that they need to be able to run their programs.

I had the opportunity today to go to AUMA also and talk to many stakeholders, and the critic area that I work as the critic in is housing, and other areas, too, but specifically housing. So if you could just explore that a bit more.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, hon. member. I have housing in my notes here of things that I wanted to talk about in terms of why we might want to refer this bill, and here's why. We have a number of challenges to fiscal sustainability for a number of municipalities, large and small – \$245 million is a lot of money – and some municipalities are bearing the burden of that more than others, I think it's fair to say.

There are many tools that the government chose not to employ in this particular piece of legislation that they could have; for example, ensuring that the AER can prohibit licences to bad actors. They did this for new companies but not for existing companies. We have from the government of Alberta estimates that between 40 and 60 per cent of the unpaid taxes are from Alberta companies that are continuously operating, so it would seem to me that that would be one way to be able to get at this problem.

A referral motion, Mr. Speaker, is the opposition trying to be constructive and helpful here, because what it might do is focus the government's attention on listening to municipalities and what they might want, or listening to Albertans writ large, and focusing on that would avoid a lot of political problems. It would demonstrate to the people of Alberta that the government actually is interested in something a little beyond the sky palace intrigue that has so

gripped them and seized them, all of their attention, rather than the many, many challenges that unpaid property taxes certainly do not help address.

I am thinking here of the massive reduction in housing investments, both on the projects and the programs. We have seen a large amount of investment disappear from the capital plan. We have also seen a number of changes to the actual programs – we've heard about the sort of programs for people on income support – but also lengthening program wait-lists as the government sort of took their time in getting their act together in a new bilateral agreement with the federal government around a rent supplement and other rent-geared-to-income programs. We've also seen a reduction, depending on the municipality, for ALERT funding, which is, of course, part of the investigative resources sent to law enforcement. We have seen a large reduction for some municipalities in terms of the police funding formula and a continued reduction of that police funding formula putting a strain on municipalities.

We have seen a change in the structure of how fine ticket revenue is shared. That has affected specifically the larger municipalities perhaps more than the smaller ones, but certainly those have been policing resources that have had to be restructured as a result of the budgetary decisions of this government. Certainly, municipalities in southern Alberta have felt monumentally unheard when it comes to the seemingly, until very recently, headlong, steadfast, rushing in to strip mine the Rocky Mountains in service of metallurgical coal deposits, where the value will be extracted by Australian coal billionaires, leaving nothing but poisoned water for us.

So it would seem to me that if we were to refer this piece of legislation, number one, we would accomplish the objective of making it better. We wouldn't make it the Better than Nothing Act; we would just make it the Better Act, and that has got to be the focus of everyone in this House. But, more to the point, it would allow us, it would maybe allow those MLAs even in the government caucus who are, by all accounts, feeling that they are not being heard by their own government, and it would allow their constituents to come and have that conversation with members of Executive Council, with the broader members of the Legislature, with in fact the public, and they would then feel heard. They would then feel less like they were part of an opposition and more like they're just part of the normal functioning of government. I think that at this point that is what Albertans are looking for more than anything, that they would just like a return to something approaching responsible, focused conversation about how we move this province forward and a focus on things that are actually on people's minds. And things like housing, as my hon. friend brings up, are on people's minds to a great degree, and certainly the proliferation of homelessness is something that we are seeing in all of our communities.

I have certainly seen it in my own community, and then I come here to downtown Edmonton in the middle of a snowstorm, and I am seeing some of the worst homelessness – it is as bad as during the early boom years in about 2004 to 2006, when the economy just raced forward and people like Brian Jean were talking about how we needed to plan better, and so was Peter Lougheed, and everybody was talking about how we needed to plan better. What I have seen over the last six, eight, maybe 12 months in Edmonton rivals that level of homelessness, and you can tell that there has been a market change in the actual sheer numbers. [interjection] Yes, hon. member.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you. Certainly, I appreciate the member's comments about just some of the significant challenges

with homelessness. I know from the representative for Lethbridge-West that Lethbridge has some significant challenges with homelessness, with opioid overdoses, and of course the ARCHES program there was closed down by this UCP government. Really, for so many services that the government should be investing in to support municipalities, they are not doing that. They are actually going backwards. Certainly, we all know that they don't support the harm reduction model, and that is what we know is the most efficacious model when people are experiencing addiction. We have to start where the person is at, and it's just a travesty that that program was closed. I know that the Lethbridge council wants to be supporting people and just the things that they could be doing with these funds in your community. If you could share that further.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, if we were to have a conversation about municipal funding as a consequence of a referral, we might hear things like, yes, homelessness counts having gone up by some 150 per cent over the last decade, that housing investments, frankly, have not kept pace – they began to as a result of having some new capital investments included in I believe it was the 2016 capital plan. But what we have seen since 2019 is a grand total of 32 rent-geared-to-income at 20 per cent below market rate, senior self-contained units as a result of the bilateral agreement with the federal government. That project was announced last summer and then I think reannounced this fall for whatever reason, because people needed something to do. Then there were also 14 transitional housing units as a result of the Indigenous housing capital program in partnership with Blackfoot family lodge. Those are the only housing investments that we have seen.

We saw a freeze on a wait-list for social and affordable housing and a lengthening of those wait-lists and a number of calls into my office. Meanwhile, moving sort of beyond simply the social and affordable housing, we have an affordability problem more generally. When you look at middle-income people, 1 in 5 of them are living in situations where, you know, the CMHC and others estimate that they're paying too much for housing. Paying over 30 per cent of your before-tax income is essentially the cut-off. What we see is that about 1 in 5 certainly lone parents but even couples with children are in that percentile – I think it's about the third or fourth decile – where they cannot access housing that is anywhere near what it should be in terms of the percentage of their income. So we have an emerging middle-income crisis in terms of affordability in Lethbridge as well, and I suspect that this is the case for other places, in particular likely in Calgary although I have not looked as closely at their housing markets as I have the one in my constituency.

8:40

Those are the kinds of things that I worry about and that I know I hear from people about: the long-term sustainability of our municipalities and of our communities and how we are building that. The way we do it is on an as stable and predictable as possible tax base, whereby, you know, folks are all paying their fair share, including perfectly solvent oil and gas companies that are apparently just not paying in many municipalities, at least according to the GOA, and that we are undertaking that work in a way that is focused on making life better. Now, what this would mean, though, is less energy for the government caucus to be thinking about themselves and more energy thinking about other people.

Ms Sigurdson: Hon. member?

Ms Phillips: Oh. Yes.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Yeah. I mean, that last comment, certainly, about really, you know, being a servant, that in our role as MLAs we are serving the public and we are thinking about the best interests of those people in our communities and across our province, of course, that is really key. I think you were just beginning to bring us to some of your thoughts regarding that. And because we have this new, revamped name for the bill, the Better than Nothing Act, I'm just wondering if perhaps you could expand on your thoughts about what could make it even better than this minimal bill before us. What could have been further done by the UCP government to really be serving the people of Alberta in the best way possible? I'm very interested in hearing your thoughts on that.

Thank you.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, hon. member. Well, certainly, the municipalities – and if this bill were to be referred, they would hear that some legislative amendments to prohibit licences to bad actors would be helpful. You know, the province has additionally extended the education requisition program until 2023-24. Some legislative amendment could be made there so that municipalities could better make a plan, I think, over a three or four or five – many have three-year budgeting cycles. I know the city of Lethbridge does. That would be I think more helpful to many municipalities.

You know, this is not the first government to grapple with the issue of people not paying their taxes. This is a reason why we have entire bureaucracies devoted to this and entire volumes of law on penalties and how appeals go down and all of that stuff. I think there have got to be, likely, some other legal tools. Certainly, some municipalities have come forward with other types of legal tools, and those should be considered by this government. That's one of the reasons why having a referral might uncover them.

It is clear to me, given the thin nature of this legislation and others – I'm thinking here of the infrastructure piece of work, which I call binders-with-tabs legislation, because it is essentially direction to bureaucrats to bring a different kind of binder, with tabs, to the minister; or the table-of-tall-foreheads legislation that the Advanced Ed minister has brought forward – he's going to have a council to tell him how to do his job and do the exact things that are, like, in the literal job description of the minister. The nature of the legislation has been so thin that it's very clear to me that even the Executive Council, who has all the resources of Parliamentary Counsel and their individual departments at their fingertips, have been driftless and are unable to actually grapple with the seriousness of governing Alberta.

I will readily grant that this is a very tough place to govern. There's no question about that. There have been many times when I have not envied the hon. members across the way governing through the collapse in oil prices and also the pandemic. It has been tough, no question, but, you know, what might make it easier, Mr. Speaker, is going to the people and listening to what they would like for problems to be solved. Certainly, municipalities have a long list of those. They always do – this is normal – but having said that, having some action plan on the issues with which they are most seized would be a more effective way to, I think, have a little peace in the valley rather than 22 members of your own caucus writing you a letter to resign.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment REF1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:46 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Dang	Pancholi	Schmidt
Irwin	Phillips	Sigurdson, L.
Nielsen	Renaud	

Against the motion:

Amery	Long	Singh
Dreeshen	Lovely	Smith
Fir	Neudorf	Stephan
Frey	Nicolaides	Toor
Getson	Nixon, Jason	Turton
Horner	Pon	Walker
Hunter	Rosin	Williams
Issik	Schow	Wilson
Jones	Schulz	Yaseen

Totals:	For – 8	Against – 27
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[Motion on amendment REF1 lost]

The Speaker: On Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, at second reading, are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East has the call.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to stand today to speak in support of Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. Accountability is a critical principle in any functioning society or any society where we wish to be functional. From the top levels of leadership to our households we all value accountability as a backbone in our society, relationships, and overall within our lives. Many municipalities have noticed a lack of accountability from a few bad actors failing to pay their property taxes. That's why Bill 77 updates the Municipal Government Act to restore a special lien for unpaid property taxes on linear property, machinery, and equipment.

In short, this lien will give municipalities priority over other creditors to receive taxes owed, of course, with the exception of the Crown and any environmental regulatory obligations. In other words, this legislation is looking out for municipalities by allowing them to collect unpaid property taxes from oil and gas companies in particular that refuse to pay their taxes. To be clear, this is only meant for a few bad actors, not the entire system, and not the entire system is acting in this way. A smaller number of oil and gas companies operating in Alberta have not paid property taxes to the municipalities in which they operate.

According to the Rural Municipalities of Alberta several oil and gas firms owe approximately \$245 million in unpaid taxes to about 69 municipalities, mostly in rural Alberta. Although the overwhelming majority of oil and gas companies are responsible job creators who pay their taxes, these few bad actors ignore the rules and refuse to pay taxes on time or at all. As many of my colleagues from rural Alberta will attest, rural communities are some of the hardest working communities in the province. Ensuring a fair deal for them, especially in situations like this, will have a ripple effect that will benefit these communities and, in turn, the rest of the province in many ways.

The special lien this legislation is restoring will clarify other powers that municipalities can use to require oil and gas companies

to pay these overdue property taxes. These changes build on an already existing provincial program that gives municipalities a credit on education property taxes unpaid by oil and gas companies. Between 40 and 60 per cent of unpaid taxes are the responsibility of companies that continue to operate in Alberta while the remainder are facing insolvency.

The provincial government introduced a provincial education requisition credit in 2015 to help municipalities deal with uncollectable taxes on the oil and gas properties. We are extending this credit to include the 2023-2024 fiscal year. To be clear on the logistics, this legislation will hold the owner of the linear property and the operator of oil and gas machinery and equipment liable for paying those property taxes. It is important to note that the owner and the operator are not always the same, depending on the corporate structure, and this legislation notices and plans for instances just like this.

This legislation will also establish a 120-day redemption period between the time that taxes are due and the enforcement of the special lien process. Ultimately, this will protect financially vulnerable companies by allowing for time to negotiate the payment and make specific arrangements in these cases. Again, we are not looking to create problems for people or businesses. Instead, we are looking to hold a few bad actors accountable while still allowing for a business-friendly environment. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Additionally, this legislation will make special liens applicable to all of the debtor's assessable property within the municipality as well as to make special liens applicable to any unpaid taxes owing when the amendment comes into force and afterwards.

Alberta continues to have the most competitive tax system within the country. We continue to support jobs in the oil and gas industry while ensuring that we close loopholes and hold a few bad actors who are ignoring the rules accountable.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Getson: It's on the first speaker.

The Speaker: It sounded like he was wrapping up, but he's welcome to take an intervention if he's inclined to do so. I haven't called another speaker.

Mr. Getson: Okay. Great. I wasn't sure, Mr. Speaker, on the order, if it was the first speaker into it or not.

Thank you to the Member for Lethbridge-East talking about this. Obviously, it has a big impact on rural communities. I know that when we heard about the linear assessment, in my area there was a bunch of municipal leaders that came together plus industry players that were talking about linear assessments, and they had recommended a lot of the items in here. Perhaps the member could tell us what was happening down in Lethbridge country, if you've also engaged with your county and community leaders, not just passing through the occasional cocktail weenie bars the other ones have and passing conversations but fulsome dialogue.

Thank you.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member. Indeed, I have. I've taken some considerable time with the Lethbridge county, which is just outside of the city of Lethbridge, as that is where more of this would be impactful for them. The county of Lethbridge has one of the largest areas within the entire province yet a very low linear taxation base. This could have a significant impact for them as they have a large number of roads and laneways and irrigation canals to maintain and a very low tax base. This kind of thing can make a significant difference for them, and they are looking for some of these changes just to help them manage that challenge that they face on a day-to-day basis and

in a very tight fiscal reality. I thank the member very much for that intervention.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

9:10

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the minister to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 77 read a second time]

Bill 83 Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader and Minister of Environment and Parks.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to move second reading of Bill 83, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021, which is a bill to bring in legislative framework to enable extended producer responsibility within our province. We are excited to bring forward this important piece of legislation. It has been long asked for inside the province by many environmental groups, by municipalities, and businesses that the Alberta government will move forward with an extended producer responsibility framework inside our province as well as focus on a circular economy.

This is also, Mr. Speaker, a direct response to what we've seen from the federal government when it comes to plastics. I'm not actually sure where the Official Opposition is at on their support for the Trudeau plastic bans – but I suspect given their long history of supporting the federal Liberal government, their close personal friendship and long-time alliance with the federal Liberals, that they probably have focused themselves often on pushing forward with plastic bans – but we decided as a government that one of the key components of our natural gas strategy would be to focus on the circular economy and to focus on recycling and the fact that we have a waste problem, not a product problem. The products are not the problem; how we handle the products afterwards is certainly the problem. Our focus has been as a government on that and creating a system where we can make sustainable recycling frameworks and make sure that we can continue to see investment come to the province, which is a sharp contrast to what we see coming from the federal Liberal government.

This bill itself, we think, will pave the way for about \$1.4 billion in investment inside our province, just over 13,000 jobs but at the same time is continuing to protect the natural gas industry and support the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity in his overall natural gas strategy. By the way, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if you noticed the price of gas when the government came in and took over the fiscal mess and disaster that the NDP left the province in, particularly when it came to the energy industry, but it is significantly higher, the price of gas, which is why we see Alberta having the largest economic recovery inside the country, particularly when it comes to our energy industry.

Not only, though, is this an important component to the response to the federal government's attempts to ban plastics and making sure that we have a strong framework to be able to make sure that there's a future for clean natural gas both within our province and outside of our province, but we already see it attracting significant investment, including just recently, Mr. Speaker. You would have seen the announcement by Dow Chemical . . .

The Speaker: Sorry to interrupt, Government House Leader, and accept my apology. If you could do me a huge favour and just pull

your papers off of the top of the microphone, and perhaps you had a device or something that was getting placed on it. It was making it difficult when you moved it, but if you can keep it off there, that would be amazing. Sorry. My apologies.

Mr. Jason Nixon: That would be my pleasure, Mr. Speaker. I did not realize that was blocking the device.

Back to the announcement that we saw recently for Fort Saskatchewan with Dow Chemical that the government has worked on over the last year and a half with Dow, that it would be coming forward within – it's been announced now, Mr. Speaker, that it will create thousands of jobs inside the province, several billion dollars' worth of projects inside Fort Saskatchewan, bringing Albertans back to work.

There were a couple of environmental components that Dow referred to in their decision to come to Alberta to build that project, but one of them was our commitment to move forward with extended producer responsibility and focus on recycling. I'm making clear that there is a future for plastics both inside our economy as well as us taking clear steps to be able to do that. The second component of it, though, is, of course, municipalities. For rural MLAs they will all know that they are consistently asked by their municipalities to move forward with an EPR program because of the tremendous burden that this has put on rural landfills in particular. This is a fulfillment of that commitment to municipalities going forward.

This is an exciting announcement. I did take some time, Mr. Speaker. I don't generally spend much time paying attention to what comes from the Official Opposition because, in my experience, it has had very, very little value and is very rarely embedded with fact. Particularly, the Official Opposition's environment critic often seems to be presenting stuff with a meaning that is very far away from facts.

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

The Speaker: A point of order has been called. The hon. Deputy Opposition House Leader.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Government House Leader has just stated that the hon. environment critic for the opposition often states things that are very far from the facts. As you have stated in this place many times, you cannot say indirectly what you cannot say directly. I think the hon. Government House Leader should know better, and I'd ask him to withdraw and apologize for that.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a matter of debate on whether the things that the environment critic for the Official Opposition had been putting out in regard to bills publicly were close to fact or not. I think that would be a matter of debate of what the facts are. I certainly did not imply that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was lying. That would be out of order and why I would not do that. Even when he is lying, I don't do that because that would be unparliamentary.

The Speaker: I thank you both for your submissions. [interjections] Order. I have on a number of occasions provided caution. Certainly, the Deputy Opposition House Leader is correct that you can't do indirectly what you can't do directly, et cetera. But in this case I think this is a matter of debate as the members

inside this Chamber, from both sides of the House, will find creative ways to do these sorts of things around debate. I provided some caution earlier today, or perhaps that was yesterday, with respect to this type of language, but I would suggest – and, of course, when the Speaker makes a suggestion like this, oftentimes members will feel at liberty to use it as frequently as possible. I wouldn't encourage that either. But in this case this is a matter of debate.

Please proceed.

Debate Continued

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will take that caution to heart. Certainly, I would not want to point out when any member is misleading Albertans. My point is that the content that is being put out by the NDP on many pieces of legislation is very far from fact. I don't know whether they're doing that on purpose or it's just that they're having trouble understanding or that's just where they're at, that they're very far away from facts.

The only complaint I saw, interestingly enough, from the Official Opposition on this, who are an Official Opposition who sure spend their time complaining a lot, is that they felt that this was going too slow. I will point out that the NDP had four years to be able to move forward on recycling and/or creating a new system within this province and did absolutely nothing when it came to this important issue. Now, I suspect, Mr. Speaker, that was because, again, the NDP – and they showed this with their time in office – do not support the energy industry.

You have something like creating a new, modern recycling framework, building on the legacy of one of the greatest Premiers, a good Conservative Premier, Mr. Speaker, of this province, Ralph Klein, when he was environment minister. One of the last major movements on the recycling file in this province was done by the late, great Ralph Klein when he was the minister of environment, when he brought in mandatory bottle recycling inside this province. We know it's good for the environment to keep plastics out of the landfill, to be able to create a circular economy, to be able to reuse products. We know it's good for the taxpayer to make sure that they don't have to continue to pay for it. It's good for our waterways and it's good for the future of our province, but also it's good for the energy industry. I have to assume that's why the Official Opposition took no action on this file, because even protecting the environment, they can't do it if it would in any way benefit the oil and gas industry. It's disappointing that they didn't do that.

9:20

I do agree with the hon. member. I am disappointed to see that previous governments – and I will give the NDP credit. It wasn't just them. The PC government before them did not move fast enough on this file, Mr. Speaker, and they lost an opportunity to be able to set up our province to be a centre of excellence when it comes to plastic recycling and the circular economy, create tens of thousands of jobs inside our province, billions of dollars in economic development. We see it with the Dow announcement. I've got to tell you that I sat in the Chamber on the other side of the aisle with you. You were my bench mate. I can't recall the NDP ever bringing that level of investment to this province, and that's just one of the announcements in the last several weeks when it comes to that.

Again, if the only complaint the Official Opposition has is that we're not moving fast enough, well, that means we've probably got a pretty good piece of legislation here. It's on its way to becoming law, I would hope, inside this Chamber, and we'll see a framework that finally fixes our recycling problems inside this province in the few months after we get this bill passed, which is very, very

exciting. I do hope that we will see the Official Opposition support it rather than continue with their efforts to be disparaging to the energy industry and to oil and gas workers in the future.

With that, I'm excited to hear further debate, at least from members that will focus on facts associated with legislation. I look forward to, hopefully, seeing support for this important piece of legislation moving forward with a framework to be able to move forward with it. I again want to reiterate that this is the first major movement on a recycling file since Ralph Klein. We're excited to be able to lead the way not only here inside the province but now inside the country and restore Alberta to be the best province when it comes to recycling management inside the country.

Again, you know, just in closing, for some of my colleagues who may be interested, when Minister Ralph Klein brought forward the mandatory bottle recycling process, switching from glass to plastic, he was asked a question by the Official Opposition at the time – I don't know if it was an NDP or a Liberal member; probably a Liberal member given his era – about glass or plastic. The minister popped up and said: I got to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I don't know a heck of a lot about the outside of a bottle, but I do know a heck of a lot about the inside of a bottle. That was his answer to the question. But what Ralph was right about was being able to make a system that could create a way that we could reuse products, keep them out of landfills, and make sure that our energy industry could continue to create plastic both for here and for the world. It's a good piece of legislation. Hopefully, we can get it passed.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for . . . [interjections] Order. Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is the only one with the call.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can see that the minister of environment is listening intently to everything I say. I'm glad that he has contributed so much value in the debate tonight. I will, before I address the content of the legislation, just say that I think it's in incredibly poor taste for the minister of environment to be making jokes about how much he knows about the inside of a bottle given the recent news coming out of his caucus over the past weeks. Unfortunately, we've seen the UCP government time and again troll the people of Alberta in its public announcements and public statements, and that's what we see the minister of environment doing here tonight with this joke that was in incredibly poor taste.

Now, with respect to the bill I'm pleased to rise and offer a few comments and say that Bill 83, as the minister suggested, is intended to create an extended producer responsibility framework within the province of Alberta. I think that it's important to note, as the minister of the environment did, that this builds on some already good work that has long been undertaken in the province of Alberta, particularly with respect to beverage container recycling, electronic material recycling, tire recycling, paints, and these other kinds of used oils as well. I think that Albertans should be proud of the record that we have already established when it comes to recycling waste products here in the province of Alberta, and I am pleased to see that the government has at least made some statements saying that it wishes to build upon that history of effective recycling programs by creating an extended producer responsibility framework.

Sadly, you know, I think that what the minister says the bill does and what the bill actually does are two very different things. Now, if one were to go online or, in fact, go into the lounges that are available to us and find copies of the bill, we would find that the bill consists of precisely two pages: two pages of actual bill content and then another two pages of explanatory notes. Now, Mr.

Speaker, I know that it's against parliamentary practice to read the entire bill into *Hansard*, so I won't do that, but I will say that this bill consists entirely of wordsmithing to make the department of environment lawyers happy that the government can do the things that it already has the power to do.

A classic example is section 3 of the bill, which amends section 173 by striking out "A person" and substituting "If required by the regulations, a person" so that instead of saying:

A person who manufactures or distributes a designated material for sale in Alberta and a retailer shall, in accordance with the regulations, provide in Alberta depots and other methods for the collection and recovery of the designated material,

it would then read:

If required by the regulations, a person who manufactures or distributes a designated material for sale in Alberta and a retailer shall, in accordance with the regulations, provide in Alberta depots and other methods for the collection and recovery of the designated material.

I'd like to hear from the minister or anybody else who will be speaking to this bill about why that change was even necessary.

It seems to me, Mr. Speaker, that from reading the bill we see some fine-tuning of the language of the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act so the department lawyers are satisfied that the language in the bill is clear enough that the government can do what it wants to do with respect to establishing an extended producer responsibility framework. It's my contention that if this bill had not been passed and if the government had just created its own regulations to create an extended producer responsibility framework for single-use plastics, for paper and packaging products, and for hazardous household waste, as it says it is intended to do, it could very well do that with the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act as it is currently written.

We asked the department officials in the technical briefing whether or not the bill as currently written was sufficient, and they couldn't give us a clear yes or no, so it's incredibly frustrating, Mr. Speaker, that we have this bill before us when the things that the government wants to do it already has the power to do. It's not clear to me or to anyone who has eyes to read this piece of legislation that this actually changes any powers that the government has.

Now, I understand that members opposite might point to section 4, which amends section 175, adding the following after clause (x):

(x.1) exempting any designated material, activity, industry, person or class of any of them from the application of all or any of the provisions of any regulations made under this section.

It also adds the following after clause (z):

(z.1) respecting the provision of and requirements for information to support an application for exemption from the application of all or any of the provisions of any regulations made under this section.

9:30

Now, I understand that this language is being proposed to be inserted into the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act just to make it clear that the government has the regulatory power to make these exemptions that it wants to make in order to facilitate the extended producer responsibility program that it wants to set up, but the answer is not definitively no, that the government doesn't already have those powers. In fact, I would bet money that if the government had passed some regulations exempting any designated material, activity, industry, person, or class of any of them from the application of all or any of the provisions of any regulations made under this section, if they had passed that kind of regulation, I doubt that anybody would challenge them in court, first of all. Second of all, I'm pretty sure that a court would not find in favour of anybody

who would be challenging the government's ability to make this regulation because it looks like, from a reasonable reading of the current Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, the government already has these powers to make regulations.

The minister of environment was correct when he said that our response to this piece of legislation was one that said that we weren't happy that the government is actually making progress on creating an extended producer responsibility framework, because this bill doesn't advance that goal. As I've said over and over again already tonight, the government already has the power to do the things it wants to do. What they've committed to, in addition to introducing this piece of legislation, was to continue listening to stakeholders about how an extended producer responsibility framework should be established, getting into the details of how it should be applied to single-use plastics, paper and packaging products, and household hazardous waste and coming up with substantive regulations sometime in 2022. Well, that's fine if you could take the minister's word for it that he's actually going to do the things that he said he's going to do, but unfortunately this environment minister has zero trust with the people of Alberta.

I don't have enough time, in the time allotted to me by the standing orders, to go into how many times the minister of environment has said that he was going to do a thing or not do a thing and then do the exact opposite, but I'm happy to provide the House with a few examples as helpful reminders. From the end of February 2020 until right up to Christmas, just before he and his family left for Hawaii on holidays during the middle of a travel ban, the minister of environment insisted that he wasn't going to sell off or close down almost 200 parks and recreation areas in the province. When the people of Alberta called him on this, he finally, after 10 months, admitted that that was indeed his plan but that he was backing away from it due to intense public pressure. So that's one thing that the minister said that he wasn't going to do but was actually going to do but was forced to back down on.

You know, the minister told the people of Alberta who were going to be paying an additional fee to go random camping on public land and going hiking in Kananaskis Country to not be upset about the unfair application of those fees that are being applied to random campers and to hikers and mountain bikers and horseback riders in Kananaskis but not being applied to off-highway vehicle users. He told those people not to worry because an off-highway vehicle fee would also be coming in the fall of 2021. Well, here we are, November 17, 2021, and the minister has actually formally reversed his commitment to introducing off-highway vehicle fees. He said it multiple times here in the House. He said it in public. His own budget budgeted for the creation of an off-highway vehicle fee, yet he has decided that that's not something that he's going to do anymore.

I think those are two of the examples that stick out in my mind and certainly the examples that stick out in the minds of Albertans who are paying attention to what this minister of the environment is doing. Those two examples demonstrate that you cannot trust this environment minister to do the things that he is going to say that he's going to do.

Maybe, you know, we can pass this piece of legislation. He's saying that he's committed to creating an extended producer responsibility framework but that we have to wait for the details. Well, I certainly hope that the environment minister changes his pattern of behaviour and actually fulfills this commitment because I think that creating an extended producer responsibility for this class of products that he's saying that he wants to create one for is an important and worthy public policy goal. It's just unfortunate that this piece of legislation doesn't advance that goal whatsoever.

I will say that it was a tremendous relief to me and to many of the people that I've spoken to over the last few months to see that the government has formally stated its intention to not modify or change the way that the beverage recycling system operates in this province. I will tell you – and all of my colleagues here in the Official Opposition will likely echo the sentiment – that the people who run bottle depots were very active in defending their interests and contacting our offices to tell us about how well that program is working and how the creation of an overarching extended producer responsibility framework should leave beverage recycling programs alone. So I'm very pleased to see that that has been committed to in the What We Heard document that was released alongside this piece of legislation.

I'll just share with the House that the other thing that we heard from bottle depot operators was that not only is the bottle depot system working very well to achieve Alberta's beverage container recycling goals; they also could potentially be a tremendous partner in expanding this extended producer responsibility framework and that they would be very well equipped to deal with some of these other products that they're considering including in the framework. I certainly hope that the department of the environment gives the bottle depot operators a fair hearing and listens to what they have to say, because I think that they could be valuable partners in the creation of an extended producer responsibility framework if given the right chance.

We also heard quite a lot from Alberta tire recyclers. Now, it's unfortunate that tire recycling was not explicitly ruled out for changes under this new framework that they're proposing. It certainly wasn't mentioned specifically in the What We Heard document. Now, I will say that department officials did promise us in the technical briefing that the tire recycling program would also not be changed. I would like to see that expressed in writing somewhere, and certainly tire recyclers would like to see that expressed in writing somewhere.

As I've said, this minister of the environment has done a lot to erode public trust, so I think the tire recyclers would want some credible assurances that their recycling program is not going to be altered in any way. I look forward to perhaps hearing from the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, who has been very engaged on this file, I understand. Perhaps he has some insider information about the future of the tire recycling program that he would be willing to share with the House and, more importantly, share with people who are engaged in the tire recycling program.

9:40

I know that in speaking briefly with my friend from Edmonton-Manning, who has been very engaged with agricultural stakeholders, she did express to me some concerns about the explicit exclusion of agricultural plastics from the extended producer responsibility framework. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of detail in the What We Heard document that was released along with this piece of legislation to explain why now was not the time to look at including agricultural plastics in the extended producer responsibility framework. I would certainly welcome any comments from the government caucus on why agricultural plastics haven't been included at this time and perhaps indicate to us under what conditions they would consider including agricultural plastics in the extended producer responsibility.

This is something that my friend from Edmonton-Manning has expressed that she's heard concerns about from agricultural stakeholders. The treatment of agricultural plastics is an important issue to them, and I don't think that it's fair to leave people in the agricultural sector wondering what the future of agricultural plastics is going to be. I certainly hope that during debate on this

piece of legislation the government caucus members can clear up some concerns and misgivings and questions that people may have about the future of agricultural plastic recycling in this province.

I will say that it's incredibly challenging, Mr. Speaker, to fill 20 minutes on a two-page bill, but I think I've laid out our caucus's concerns with this piece of legislation as it is. While we do think that expanding the extended producer responsibility programs in the province is a good idea, we are very concerned that this bill does nothing to advance that goal and that the time of the Legislature could be better spent making meaningful amendments to legislation as opposed to these kinds of frivolous wordsmithing exercises that Bill 83 engages in. I think that it's important that the government meet its promises for once and create a meaningful extended producer responsibility program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are at second reading of Bill 83, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021. We have now passed the two-speaker threshold where interventions are prevented, but following or in this third speaker, if anyone is so inclined, interventions are available for the remainder of the debate.

I see the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain is on his feet.

Mr. Turton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an absolute pleasure to be speaking today on Bill 83, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021, and as the member mentioned previously, I am pretty excited about this bill. I was very excited to put forth my motion last fall urging the government to move forward with extended producer responsibility. For a private member, this is a pretty big day, to be able to speak to this much-needed legislation here in the province of Alberta. First of all, I just want to thank the Minister of Environment and Parks for his tremendous work on this important piece of legislation and for allowing me to participate in much of the stakeholder engagement earlier this spring.

Mr. Speaker, as a former long-time city councillor in Spruce Grove and a long-time environmental steward I saw first-hand the short- and long-term negative effects of sending recyclable items to landfill. Our environment is obviously affected by this needless waste, but another negative effect that isn't as well known is the impact that it has had on municipalities and taxpayers.

Extended producer responsibility, which Bill 83 will enable, shifts the physical and financial role of collecting, sorting, processing, and recycling waste to the producer and away from municipalities and taxpayers. Municipalities and organizations such as the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association have advocated for this sort of policy for years, and I'm glad to see the progress that we have made in just this last year. Just as an example, I have attended every AUMA conference since being elected as a city councillor in 2010, and every single year since that time one of the resolutions at AUMA was for the government to adopt EPR. I'm so thankful that it's this government that finally came to the plate, was able to push forward this legislation.

As I also stated, Mr. Speaker, last fall I tabled Motion 510. This motion urged the government to examine the feasibility of implementing extended producer responsibility, and I was very happy to see that my motion received unanimous support by all members in the House. Obviously, it's always a great moment when everyone in the Chamber can agree on a good motion. I was also very happy to see how quickly the minister began to study extended producer responsibility, or EPR, and how it could be implemented here in Alberta.

Over the past year I've worked with the department and the ministry on various stakeholder meetings with industry groups, nonprofits, and groups representing municipalities. These consultations were insightful and strengthened my belief in the importance of EPR, not just for the positive effects it will have on our environment but also for the economic potential that it will bring to our province. The key findings for many of these consultations were published last spring in the What We Heard document, but I would like to remind constituents and other stakeholders that they could still e-mail their comments until December 15, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, EPR is an environmental and economic policy approach in which the producer is responsible for the end-of-life management of the product or packaging it produces. EPR policies are in place in most Canadian provinces, including Ontario and Quebec and the other western provinces, and it should be noted that out of all the major provinces, Alberta is actually the last when it comes to adopting this type of program. Alberta has been in a unique position, though, to learn from the experiences that these other provinces have had with EPR to see what works and what doesn't.

According to Alberta's natural gas vision and strategy possible future economic benefits from increased recycling are \$1.4 billion injected into the economy and approximately 13,300 jobs supported. Now, that's double the number of jobs and economic injection compared to where we are now with our current recycling program. We have seen this economic stimulation in other provinces like B.C. Twenty million dollars in capital investment occurred in B.C. after they shifted to EPR in 2014, and another \$25 million was invested in 2020 for enhanced sorting of packaging, cardboard, and paper for greater access to local markets.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 83, if passed, will enable an extended producer responsibility framework for single-use plastics, packaging, paper products, and hazardous and special products here in Alberta. This framework will provide the foundation for future EPR regulations to be implemented, some of which will hopefully include ag plastics. Bill 83 will make amendments to the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act in three key ways. First, it will allow for exemptions of certain designated materials, activities, industries, or classes of persons from a future EPR regulation. For instance, Alberta's existing beverage container recycling program will not be within the scope of EPR. Second, the legislation will allow the collection of information to determine eligibility for the exemptions that I just mentioned. And, lastly, this legislation will provide flexibility for future EPR regulations to depart from existing approaches on collection and the recovery of designated materials and surcharges.

Mr. Speaker, obviously, I'm pretty excited for this legislation. It is greatly needed and long overdue. Albertans send 1,034 kilograms per person of waste to landfills annually, which is well above the national average of 710 kilograms per year. Albertans don't want to throw away items that can be recycled and reused, and that's come out loud and clear. Albertans want the highest potential number of items to be diverted away from our landfills, and EPR can make that happen.

If this legislation is passed, we can expect the regulatory framework for EPR to be in place by next spring, and obligated producers will be given a specific period of time to implement those programs. Until an EPR program is in place, Environment and Parks will continue to fund the household hazardous waste program at the same level provided in 2020 to 2021, which is about \$1.9 million. This will happen until 2023, when it is expected that EPR will be fully implemented.

9:50

Now, Mr. Speaker, before I conclude my speech, I also just want to give special recognition to some of the municipal councillors around the province that did help me in the formation of my motion last fall and have been actively working with me over the last year as this legislation is now in the Chamber.

I want to specifically give a shout-out to Councillor Demong from Calgary – obviously, he has been an amazing champion for waste minimization for many years, and I knew him from my time as a city councillor – and Mayor Cathy Heron from the city of St. Albert. We both served as councillors for our respective communities for many years, and she was a key voice in helping me with my motion last fall. Obviously, I have a number of councillors – too many to count – from Spruce Grove and Stony Plain, so thank you, all, to many of them for helping me out. I also just want to give a special shout-out to a former city of Edmonton city councillor, my good friend Michael Walters. Thank you very much for his time as well as current city councillor Andrew Knack. These individuals have just been a few that have helped me over the last year working towards this legislation, have been fantastic voices for their communities. I'm very thankful for their past and current service.

Mr. Speaker, I'm excited to see this legislation put forth, and I would like to thank the Minister of Environment and Parks again for this great work. I encourage everyone in this House to please vote for Bill 83.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to add some comments here this evening to Bill 83, Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021. I have to admit that when I first heard the bill, I thought: "Wow. Enhancement to environmental protections. That sounds like a good thing given what we had seen earlier within some of the decisions that the government was making, you know, rescinding the coal policy to potentially allow coal mining in our eastern slopes with the threat of polluting our drinking water." You see scenarios like that, and then you hear about a bill that could be protecting the environment. I was excited. I thought: here we go; we'll actually do some work towards preventing some damage to the environment.

Like my good friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar, I was surprised when I saw the bill and how thin it was. I won't be quite as gracious as my friend was. It's not really two pages because there are a lot of spaces in between on this bill. I will say a page at best. While I appreciate the excitement from the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain about this – you know, I remember your motion, and I did like it. I was in favour of it. It, quite honestly, seemed a lot more robust than the bill that we have here before us this evening. I guess I'm just disappointed. I was hoping for a little bit more than this. Listening to the Government House Leader's comments and certainly goading us on . . . [interjection] I do see my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud, and I'm happy to give way.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Decore. I just wanted to pick up on your comments where you just mentioned that, you know, it's a little bit disappointing. It is a very thin piece of legislation. I do appreciate the enthusiasm from the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

I, too, have heard from some constituents who were involved in bottle depots and who own bottle depots, and they were looking for

a level of certainty from this legislation. They were aware that this was under consideration and certainly had provided some feedback. Further, I think, to the Member for Edmonton-Decore's comments, they were looking for some certainty around the absolute sort of exclusion of bottle depots from these mechanisms because they've been very successful in what they've been doing. They were looking for some certainty around, you know, the requirement for depots to be the sole collector of beverage containers, and I'm sure we'll hear some feedback on that as to why that wasn't addressed in here.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you for that comment. Like you, I actually have two bottle depots that are in Edmonton-Decore, both on the northern border and the southern border of Edmonton-Decore, and meeting with those individuals, I heard that exact same thing. You know, they're very happy with the way the industry is running right now in terms of bottle collection. I would have even been willing to say that I think I heard some willingness to maybe look at ways to include some other things.

What they are definitely concerned about is that these regulations are just going to come out here. Hence, going back to the bill, it really doesn't say much around that at all. Are they all of a sudden now going to be responsible for having to take in a variety of other items and be on the hook to try to figure out a way to manage that? You know, the folks that I met with: yes, they said that they were consulted, and they felt they could have been heard better. [interjection] But I do see my colleague across the aisle, and I'm happy to give way for the moment.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you for allowing me to intervene really briefly. I just wanted to kind of put forth that, you know, over the last year Minister Nixon and myself have met extensively with bottle depot owners right across the entire province, including the bottle . . .

The Speaker: I'm sorry. It sounded a lot like the hon. member may have used the hon. Minister of Environment and Parks' proper name, and I just might remind him that the use of names in the Chamber, of course, is unacceptable.

Mr. Turton: Absolutely. I'll figure it out eventually. No. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: We all make mistakes.

Mr. Turton: We all make mistakes.

I will say that from many of the extensive conversations that I have been able to participate in over the last year with the Bottle Depot Association as well as bottle depot owners right across the entire province, I mean, these are incredible entrepreneurs that are almost in every community in the province that have poured significant investments into their respective businesses. I know that in those conversations and the upcoming regulations we want to make sure that those business owners, their interests are protected and that they can continue to provide for their families, provide a valuable service, and we are looking for opportunities that those bottle depot owners can potentially expand the number of goods and products that they receive.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Point taken there. Again, I guess they were hoping to maybe see more within the bill that's currently before us rather than just: well, we're going to see what happens when it comes out of the regulations.

You know, when we start talking, I always seem to find myself going back to the 29th Legislature, Mr. Speaker, because I remember the members that sat during that Legislature, when they were in opposition, constantly berating the NDP government because stuff wasn't in a bill. When we said, "Oh, well, you know, it's going to be coming up in the regulations," "No, it can't be in the regulations. It has to be in the bill. Why isn't it in the bill? Now you guys aren't doing your jobs." Then here I see the same scenario.

I guess the other criticism I do have of the bill – because it is so thin, because it is so vague, it actually kind of reminds me a little bit about some of the red tape bills that I've seen come into the House, kind of the hand-me-down stuff. Because it's so thin, I'm almost surprised that maybe it didn't just make its way into a red tape bill, because, well, we're reducing red tape to improve the environment or something. You know, I guess I really expected more when I heard this bill was coming out.

Given the fact that I had spoken with some of my bottle depots there, I think there are legitimate concerns. Hopefully, when we see the regulations come out, they won't be blindsided and all of a sudden having to be in a position of, you know, investing millions and millions of dollars to try to quickly upgrade their operations in order to be able to handle potentially some item that they weren't expecting in any way, shape, or form.

10:00

But, as my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar said, you know, extended producer responsibility is a good idea. It just would have been nice to see a little bit more with regard to that. That now leads me, of course, as I always do, to talk about the language itself. The Government House Leader was saying that he wants to see facts associated with the legislation, and what's associated with it here is exemptions. I have to be honest. As soon as I start hearing about the government wanting to provide exemptions to things, I do get a little bit nervous because sometimes those exemptions can go a little bit too far. The favourite words that I used to hear all the time from folks back in the other Legislature was the "unintended consequences."

You know, I hate to say it, Mr. Speaker, but given the track record of the government that we've seen over the course of this little while, they are very, very, very quick to grant, shall we say, assistance, a hand up, things like that, to friends and to insiders and to grant exemptions to avoid criticism. So when I see exemptions being very prominently mentioned in this bill, it does give me cause for pause. It's not to say that I'm necessarily against it, but it would be really, really nice to see sort of just more examples of what might be going on. Who is going to be granting those exemptions? I've seen it, more times than not, not work out, and it creates more problems than it supposedly actually solves.

You know, I guess that out of this, as we get further on into debate, likely into Committee of the Whole, we'll get a chance to maybe dig into some more details around what it is this bill will be able to do. [interjection] I'm sorry. I missed my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Decore. I think what you were talking about there in terms of the regulations – look, I'll be the first to admit that there are certain provisions that are appropriate in legislation and certain provisions that are appropriate in regulations. Having done some legislative drafting before, I understand that there are distinctions between the two, and there are certainly situations where it should be in regulations. However, I think it speaks to a fundamental trust issue that many Albertans have every time this government in particular says that

there are things that are going to happen – I'm thinking, actually, of the Trails Act. There were going to be fees for, you know, off-highway vehicle trails in Kananaskis. We were told it was okay that the fee didn't apply to OHV users in Kananaskis because they will be addressed later on, and then it wasn't, right? We know that from the Trails Act that's before us now.

I think that maybe that is perhaps part of the concern, that relying on what's going to be happening in regulations. Well, sometimes there's not a lot of faith in that.

Mr. Nielsen: Yeah. I would absolutely agree. There's certainly a trust factor there that Albertans are struggling with with this government. I have been critical right from the start that every time I see legislation and what it says and what it doesn't say and what I'm hearing from the government about it, a lot of times it doesn't line up, so when we hear, "Well, just trust us; it's going to be in the regulations," it's very, very difficult to do that. You know, Albertans are looking to see those signs that they can trust that the decisions that will be made will actually be made in their best interests.

I guess that, you know, thinking from the municipalities' side of things, my hope is that as we see these regulations, we'll hopefully get a sense of what kind of money municipalities might be able to save with an extended producer responsibility program that's further in place.

We've clearly seen decisions that have put municipalities in a very, very difficult position of making decisions. Do they build something, or do they hike a fee here? As we know, the only way that a municipality can generate any kind of income in order to be able to provide services is either through property taxes or through user fees. You know, if a municipality gets an opportunity to save some money here, is the government then going to look at that and say: "Well, you've got this extra money now, so we're going to claw back some more"? That becomes yet another problem and another pressure that's going to be downloaded onto municipalities. I would be interested to hear from the minister that, should municipalities get the opportunity to see some savings, hopefully maybe even significant savings, that won't be just clawed back from them; for instance, like what we've seen with AISH recipients. They start to make a little bit of extra money, and then all of a sudden there's another hand grabbing some of it back, and it just exacerbates the problem.

I'm also wondering if there are any kind of target rates. You know, what are we hoping to be able to achieve out of this? Is there a certain amount of tonnage? Are there a certain number of products that we're hoping to be able to get to in terms of targets and what we're pulling out so that it's not ending up in the landfills and that we're actually getting a chance to be able to make significant progress on those items?

You know, like my friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar, again, the bill is leaving me with not a lot to talk about. I was hoping to be able to talk a lot more about Bill 83, but I guess, as they say, we'll be on the edges of our seats waiting to see the regulations. Hopefully, they will work out for everybody, and we'll be able to be the responsible stewards that we should be. Certainly, some of the decisions that we've seen over the course here haven't exactly been that way. As I've mentioned, wanting to mine coal right in our headwaters in the eastern slopes: that is all kinds of not providing environmental protections. We can do better, and my hope is that we will see a little bit more as this discussion progresses on to other stages.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this wonderful opportunity today to speak here on this important topic and concerns around Bill 83, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act, 2021. In Alberta the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act will provide for an expanded producer responsibility framework for single-use plastics, packaging, paper products as well as unsafe and special products.

Before I further begin expressing my support for this bill, I would like to express my appreciation to the Minister of Environment and Parks and the team, all members, constituents, and the Premier for all the dedication in taking the initiative and spending countless hours working hard to improve, strengthen, and modernize our environmental sector.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the minister and the entire team for taking the initiative in bringing out this important bill to reduce barriers and ensure efficiencies within our system as well as to sort input on the design of an extended producer responsibility strategy in spring 2021.

10:10

I as well extend my appreciation to Dow Chemical. We can now say that the Alberta advantage is retained after years of diminishing investment in our province. Since the spring of 2019 our government has worked closely with Dow Chemical to secure this massive investment. Policies such as the red tape reduction strategy, the petrochemical incentive program, the skills for jobs strategy, the natural gas strategy, municipalities' flexibility to offer property tax incentives, preapproved regulatory zones, and investments in carbon capture and storage infrastructure have all contributed to Alberta's status as a magnet for this type of investment.

This is fantastic news for both our coal energy sector and our diversification efforts as well as a significant step towards achieving Alberta's natural gas strategy's ambitious goals of growing the petrochemical sector by more than \$30 billion by 2030, resulting in more than 90,000 direct and indirect jobs during the construction and operation of new facilities and more than \$10 billion in corporate and personal income tax revenue for the province. Mr. Speaker, the aim is to have a clear, better path for business operations in our province as we monitor our economy after the major challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The recycling program in Alberta is well established. It is an industry that creates economic opportunities and, most importantly, ensures our environment is well protected.

Plastic is material made to last forever, yet a high percentage of all plastics – water bottles, bags, straws – are used just once and thrown away. Plastic, as we know, cannot biodegrade. Chemicals in plastic which give them their rigidity or flexibility – flame retardants, bisphenols, phthalates, and other harmful chemicals – are oily poisons that repel water and stick to petroleum-based objects like plastic debris. Wildlife as well are becoming entangled in plastics. They eat it or mistake it for food and feed it to their young. It is found littered in even extremely remote areas of the Earth. In our oceans alone plastic debris outweighs zooplankton. The toxic chemicals that leach out of plastics can accumulate on other plastics. This is a serious concern with increasing amounts of plastic debris accumulating in the world's oceans.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is that essentially, at the end of the day, everything suffers – tourism, recreation, business, the health of humans, animals, fish, birds – because of plastic pollution. The financial damage continuously being inflicted is inestimable. Plastic recycling is very important and must be taken seriously. Plastics make up a huge amount of solid waste and take centuries to break down in landfills or the ocean. Therefore, all recyclable plastics should be recycled to reduce landfill, conserve energy, and

conserve the environment. We are lucky to be living in a province that values and participates in the recycling program. It will encourage and show our generations to come how to protect and care for the environment.

As time goes by, there are more efficient and cost-effective ways to recycle and ensure that our environment, economy, and ways to create jobs are well supported.

Mr. Speaker, the new extended producer responsibility framework will help Alberta diversify its economy by pushing businesses to come up with new ways to recycle more post-consumer items like plastics and produce less trash and packaging. Extended producer responsibility transfers the fiscal and financial burden of trash collection, sorting, processing, and recycling from municipalities and taxpayers to the producer.

Alberta's suggested strategy is a similar producer-run system in other jurisdictions, giving producers the ability to build local recycling markets, redesign cost-effective, efficient recycling operations, maximize the value of their products, and demonstrate environmental responsibility. As well, new innovations in Alberta's recycling program are vital in the workplace, giving companies an edge in penetrating markets faster, and provide better connections to developing markets, which can lead to bigger opportunities. Approval of both enabling amendments to the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act as well as providing support to a new extended producer responsibility, EPR, framework will provide greater efficiency and improvement in the economy and support the innovation in recycling.

Mr. Speaker, it is a very common approach all across Canada to implement the EPR framework. Alberta is one of the last jurisdictions to consider adopting the EPR. EPR programs for packaging and paper products as well as home and special products would bring Alberta into line with British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. New Brunswick has stated that by spring 2023 it plans to have an EPR program in place for packaging and paper products. As well, in the beginning of January 2023 British Columbia will extend the number of single-use plastic products that can be recycled through industry-funded residential recycling programs.

Alberta has a chance to learn from other jurisdictions in order to ensure that our strategy and systems are well informed, resulting in a final framework that is efficient and effective. Alberta's proposed approach would strive for consistency and harmonization by aligning with producer-run programs in other jurisdictions, empowering producers to create local recycling markets, design cost-effective, efficient recycling programs, maximize product value, and demonstrate environmental responsibility.

It is crucial to move forward with common approaches as there is an abundant amount of potential to create new jobs, improve our economic situation, and protect our environment. Alberta's natural gas vision strategy is an important part of Alberta's recovery plan. It includes advancing a circular plastics economy where the full value of plastic product is reused, recycled, and remanufactured across many life cycles. Mr. Speaker, by 2030 the aim of Alberta is to be the centre of excellence for plastic diversion and recycling, and the EPR will be one of the key parts of achieving the visions and strategy.

As of now the existing beverage container system is not included in the scope of the government's EPR study. If an EPR framework for beverage containers is desired in the future, it will only be explored after consideration and consultation with the beverage container industry.

10:20

Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta is dedicated to providing Albertans with safe disposal choices for unsafe household items

such as plasticizers and solvents. Transitioning to EPR will provide a long-term solution for managing unsafe and special products, HSP, which include fresh HHW, until an EPR program is established. Environment and Parks will continue to fund the HHW program at the same level it was in 2020-21, about \$1.9 million, until 2023, when an EPR program will be introduced.

The EPR will support many Albertans and the petrochemical industry, that will ensure the recycling industry advances the way of reutilizing plastic to create new work and provide investment certainty. Currently there are no consistent municipal frameworks in the province. There seems to be a lack of postconsumer markets, that has created barriers to develop and improve the recycling programs.

As well, Mr. Speaker, according to Alberta's natural gas vision strategy increasing recycling might result in an economic boost of \$1.4 billion and the support of 13,300 employment in the future. Alberta's present recycling efforts support 7,500 jobs, and according to the report Alberta's recycling sector generated \$700 million in income-based gross value-add in 2018.

The inconsistent and fewer options for Alberta to manage waste streams create barriers to develop markets with the scale of attracting investment. It is good news that there will be no impacts to the existing infrastructure and investment in the existing recycling programs. Efforts to support the EPR framework will allow the ability to create opportunity and recovery in our province.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage everyone in this Chamber to support Bill 83. It is certain that Alberta's economy will diversify thanks to a new EPR framework. This will encourage businesses to come up with new ways to recycle more materials and produce less waste and packaging by expanding markets and increasing investments in plastics recycling. An EPR framework will aid in Alberta's transition to a circular economy instead of creating environmental waste; a made-in-Alberta solution that will create jobs and keep plastics in the economy. We hope to have our EPR system up in operation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I notice that the hon. member has just a few seconds left, and I wouldn't want to presuppose what he may or may not want to do, but perhaps he may have wanted to adjourn debate. I'm not sure.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With that, I will adjourn the debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Motions

Equalization Payments

101. Mr. Kenney moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly:

- (a) recognize the results of the referendum held on October 18, 2021, where 61.7 per cent of voters supported removing section 36(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982, Parliament and the government of Canada's commitment to the principle of making equalization payments,
- (b) reaffirm the principle articulated by the Supreme Court of Canada in the 1998 reference re secession of Quebec that it is "the constitutional right of each participant in the federation to initiate Constitutional change" and that "this right implies a reciprocal duty on the other participants to engage in discussions to address any

legitimate initiative to change the constitutional order,"

- (c) authorize an amendment to the Constitution of Canada to be made by proclamation issued by Her Excellency the Governor General under the Great Seal of Canada in accordance with the schedule set forth below, and
- (d) direct the government of Alberta to take all necessary steps to secure a fair deal for Alberta in the Canadian federation, including the reform of federal transfer programs, the defence of provincial powers enumerated in the Constitution, and the right to pursue responsible development of natural resources.

SCHEDULE

AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF CANADA

1. The Constitution Act, 1982 is amended by repealing section 36(2) thereof.
2. This Amendment may be cited as the Constitution Amendment, [year of proclamation].

[VERSION FRANÇAISE]

MODIFICATION DE LA CONSTITUTION DU CANADA

1. Le paragraphe 36(2) de la Loi constitutionnelle de 1982 est abrogé.
2. Titre de la présente modification: Modification constitutionnelle de [l'année de la proclamation]

[Adjourned debate November 17: Mr. Williams]

The Speaker: I see the hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to Government Motion 101. Albertans have spoken loud and clearly through the recent referendum, and they've given us a clear message that Alberta is not treated fairly and that equalization needs to change. As we all know, approximately 62 per cent of those who cast their ballots in this unique and historic referendum want to see a change, and Alberta's UCP government is determined to get a fair deal from Ottawa.

I know that some pundits and perhaps even members of the opposition have tried to suggest that this referendum will not accomplish anything, but, Mr. Speaker, I offer that it will accomplish a lot. As Albertans we succeed when we are united. We succeed when we rally together to support a common cause. We succeed when we work together for the betterment of our province. United together, we can accomplish anything.

Now, while Albertans want to see a fair deal for our province, I know that we are collectively proud of the role we play in building a stronger Canada. We just have to look in this very Chamber to see evidence of our commitment to a strong Canada. We are the only Legislative Assembly in the country that displays the flags of all other provinces in the Chamber. But the problem is that despite our commitment to federation, Alberta is not treated fairly.

In fact, Alberta taxpayers through their federal taxes have contributed over \$630 billion more to the rest of the country than they have received back in federal benefits and transfers since the mid-1960s, \$200 billion more in net contributions made by Alberta taxpayers to Ottawa in the last decade alone, even while we were going through a period of deep economic adversity. Albertans continue to make a net contribution to the federation in the range of \$20 billion a year.

Now, Mr. Speaker, equalization is a system that exists in many federations, other jurisdictions around the world, and, of course,

right here in Canada, and it has existed in various forms in Canada since the late 1950s. As members of the Assembly may know, it was formalized as a principle in the Constitution of Canada, section 36, in 1982, with the repatriation of the Constitution and the concurrent adoption of the Charter of Rights. It is the principle that all provinces should maintain roughly comparable levels of public services at roughly comparable levels of taxation.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I know that Albertans agree that every Canadian should have comparable levels of services regardless of what province they live in. This is a noble and worthwhile objective that is a source of pride for all Canadians. I don't think any of us want to see fellow Canadians in other parts of the country living in abject poverty while other parts of the country might be in periods of spectacular prosperity. I believe Albertans are proud to have been able to contribute to their fellow Canadians when times have been good here but bad elsewhere, but all we have asked for and what we are saying with these referendum results is that we must have a fair deal.

If Ottawa and our fellow provinces want to benefit from the hard work of the people of Alberta and the abundant natural resources within our province, then they must allow us to develop these resources and grow our economy. Instead, what we have faced is an endless series of discriminatory pieces of legislation and policies that have impeded Alberta's economy and undermined our constitutional authority in our ability to control and manage our own natural resources.

What's more troubling, Mr. Speaker, is that these anti-oil policies from Ottawa hurt hard-working Alberta families. Over the last few years we have seen tens of billions of dollars of investment leave our province due in large part to the uncertain economic climate that the federal Liberals and the Alberta NDP, during their time in government, created. This meant tens of thousands of jobs left our province and our economy weakened. It meant that dreams were dashed, and too many Albertans moved from prosperity into despair.

Now, the results of the equalization referendum demonstrate clearly the significant level of frustration Albertans are feeling about these federal policies and the unwillingness of other provinces to help us develop our resources. Some of these challenging policies include Bill C-48, that bans oil transportation on our west coast. In fact, Mr. Speaker, this is the first and only time in Canadian history that a federal government has effectively banned the export of a product, and indeed it is frustrating to many Albertans that the product singled out is one that so many families rely on. This was nothing but a direct frontal attack on Alberta's economic interests.

10:30

Bill C-69 as well, the no-more-pipelines law, is another example and is a clear violation of Alberta's exclusive constitutional authority under section 92A of the Constitution, which ensures that our province has exclusive control over its natural resources, which, as I may remind the Assembly, was a critical win by Premier Peter Lougheed, who recognized that the autonomy to extract and develop our natural resources was critical to ensuring Alberta's future economic prosperity.

This is now at risk due to unconstitutional intrusions by the Trudeau Liberals. Let's not forget as well, Mr. Speaker, that they also threw more regulatory hurdles in front of the Energy East pipeline. [interjection] In a few moments, sir. And those hurdles that they threw in front of the Energy East pipeline project were to kill it. As well, let us not forget that they did nothing when Keystone XL was vetoed by U.S. President Obama. It's easy to understand

why Albertans are so frustrated. They are essentially being told to stop making a living but to keep sending cheques. Albertans have said, "No more," and I stand with them.

This is a powerful statement from Albertans, a democratic statement where Albertans are demanding to be respected. They're demanding that Alberta be respected. They're demanding the right to earn a living and feed their families, and above all else, Mr. Speaker, they're demanding a fair deal. [interjections] I'm happy to accept an interjection from the member.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you to my colleague from Calgary-Bow for eloquently listing a number of the different ways in which the Trudeau Liberals have really thumbed their nose at Alberta and, as you put it, expect us to keep sending cheques but not being able to earn a living for our families. Would you be able to comment on: after the referendum results were published and made clear to the federal government yet still thumbing their nose at us with the appointing of the federal cabinet minister Steven Guilbeault as the minister of environment, who is a radical environmentalist that has zero intent, from all I can tell – and I'm interested in hearing someone else – in trying to find a reasonable, thoughtful solution. It seems as though it's a part of the exact same pattern of behaviour.

Mr. Nicolaides: It is, and it's quite unfortunate. As my colleague has mentioned, even after this important and historic referendum occurred in the province, with a clear message being sent, we see the response from the Trudeau Liberals. I believe even before the appointment of the individual he mentioned as minister Prime Minister Trudeau was asked about the referendum, I recall, in a press conference where he very openly dismissed it as nothing of importance. Mr. Speaker, this is incredibly worrisome.

I recall in 2019, during the course of the election – and I know that many of my colleagues probably experienced the same – the hundreds and thousands of doors that we knocked on during the course of that campaign, be it in Red Deer or in Grande Prairie or in Calgary. What we heard and what I heard time and time again from our neighbours, from families in Alberta was that they were tired of being treated like a doormat. The members opposite laugh and chuckle, but that was what we heard loud and clear, Mr. Speaker, and that is why we campaigned on advancing a fair deal for Alberta. I know I stand united with all of my colleagues on this side of the aisle in getting a fair deal for our province. Because enough is enough. [interjection] I'm happy to accept another interjection.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you. I appreciate that. You know, I noticed that the members across the aisle, unfortunately, were chuckling. I know that Justin Trudeau has been described in the media as the first NDP Prime Minister. I'd be interested in your comments. Why do you think that the NDP doesn't seem to care about this at all, getting a fair deal for Albertans? Why do they just sit here and do nothing? Do you have any ideas or thoughts on that?

Mr. Nicolaides: It is a very insightful question. I struggle, to be honest. I struggle to try and understand why they would be so opposed. I can understand the opposition. I can understand having a different perspective and having a different point of view. But postreferendum, in an environment now where, again, through a clear democratic process with a clear question on a clear topic, Albertans have expressed their opinion overwhelmingly, 62 per cent, again, of those who participated and voted, I cannot

understand why they would continue to object and why they would not stand with the vast majority of Albertans in getting a fair deal.

Mr. Speaker, I've had the fortune of living abroad and travelling to many other parts of the world, but I'm a very proud born-and-raised Calgarian and born-and-raised Albertan. There is no better place in the world than right here in our beautiful province, and I believe we must fight every single day to do what we can to make this province stronger, to make this province better, and I believe an important part of that action includes creating a stronger province within the Canadian federation. We're not asking for special treatment. We're asking to be treated equally just as other provinces are. Again, we have a clear demonstration through this democratic process, through the referendum, that Albertans want us to proceed overwhelmingly in this direction to get a fair deal from Ottawa.

I'm proud to stand with my government colleagues. Again, I hope the members opposite will work together with us and with the

majority of Albertans, who have supported the referendum, to get a fair deal from Ottawa. I don't think that'll be the case, but I do cling to hope and I do cling to optimism because, as I mentioned earlier in my speech, I know that when Albertans are united and when we work together, we can achieve incredible results. The only possible outcome of working together on achieving a fair deal is a stronger and better province. I think we can all agree that that is a worthwhile objective.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until tomorrow at 9 o'clock a.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:39 p.m.]

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