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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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Day 133

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Independent: 2

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, November 29, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 80

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

Ms. Renaud moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2), be amended by deleting all of the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2), 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.

[Debate adjourned on the amendment November 24: Ms Ganley speaking]

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are on amendment REF1 as proposed by the hon. Member for St. Albert. The debate was adjourned by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, with approximately two minutes remaining should she choose to use them.

Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise this evening to speak to Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). What we have before us here again is another piece of omnibus legislation. Essentially, you know, we've seen this a few times from the UCP government, where they put forward some pieces within legislation that, I guess, you might call red tape reduction or clarifying language, modernizing it. We see that having to take place every once in a while. Unfortunately, this continues a record from this government where they also stick in very consequential amendments to other pieces of legislation that are going to have massive impacts on Albertans. Again, I am supporting the referral amendment or motion that is currently on the floor because the fact is that while we see some changes to things that are less substantial or more modernizing certain acts, we also see things that are going to have deep implications for Albertans.

In this instance we are talking about Albertans who are trying to better themselves by getting supports to continue their education. In many instances the funding that we are talking about right now regarding the Income and Employment Supports Act – these are people, again, in many cases, who may have several obligations or hurdles to overcome to get back into postsecondary learning. Instead of having our government, especially right now in a time of the pandemic and in COVID, when we should be encouraging people to better themselves and get the education that they might be trying to pursue – in this case, you know, programs that we're talking about, for instance, are programs like English as a second language. Ensuring that people have proper opportunities to get the education that they might need to further themselves and their careers: while we should be doing our best to support those initiatives, unfortunately, we see this government going in a direction that is quite the opposite.

When we look at this act, it currently provides support for both training benefits and income support and benefits. We see this government making moves to reduce the amount of funding that is available for full-time learners. It's deeply unfortunate because we see essentially a sunset of the training benefits that people are able to access.

We can get more into that, but the fact is that this continues on other decisions that this government has made. Reflecting on the tax year 2020, the government making a decision to issue T5007 income tax forms, which is considered a statement of benefits, so many Albertans at tax time, not before but while they are doing their taxes, are finding out that they're actually losing significant benefits and important benefits, potentially even cuts to GST credits or Alberta child and family benefits. Again, these are people who are trying to better themselves. In some instances – in many instances, quite likely – these are people who are trying to take care of their families at the same time as furthering their education. We see this government not only make those changes in the 2020 tax year that affected their child benefit or their GST credits; now we see this government further scaling back other opportunities for funding for full-time learners.

I can only imagine – I mean, we see so many decisions from this government that are affecting Albertans at a time, again, in the midst of a continued pandemic. What is the direction of this government? Deindexing Alberta seniors' benefits, deindexing AISH. We see changes happening to temporary accommodation benefits and funding. We're hearing this. I'm sure that every single MLA in this Legislature – I know that I have received several messages to my office about the effects that these kinds of decisions are having on Albertans. We've heard the stories of massive increases of people who are needing to go to places like the food bank. Unfortunately, you know, this government has taken a response to all of these people who are crying out for their help or asking that they continue these important programs – the government is essentially saying: don't worry; the economy will get better at some point, and you'll have an opportunity to get a job, but by no means are we going to continue these supports for you.

I think that my colleagues have made it very clear why they support the referral, and I hope that I can do that as well. The fact is that the decisions this government is making, when we're talking about the Income and Employment Supports Act, are so detrimental to the future of this province and the people and families who are counting on this funding. I have to ask because it hasn't been clear. What consultation process took place to give the government permission – you know, I guess maybe “permission” isn't the right word – make them think that this was the right decision?

It truly seems like with the decisions that this government has made around cutting so many different benefits to Albertans who are in a time of need, who are struggling to get by, and who once had programs in place to support themselves and to support their family members, unfortunately, this government is more concerned about – I'm not sure what, to be honest, Mr. Speaker. They might say that they are concerned about the budget, but the fact is that they've been doubling the debt that was already there. They have made no headway on that. If they have, it really is only because of the price of oil, which is dramatically changing day to day again, as we're seeing. They really have no excuse when we see the decisions that they've made. We've seen no clear commitment to consultation through this process, which is why I, again, am supporting the referral amendment that is before us on the floor of the Legislature.

I'm still somewhat unsure about the cost changes that they expect, I guess, the amount that Albertans are going to have taken away from them through the changes to these programs. The government has said that there are programs that they've put in

place that are essentially going to replace what we're seeing in the proposed changes in this legislation, but we've seen far too many times, Mr. Speaker, that the government says one thing and does a completely different thing, whether we talk about the changes that they made to the timing of benefits. We continue, as we head into this holiday season, to see that there are many Alberta families who are concerned because, again, it is very unclear, because of the changes that ministers have made, where the payment dates are going to fall. Instead of, as a good government might do, clarifying situations like that, Albertans are left essentially to the date to find out in many cases.

The government won't even admit that there's something wrong here, won't even admit that they've made a mistake or that a program isn't necessarily working in a way that it should have or that they thought it would. Unfortunately, until this government is at least willing to admit that they're making these mistakes, we can't get to the part of clarifying those mistakes. We've seen that again and again, Mr. Speaker, from this government. It's truly unfortunate because Albertans deserve better.

At a time when, again, Albertans should be able to count on the supports that they've needed over so many years and likely more so now than ever with the rising costs of insurance because of UCP inaction, the rising costs of postsecondary education because of the UCP's decision to lift the tuition freeze and increase the interest rate on student aid, we continue down this road, and I'm very worried, Mr. Speaker, for the people who are accessing these programs and the many other programs that have been there for them in place until this government decided to start cutting them.

7:40

With that, I look forward to hearing more throughout this debate. I think that this government talks a big game about getting support out to Albertans. Whether it is private citizens who are in desperate need of these supports or if it is the some 4,300 small businesses, most of them still waiting for the third instalment of the small and medium-sized enterprise relaunch grant, you know, the fact is that this government talks about moving at the speed of business, but it truly isn't being shown in their work. I encourage them to get that money out the door for those small businesses so people can get back to work, and the same goes for those Albertans who are waiting on the supports that they so desperately need.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat. Again, I support the amendment to move this to committee that is on the floor.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to speak to amendment REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Oh, my goodness. My absolute apologies to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Now, I will say, Mr. Speaker, that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and I have many constituents in common. In fact, well, our riding has a major shared border. Many constituents of mine have actually written to me wishing that their MLA was the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood because she's an incredible advocate.

An Hon. Member: You've got to step up.

Mr. Bilous: That's true.

Now, they do in the same message indicate their support for me except I think that when it comes to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and her cat, Oregon, there is no one in this Chamber who can match her presence on social media.

With that, I am pleased to rise and speak to Bill 80, the red tape reduction act, and to the amendment that my hon. colleague put forward. Mr. Speaker, it will come as no surprise to you or members of the Chamber that I do in fact support this referral motion and urge all members of the Chamber to support it also.

Now, I'll start my comments, Mr. Speaker, by saying that there are some changes in this bill that I do support, that I think will actually help improve a challenged business environment. Having said that, the challenge with omnibus legislation such as Bill 80, that we are debating this evening, is that the government will try to implement changes to pieces of legislation that they know full well we cannot support – in fact, I think they know full well that the majority of Albertans don't support – yet they'll tuck them into a piece of legislation and kind of make it a grab bag, so, you know, changes that are good with changes that they know full well the opposition won't support.

So we're left in a position of: well, what can we do to improve the legislation where it currently stands? That's why, Mr. Speaker, I'm supporting this referral motion. It'll give the government an opportunity to take a look at some of the changes they're proposing. In fact, we have changes in this red tape reduction bill which I do also want to flag. Every government since Alberta became a province has introduced omnibus legislation to make administrative changes to a number of bills. This government, because they want to tout the fact that they're reducing red tape, have put it into a new column or under a new banner. They've rebranded what every government has done, you know, for the past 116 years and refer to it as red tape reduction. This bill amends the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act, the Alberta Human Rights Act, the Credit Union Act, the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act, the Income and Employment Supports Act, the Insurance Act, the Loan and Trust Corporations Act, and the Mines and Minerals Act, so a significant number.

Now, I'll go through my comments, Mr. Speaker, in no particular order as far as highlighting some of the changes that I support along with some of the changes that I have issues with.

One of the most substantive changes in this piece of legislation is removing the adult learner stream from income support. This is significant, and I'm happy to actually speak from personal experience. I know that you're aware of this, Mr. Speaker, but Albertans may not be. I'm a high school teacher by trade. I taught at a very small school in Edmonton, from 2006 until 2012, called Inner City High School. Now, this school is truly unique. It's not Centre High, for those folks listening at home that confuse the two. Inner City High School is a school that serves a very unique population between the ages of 15 to 24. These are students who have been unsuccessful in the traditional system. They've been unsuccessful because they are in unique circumstances and face a number of barriers that the majority of Alberta students don't face and actually probably aren't even aware that there are students that face these barriers.

Some of the students face challenges with addictions. Some of them are in and out of incarceration and pass back and forth within the system. Many of the students are young parents that, of course, have the challenge of ensuring that they can provide for their families and feed their babies but still want to get a high school education. Our traditional school system – and I'm not criticizing it, Mr. Speaker, because our school system, well, until this UCP government took office, was ranked within the top 10 in the world, and I'm looking at the former Minister of Education, who can nod for me. With our test scores, including in math, despite what this government is saying, we were a leader globally.

In fact, what I can tell members – a side story, but it's my prerogative, so I'll take it – is that when I was in China on a trade

mission in 2017, I met the first graduating class from China using the Alberta curriculum. I'm talking about the class that used the curriculum from kindergarten to grade 12, and it was a very proud moment.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I'm proud of the province I grew up in and of the people who faithfully serve our young people and play such a critical role educating our youth. I think there are probably few jobs that are truly more important than ensuring that we are providing the next generation with the right tools and skills they need to be successful.

So that was a really proud moment, Mr. Speaker, to be in China and a part of their graduating class. I know for a fact that many countries and other provinces and territories used to use Alberta's curriculum until recently. One, it's a challenge with the changes that are being made – I recognize that's a different piece of legislation – but where this ties back to is the fact that we need to be providing as many supports for our students to be successful as possible, not the opposite.

7:50

I go back to Inner City High School. These students, who are parents and have mouths to feed, cannot be full-time students during the day and pay for child care and rent and food. They're on programs, government programs like, for example, advancing futures and other programs, but they receive and have received support from the government. Likely my biggest criticism of this bill and why I do not support it and why I am supporting this motion is because it's making changes to the adult learner stream.

Mr. Speaker, I will stand here and give an argument that I gave for many years and why I ran to defeat the former PC Party. How much does it cost to incarcerate a youth per year? I'll tell you. Back in 2006 it was \$90,000. How much does it cost the taxpayer – I'm hoping the accountants in the room are paying attention – to educate a youth and not incarcerate? About \$18,000. To anyone in this room who actually calls themselves a fiscal conservative, if you're being honest with yourself, giving people a hand up and supporting them so that they do not become repeat offenders in the system is actually in your best interest. This bill does the opposite of that. Now, that's the fiscal argument.

I believe that these young people deserve a fair crack. I'll ask any member in this room: "Do you think a person chooses to be born in poverty? Do they choose to be homeless or houseless?" If anyone answers yes, you are beyond clueless. Nobody chooses that. Our children are born into the circumstances that their parents faced. But here is the challenge with many of the learners that this bill affects: we don't choose who are parents are. If this young person's parents went in and out of the legal system and were incarcerated and their parents went through it, what this is doing, by changing the ability for these young people to receive government dollars to change their lives, is that we're trying to break this pattern, and this is another barrier.

I happily tell the story of why I got involved in politics. I was teaching at Inner City High School, seeing these young people facing challenges. But they're not there because they have to be. None of them were court ordered to be there. They were all there by choice. That alone speaks volumes on the character of the young people that attended this school, and it frustrated the heck out of me that the government of the day put up artificial barriers and hoops in order to thwart their funding. If that wasn't the case, well, I'm sorry, but those are the optics to everybody on the outside, where it seems like at every turn the government is looking for reasons to remove them from receiving this funding or block them from it.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that right then and there I decided that I'm not just going to complain about this from the sidelines,

but I'm going to run, and I'm going to try to effect change, because these young people deserve it. They deserve the same opportunity that every young person in this province deserves no matter the colour of their skin or their religion or what side of the city they grew up on or who their parents were. It's extremely frustrating that this bill is removing income support, and I can tell you, believe me, that in Committee of the Whole every member in this Chamber better hope that I don't get up and speak over and over and over, because I could speak for hours and hours and hours.

Mr. Nally: This feels like it.

Mr. Bilous: Oh, it'll feel like it a lot more when I do.

But it's my job as a member of the opposition to educate the rest of this government caucus on exactly what's in this bill and the implications that it has. We're talking about equal opportunity for young people, giving them a chance to turn their life around. This government, of course, looks at it as a cost. I'd love to know what the private members of the government said when the Premier talked about buying a pipeline to nowhere for \$1.5 billion.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else that wishes to speak to amendment REF1? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise in the House to speak to amendment REF1 to Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021. Every time I see something coming from the Associate Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, I'm kind of reminded in very bold letters of the part of the election speech of the UCP leaders and the UCP party as to how they were interpreting the meaning of red tape reduction to Albertans. Red tape reduction: sometimes they bragged that it will bring investment in Alberta, that it will speed up the process of establishing new ventures, adding new employment, and that that will send a message to the corporate world. They will rush to invest their money in Alberta, and that will help address the economic crisis that the province is facing.

Every time I stand up to speak to something coming from the ministry, what we see specifically in this bill, other than some of the housekeeping changes that would have been done by the legislative amendments, is that the government is still thinking they can just, you know, try to get their way with Albertans by bagging up a number of things and then getting away with substantial changes to the acts that will do nothing to improve the quality of life or increase employment or help our education system or that will build our health care system. The changes we are seeing are totally opposite to the way the ministry was created. They send a signal that turned out to be that everything the UCP was saying was false. Looking at this bill, it is even more obvious. The UCP government themselves are very clear and convinced. Each and every member who is willing to support this Bill 80 as it is: it seems like they have been convinced by now.

8:00

This associate ministry, basically, probably will have nothing to do to help everyday Albertans. What we see in this bill, instead of addressing the growing economic crisis under the UCP government, their failed and wrong decisions under the name of creating employment and creating big holes in Alberta's budget by taking billions of dollars away, promising Albertans that it will, you know, create jobs and help our economy prosper – it turned out to be false and false slogans every time. This bill doesn't do anything to address those mistakes or wrongdoings. On the contrary, it's moving forward to create even more hurdles and create more

challenges for those very Albertans that wanted to take the challenge, to face the challenges in their lives and take the risk to, in many cases, join – like, I’m speaking of the changes this bill is bringing to the Alberta learner income support and the skills investment bursary programs.

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

These programs have been so critical for those people. They wanted to upgrade their education. They wanted to complete their diplomas. They wanted to complete their degrees while helping their families, making sure their families have food on the table. I actually understand because a number of my friends, even I myself personally applied for the bursary, the skills investment bursary program, and I was accepted for it. I had very different circumstances. Eventually I didn’t use it, but I know that a number of those people come from other countries, other places in the world and make our very province their home. They come with degrees and higher educations that are not being recognized in our province, and they want to upgrade according to the Canadian or Albertan standard not only so they could prosper their life or make their family’s life better but so they can also contribute to our province and our country.

Instead of looking at those things and understanding the mechanism and the ideas behind these programs and while the province is going through a deep economic crisis, the government, under the name of the red tape associate ministry, is bringing legislation to debate in the House that will create more hurdles for those individuals who are working very hard every step of the way in their life to upgrade their education so they can better contribute to our economy and they can better contribute to our province.

I just wanted to read one of the messages our caucus received from the very person. She explained how these changes are affecting, actually, her life and planning of her life. It’s not only an individual’s life. It’s the life of their families, their children.

Asila Ashmawi, a Syrian refugee and mother of three, was forced to cancel her ESL program at Columbia College. As a result of the UCP’s policy change, she would have been forced to report thousands in additional income, which would have meant she no longer qualified for the Alberta Child Benefit.

“I was forced to decide between my career, my dreams or caring for my three children,” she said during a Sunday press conference.

She spoke in the press conference Sunday with my caucus colleague, and she said:

“I chose my family of course, but this isn’t right.”

The decision to change the tax treatment of these learning supports was done without consultation, and without Albertans knowing this change was coming. As a result, many low income Albertans didn’t find out about additional income reporting requirements until they did their taxes.

This is how these small changes and the directions the UCP has been moving in for the past two and a half years are impacting those very Albertans’ lives. That is in no way contributing any better to our economy in Alberta or for the future of our province or the future of our next generations. That was the promise the UCP made. Everyone remembers the Premier’s blue pickup truck and his promises to fill up Calgary buildings, and we know that people are still asking those questions in empty Calgary towers.

This bill is not doing anything to fulfill those promises. On the contrary, what we have seen is that with the funding, funding like SMERG, even with the support of the federal government, the federal money, the UCP government even have failed to deliver fairly to those very struggling businesses. Over 4,600 businesses have been denied SMERG. Many applications were thrown out for the wrong Internet browser, and then they were giving unreasonable

timelines to turn over information. I spoke in the House. I made a member’s statement. I heard my constituents, and I worked with the ministry to work with those discrepancies, to get their applications approved. Those applicants were not wrong anywhere in the process, but they still haven’t received their funding. That is the question when we’re discussing the red tape associate ministry’s proposals, bills: how is this going to help? The minister can just answer this question: how is this bill, the red tape reduction associate ministry’s actions, going to help those 4,600 people get their SMERG funding?

8:10

On the contrary, it’s going to make people’s lives tough. This program has been helpful the way it has been working and supporting those very families in our province for decades. As I said, those families immigrating to Canada, Alberta, with a higher education: their dignity is not being recognized working on low-wage jobs and then using those opportunities to upgrade their education. This is creating another hurdle for those families, and that is why I actually stood up to speak in favour of the amendment. This is very important. This bill should not move forward as it is, as it has been proposed by the government’s red tape associate ministry right now, so I would encourage all of my House colleagues, on both sides, to please support this amendment REF1 motion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Any other members? I recognize the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s nice to see you in the chair. I’d like to speak to Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2001 . . .

Mr. Carson: 2021.

Ms Goehring: What did I say?

Mr. Carson: 2001.

Ms Goehring: Oh, 2021.

. . . on the referral to committee. I think that when we’re looking at this piece of legislation, there are so many portfolios that are impacted by this. It only makes sense to be able to have it sent to committee to, you know, get further clarity, to give Albertans an opportunity to ask the questions that they have, perhaps actually to get some answers to the questions that they have. I know that when we’re looking at this piece of legislation – it’s called red tape reduction – some of this legislation could have easily been fixed with simple housekeeping measures through a miscellaneous statutes amendment act.

I know that when we were government, we did that, and it wasn’t considered red tape; it was considered cleaning up the legislation. It was something that we did with ease. We did it in this very Chamber. We didn’t need to create a whole new ministry of red tape to do that. I remember the debate on one of the amendments was to change the word “motorcycle” in the legislation. It had apparently been spelled three different ways, and a simple change was just making sure that it was consistent and spelled the same throughout the legislation. Instead of creating this omnibus legislation, you know, each ministry could have been responsible for their own topics.

We’ve seen this government pick and choose what goes into their red tape, what goes into other ministries’ legislation. You know, a

clear example of that within this government is a bill that's being debated right in this very Chamber currently, Bill 84, the Business Corporations Amendment Act, 2021. There are a lot of things in that piece of legislation that are simple housekeeping, cleanup, that make sense. I'm curious why that legislation required its own bill and that the Minister of Service Alberta was capable to do their own housekeeping, yet the UCP has created this omnibus legislation and taken away the ability for ministers to do their own work in their own ministry where, arguably, their area of expertise resides.

What I fear is that with all this legislation – to be clear, there are several acts that are being impacted under this: the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act; the Alberta Human Rights Act; the Credit Union Act; the ensuring fiscal sustainability act; the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act; the Income and Employment Supports Act; the Insurance Act; the Loan and Trust Corporations Act; the Mines and Minerals Act.

That's a lot of legislation and a lot of acts. I think that by having this bill referred to committee, it would give Albertans a real opportunity to provide their feedback in their area of expertise rather than putting it all into this omnibus legislation and just pushing it through. I think that when we ask for a referral to committee, it makes sense because the minister responsible for red tape is looking at all of these different acts.

I'm curious how the consultation process went, because I've heard, you know, from several of the business organizations around the province, specifically related to section 8, amending section 90, regarding the entertainment districts, the designation eligible by municipalities. After speaking to some of these business associations, they're saying: "Sure. This is a great change; however, this isn't a top priority for us." What that tells me is that perhaps a lot of consultation didn't occur, or if it did, what they heard wasn't actually implemented. I think that by sending this to committee, it gives those who are being impacted an opportunity to come forward and provide their feedback. There is a lot of legislation that is being changed in this act, and by having it referred, it gives so many an opportunity to come in, share their feedback, ask their questions, and it gives the committee an opportunity to provide a report that perhaps the government would listen to.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I know, over and over, with this government, the opposition has provided numerous amendments, and they're just disregarded. But I think that when we have a committee looking at what Albertans have to say, there's a different level of appreciation for those individuals that took the time to submit to a committee. I'm on several committees where, you know, we hear from stakeholders, they reach out, and we give them an opportunity to come and present to the committee. It's an effective way to hear concerns directly and then create a report that then provides information back to this Chamber on what's going on. I think that when we have a piece of legislation as huge as this, it only makes sense to have it referred to committee to allow so many impacted to come and share their voice.

Now, I know that West Anthem, an organization that has been engaging with Alberta's live music venues, has submitted a proposal, and I'm curious what this government's take on that is. I know that it's specific to the AGLC handbook. In this omnibus legislation there are changes that are happening to the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act. I'm curious if their feedback was considered or if it would be considered, but I know that if this was referred to committee, West Anthem would certainly want to be a presenter at that committee. They've created a wonderful proposal outlining the needs of their industry. Their ask is simple; it's straightforward. They've been able to consult with many, many live

music venues across the province and collaborated and brought together this recommendation.

Perhaps they were talking to the Minister of Finance, because this falls under gaming and liquor, but they probably should have been speaking to the red tape minister. There is some confusion because sometimes it goes to red tape; sometimes it goes to the minister responsible. So perhaps by having this referred to committee, it would allow them an opportunity to bring forward the recommendation, which makes sense, and have it prepared and presented at the committee and then have the committee being able to provide that summary of their presentation and bring it back to the Chamber.

I think there are many organizations. I mean, that's only one organization or advocacy group that I can think of that would be impacted. When we're looking at Health, Environment and Parks, Advanced Education, Municipal Affairs, Seniors and Housing, Finance, that's a lot of people that are being impacted by this legislation. It's moving quite quickly, and it's quite a substantial bill. I mean, it's an omnibus, to be quite honest, and having it in front of committee would simply make sense.

8:20

I think that there have been so many questions that have been raised not only by our stakeholders in industry but by Albertans that have questions and concerns. I think that by having it referred to committee, it would provide that opportunity for this government to hear some feedback and some, actually, really good ideas that perhaps the red tape minister didn't think about. Perhaps had the ministry responsible for the legislative changes had the leading role, those things could have been fleshed out. Unfortunately, we see a government that created a ministry to reduce red tape. It just doesn't make sense.

So I would ask that all members in the Chamber support this referral so that this bill can be, you know, fulsomely debated, discussed. We can hear from Albertans. We can hear from stakeholders. I would request that everyone in the Chamber please support this amendment.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others on amendment REF1? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall is rising.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). I think the government has used this omnibus legislation to hide significant and, I would suggest, fundamental changes to many programs that Albertans rely on. I think the changes contained in this piece of legislation – I will only speak to certain pieces of this legislation. I think I will for the most part speak to the Income and Employment Supports Act and the changes that are contained in it.

In short, I think these changes are a continuation of the UCP policy to attack students, low-income Albertans, and newcomer Albertans, and I will certainly explain my assertions as well. The changes contained, with respect to the Income and Employment Supports Act, start at page 34, essentially saying that it's amending the act so that unless you're registered in a program before April 1, 2022, you will not be eligible for the learner benefit. So in order to be eligible for learner benefits, you have to be registered in an approved program before April 1, 2022. That's page 35. I would invite the minister to correct me if I say anything wrong or read the legislation wrong, but that's what it says: in order to qualify for the learner benefits program as it stands now, you have to be in a registered program before April 1, 2022.

After April 1 there will be a program that's not called the learner benefit program. That program will be governed by Alberta regulation 148/2021, the foundational learning assistance regulation.

Let me, first, talk about the program as it stands now. When we were in government, that program was within my ministry along with Advanced Education. It's a statutorily mandated program. What that means is that when an Albertan qualifies under the criteria provided for in the legislation, the government has an obligation to provide the benefits set forth in the regulation, in the legislation. Those benefits included a set amount as a living allowance. Those benefits included health benefits for the student, for the learner, and their family. Those benefits also included a generous child benefit as well: \$300 for the first kid and, I believe, \$100 thereafter for every other kid.

When we made changes to AISH income support, we increased and indexed the amount that Albertans were receiving through these programs, and the learner benefit program was one of those programs that we indexed as well. We increased it, and we indexed it. What this Bill 80 is doing to that program is that they are getting rid of this program altogether. The government is getting rid of this learner benefit program altogether in Bill 80 in the name of reducing red tape, and I think that's very troublesome.

The materials that the government shared with private and government-funded colleges that usually provide these programs – ESL, skills training, and upgrades in occupational training – those colleges were provided with the materials, and they were just told that this program will continue under a different piece of legislation. And guess what, Mr. Speaker? That's so not true. They're just getting rid of this program from the Income and Employment Supports Act. The way they're getting rid of that program is, as I mentioned, that if you're registered before April 1, 2022, you'll get the learner benefit, whatever the legislation provides for. But if you register after that, then the foundational learning assistance reg will govern that program, and that regulation will come into force January 1, 2022, for the program starting on or after April 1, 2022.

Section 3 of this regulation states:

Notwithstanding anything in this Regulation, the Minister may provide foundational learning assistance only if money is available for foundational learning assistance.

That's written in black and white in section 3, that if there is money available, it's the minister's choice; it's the minister's discretion. The word used is "may," that "the Minister may provide foundational learning assistance." It's not: the minister shall provide.

The current Income and Employment Supports Act mandates a program that has set eligibility criteria, that has set amounts, set benefits written in the legislation. In this case it says, "Notwithstanding anything in this Regulation." It doesn't matter what the regulation says; the minister may provide foundational learning assistance only if money is available for foundational learning programs. So the government is getting rid of a statutorily mandated program, that benefits students, low-income Albertans, and newcomers specifically, and giving the minister discretion that he may provide assistance if he has money.

8:30

The second thing is that, as I said, the program as it exists now is a statutorily mandated program, which means that eligibility, benefits, criteria, everything is set in the legislation, and here in this program section 8 of this proposed regulation essentially gives the minister discretion again to approve students their amounts only

when money is available and lists certain criteria. That's how it will be given to the students.

Clearly, no matter how the UCP presents this to Albertans, no matter how deceptive the language is used to convince people that the learner benefit stays, the fact is that this red tape reduction legislation eliminates the learner benefit program as of March 30, 2022. Starting next fiscal year, there will be no such thing as the learner benefit program, and that program is replaced with a program which may or may not exist, because the regulation says, "Notwithstanding anything in this Regulation, the Minister may [only provide assistance] if money is available."

We have seen what this government has done to other education programs. So far the minister has been responsible for and has presided over hikes in fees, layoffs from throughout our education institutions, and the erosion of the quality of education. I don't think this government can be trusted with their words if they say that they are replacing this program with a new program while giving the minister discretion and carte blanche to give assistance if money is available.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you to the member for giving way. I have a very short amount of time, but I just want to provide clarity. I mean, I've heard some members opposite saying that there won't continue to be applications for foundational learning and other learner benefits after April 1, and that's not the case, of course. As the member pointed to, applications for foundational learning and other student assistance programs will continue on January 1, 2022, when the new act comes into effect. But, of course, we can't have people applying for financial assistance under two different acts, so we're transitioning the authority from the Income and Employment Supports Act, closing that out on April 1, 2022, but opening up applications under the new act on January 1, 2022. You know, there's certainly no intent to dismantle learner benefits or shut down foundational learning programs or anything of that nature. This is about a transfer of authority, which actually began in 2016. It was a process to consolidate authority of these benefits.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will give the minister another chance to intervene. What I read earlier is that the Income and Employment Supports Act has a statutorily mandated program with a set amount of benefits – health benefit, child benefit – and when an Albertan qualifies for it, the minister responsible is required to provide that benefit. There is no qualification if there is money or not. Through you, to the minister, that section 3 – I'll read from the proposed regulation, which says, "Notwithstanding anything in this Regulation, the Minister may provide foundational learning assistance only if money is available for foundational learning assistance."

That, to me and to anyone reading the income support act and this regulation, means that the government is getting rid of the learner benefit program and as a replacement is giving the minister the discretion that if money is available, the minister may or may not provide some money to those learners. This change will impact students, low-income Albertans, and newcomers, many of whom are living in my riding. That's why I will be opposing this piece of legislation, and I think I will also be reaching out to those who will be directly impacted by that.

With that, I move that we adjourn debate on this.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 81
Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 (No. 2)

Mr. Nielsen moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 81, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 (No. 2), be amended by deleting all of the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 81, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 (No. 2), be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment November 24: Mr. Luan]

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are on the referral amendment. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview would like to add something to the debate.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I definitely would like to add to this important debate, especially as it relates to the referral motion put forward by my hon. colleague, which I am in support of. You know, this bill actually comes as a bit of a surprise, at least for those Albertans who listen to what this government says but then see that their actions are completely at odds with their words.

The government and my colleague the Minister of Justice talk about, you know, enhancing democracy and ensuring that we are providing an opportunity for every Albertan to have an equal voice and an equal say. In fact, this government, to the tune of millions of dollars of cost to the taxpayers, put forward a couple of different referendums, with questions on the municipal election ballot that I think even had members of the government caucus scratching their heads because the questions were so convoluted.

My favourite was the daylight saving time question, to which many constituents that I spoke with said: “We were only given two options, and what if we hated both options? Like, where is beyond that?” I don’t even know if the government contemplated a third option. You know, move the clocks on daylight saving or keep them where they are? Well, there’s a third option. But that’s neither here nor there because the government clearly doesn’t care what Albertans think or say, because they’re moving forward with an Alberta police force.

I know the Minister of Municipal Affairs was also in attendance at most if not all events at RMA, the rural municipalities association, fall conference as well as the former Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, now just the Alberta Municipalities association, conference, at which, Mr. Speaker, I spoke with dozens and dozens of counties, municipal districts, and municipalities. The current number I don’t know offhand. The Minister of Municipal Affairs could probably elaborate. At one point there were 342 different municipalities in the province of Alberta. We might be down to 340; 330?

8:40

Mr. McIver: It’s 333.

Mr. Bilous: Three hundred and thirty-three. Wow, Minister, you’ve been busy. I’m joking. It’s municipalities that decide whether or not they want to initiate the process of dissolving.

Mr. McIver: That’s an accurate number.

Mr. Bilous: Fair enough. Fair enough. The Minister of Municipal Affairs has indicated 333. Thank you.

A significant number of municipalities in Alberta, but not one, Mr. Speaker, indicated their interest in Alberta pursuing its own police force. Again, to the fiscal hawks of this party – I don’t know

if there are many fiscal hawks left over there. I mean, maybe you’re fiscal pigeons or seagulls or something. I look at the cost, to which I’ve asked numerous times: what is the cost if Alberta did pursue moving from the RCMP to a provincial police force? Not once have I received an answer on the actual initial administrative costs. If anyone in this Chamber thinks that it’s a small number, they’re deluded. Delusional? Delusional. Their answer is probably deluded. Delusional in the cost. We know that it’s significant, right?

I appreciate the fact that I’ve wandered a little bit away from this bill. My point is this. This bill is making changes to our election statutes legislation. What’s frustrating is that what should be coming from a conservative party are amendments that will ensure there is more accountability and oversight on donations and where they’re coming from. This bill does the exact opposite. Mr. Speaker, I really, really question again whether or not members of the government caucus, private members, have actually read this bill.

The fact of the matter is that this bill does the exact opposite of everything the Premier and this government have said when it comes to political donations. I mean, granted, we’re still waiting, I think, for the current Premier’s list of donors when he was running for leadership. That’s only two and a half years past. I mean, that in and of itself speaks volumes of the Premier, refusing to acknowledge who donated to his campaign, unless the donors were like: please, God, don’t tell anyone; I can’t be caught knowing in my community that I donated to this party. I mean, that could be the case, Mr. Speaker. Regardless, Albertans have a right to know.

The issues and the reason, Mr. Speaker, that I’m supporting this referral: there are a couple of significant problems with this piece of legislation. The first is that it allows for an individual to purchase a party membership on behalf of another. Now, I’m just going to go out on a limb here. I mean, we know that our Premier is currently the least popular Premier in Canada. Everybody knows that.

An Hon. Member: Except him.

Mr. Bilous: The question that I have to ask – that’s a really good point from my colleague. From the way the Premier acts, you would think he’s the only person in the room who doesn’t know that.

Why would a government bring forward a piece of legislation that allows anyone to buy a party membership on behalf of another?

Now, here’s a question. Does the . . . [interjection] I’m not going to give way. I apologize, Member; I’m just warming up. Would the Premier be putting forward this piece of legislation in different circumstances? It makes me wonder. We have a leadership review coming next spring of our dear Premier, and if a membership can be bought on behalf of someone else, how many memberships are going to be purchased for people who never wanted a membership but suddenly who have one and who maybe magically vote in a leadership race or a leadership approval vote? It really makes one question why that’s in here.

Maybe this isn’t the goal or the stated goal or the intentional goal of the current government, but what this opens up: it opens up the possibility that thousands if not tens of thousands of memberships can be bought on behalf of people who never wanted a membership in order to support a leader who is desperate to hold onto said leadership. It’s a real cause for concern. [interjection] I recognize that there are members in the Chamber that want to interject, but I’m not about to give the floor.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, that this bill does that, allows the ability for a member to purchase a party membership on behalf of another person – I will just state that the current NDP constitution does not allow a member to purchase a membership for anyone. I can tell members of this Chamber that when I was first looking for

the nomination for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview – we’re going back to 2010 – I remember meeting with an elderly woman in her home who could barely afford her rent and had not enough food to eat. Our memberships were \$5, and I was at a crossroads because I wanted to pay the \$5 for her to be a member, but our constitution doesn’t allow it. I told her with a heavy heart: I cannot buy your membership. She, unfortunately, never did buy a membership, but I respect the fact – well, she couldn’t afford it. But I respect the fact that for her that \$5 was likely a couple of meals, so who was I to try to convince her that this is where you should spend your \$5 when you cannot afford to live? So I didn’t. But I respected the fact that we, on this side of the House, don’t buy memberships on behalf of someone else. [interjection] I apologize, Minister. I’m not ceding the floor.

That’s a challenge, a significant challenge. I appreciate – I really do recognize that there have been a couple of members on the government side that have wanted to get up and contribute to the conversation; I thank you – that the argument may be that this is not the intention of why this is going in there, and I get that. I get that, you know, government will come forward with good intentions. However, it’s the opposition’s job to point out that there are unintended consequences that can arise from those good-intentioned amendments or changes to legislation.

8:50

The other thing that this bill does, Mr. Speaker, is that it limits the frequency of reporting at the constituency association level on donations from quarterly to annual, which means that instead of Albertans being aware four times a year of what constituency associations have raised, it’s once a year. Again, if we just follow the pattern of this government over the last two years, things they don’t want Albertans to be aware of get released on a Friday around 5 o’clock, once other stories have already taken over the media cycle, so this could easily be one of those examples, where now it’s just once a year. That’s a challenge.

I do have a number of questions, and I realize that my time is running short. You know, a number of other changes this bill makes are, again, to third-party advertisers, and that’s really the concern here, Mr. Speaker, that the amount of money that will be funnelled to – and I’ll say political parties, but I can tell you that the NDP neither asked for this nor has used this method to receive funding in the past, but this is something that the government of Alberta is trying to bring in, a backdoor way of ensuring that they can bring in funds. Again, I think Albertans are asking the question: why is the government bringing this in? Is it the fact that they’ve been out fund raised for the last four quarters by the opposition? Is it the fact that they have a Premier with the lowest ratings in Canada? Now, I don’t know if it’s the lowest in Alberta’s history, but I would venture a guess that we’re getting near that bottom. We’re almost there.

Regardless, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of reasons why I do not support this bill.

The Speaker: Are there others on the amendment to refer? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is my pleasure, to rise in the House to speak to the amendment on Bill 81, election statutes act. This bill proposes a number of changes. Out of them, a few are very concerning personally to me not only as a member of this House, as the elected representative of Edmonton-Meadows’ constituents, not only the views that my constituents share with me but also as a witness of what exactly is being proposed here and watching the obvious consequences of implementing policies like

these in democratic processes. As my colleague spoke so eloquently on this issue, the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Castle Downs . . .

Mr. Bilous: Clareview.

Mr. Deol: Clareview. Thank you.

. . . these changes in this bill in no way are promoting democracy in democratic institutions in the province of Alberta. If it is not helping in promoting the very democratic mechanism, democratic values, that means it’s in no way going to help the people of Alberta.

[Mrs. Frey in the chair]

The changes specifically focus to increase the role of big money in politics, specifically in provincial elections, as they obviously undermine a number of principles that we adhere to, being a democratic place. It is actually strengthening the barriers to ordinary people, ordinary Albertans. It is discouraging everyday Albertans, who are not able to compete or do not have a capacity to attract a huge amount of money into politics. Politics is not about – how do you say? Politics is about serving the people of the jurisdiction with their best interests by serving their education systems or establishing universal health care and creating jobs or developing economic plans. Those were the things, the promises the UCP made in the election, but soon after that, you know, Albertans are seeing, one after another, the RCMP investigations going into the Premier’s leadership contest and after, a number of the provincial contestants in that. The investigations are still going on.

If we move this legislation as it is, it will – I’m struggling to use very parliamentary language. [interjection] I’ll give way to the hon. minister.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you. Just to give my friend an opportunity to find his place in his notes and to get an opportunity to collect his thoughts before he’s able to further provide some issues to the Chamber on his thoughts on this bill – I just thought I’d give the member an opportunity. For anybody who recently saw another politician who might have lost his place, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson – although in that opportunity he ended up asking everybody if they’d been to Peppa Pig World: “Peppa Pig World. Who’s been to Peppa Pig world? Not enough.” Anyway, that’s my Boris Johnson impersonation for the members opposite, to give the member some time to collect himself and provide him the opportunity to finish his submissions.

Mr. Deol: I wish the member actually had something better to add on during the intervention. That is exactly what is concerning in this bill, and that is exactly . . . [interjections] This is how exactly you view the politics, and this is how you exactly interpret and define the political democracies when it comes to serving those very people. I come from jurisdictions where I started my political activism at the early age of 16, when I was just starting to join my postsecondary education. Since then I’ve witnessed very closely as an insider the role of big money in politics, how it was an impediment to ordinary, enlightened, passionate, dedicated, committed people entering into politics, to serving those very people.

9:00

Given the unfair opportunity for those people who could just buy the elections and buy the elections in the sense and the meaning of thinking that this is just an investment into any other business, as into politics, as a result those things and those effects had pushed the people to the verge of losing every possibility of any social security that they had in their lives. Losing the education system:

even if you ask the current generation in India, they would not even believe that we ever had an accessible education system, a free education system, in India. They will say, “You are lying to us,” because they didn’t see it. For the last 20 years, with the role of big money, the parties looked for those candidates who can bring tons of money in so they could win elections, form the government, and at the end of the day those people have to recover their investment from somewhere: signing contracts, selling public properties, and letting public health care be demolished.

I understand the members of the government are really convinced, and it’s very hard for them to see this because they did not experience anything practically. But, surely, there is no such example, even in tons of articles, when you just enter one hit in Google, on the role of big money. First of all, you can just try to put in any wording you want to put, the way that you want to look at our neighbour country, the role of money in the U.S.

What are those institutions coming up with? They are reporting how this is contributing to politics, how this is contributing to the country, how it is contributing to community-level politics. People like me, who come from racialized communities, know how hard this is for us when it comes to stepping up to represent your communities, to participate in the political system. Specifically, when it comes to recruiting women, it’s even tougher than that. When you are focusing on candidates who can just dump money into the nomination process so that that money can be funnelled to your party coffers to win the elections – there’s no way. You’re just muzzling ordinary Albertans’ voices.

Definitely, it’s not only because I sit on the opposition benches. This bill is in no way helping Albertans, Alberta generations, and cannot be supported as it is. That is the basic reason that I wanted to support the amendment to this bill by saying this. I would encourage all House members to at this moment, at this time support the amendment and not pursue this bill as it is.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. First of all, I would like to thank the hon. member for this amendment. I will not be able to support this amendment for many, many reasons.

It is my pleasure to rise and speak today in this Chamber to provide my support for Bill 81, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 (No. 2). Let me first acknowledge the minister for introducing this significant bill, that will further strengthen our democracy by providing election financing rules and will set a definite election date while making it easier for Albertans to vote. This legislation is following the democratic reforms committed to by the government.

The Legislature has enacted the Alberta Senate Election Act, and it came into effect in July 2019. It brought back the Senate nominee elections so that voters can decide who will best represent them in the Senate and fight for Alberta’s interests in Ottawa. Last month Albertans were able to vote for three Senate nominees, and I congratulate the top three Senator nominees, who got the most votes. I hope that the Prime Minister will respect the results of the Senate elections.

Alberta has held Senate elections five times now, including the one held in conjunction with the municipal elections last month. In each election Albertans voted for the Senate candidates that they wanted to put forward to the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada for filling future vacancies related to Alberta in the Senate of Canada. These names were put forward by the government of Alberta for

consideration by the federal government. There have been five Senate nominees elected in Alberta who were appointed to the Senate of Canada since 1990.

Also, Bill 26, the Constitutional Referendum Amendment Act, 2020, was passed and went into effect in July 2020, which allowed the government to seek Albertans’ guidance on initiatives beyond constitutional matters in order to get a fair deal for Albertans.

Further, in June this year, Madam Speaker, the Citizen Initiative Act and the Recall Act were enacted. The Citizen Initiative Act permits Albertans to bring forward important matters to the Legislature for consideration. If enough support is received through a public petition, Albertans will be able to submit proposed legislative and policy changes to the Legislative Assembly for consideration and submit proposed constitutional referendum questions to the provincial government. While the Recall Act allows Albertans to hold elected officials accountable throughout their term, not just during elections, it also created a process that could lead to the recall of elected officials, including Members of the Legislative Assembly, MLAs, municipal officials, and school trustees.

Similarly, in June this year, Madam Speaker, Bill 68 was passed. It made it clear that all Members of the Legislative Assembly, including ministers in their role as MLAs, are allowed to participate in public debate and share their views on the topic of referendums.

9:10

All these, together with Bill 81, are with the aim to follow through on the promise made by the provincial government on the role of strengthening democracy and accountability in Alberta. By enhancing and modernizing our electoral system of governance, Madam Speaker, it contributes to boosting investors’ confidence in our province. Just last year alone we saw huge investments. Amazon Web Services announced that they will build their second Canadian hub in Canada in the Calgary region. This investment will create a thousand jobs and a total of \$4.3 billion.

The Northern Petrochemical Corporation announced a planned \$2.5 billion investment to build a major petrochemical facility in the Greenview industrial gateway near Grande Prairie. This facility will create thousands of jobs and contribute to further diversification of the Peace region. The facility will be a multibillion-dollar carbon-neutral ammonia and methanol production facility in the municipal district of Greenview. The facility is expected to create over 4,000 jobs during the construction phase and 400 long-term jobs for the region when the facility is in operation. This investment proves that Alberta’s recovery plan is working to diversify our economy, attract investment, and create jobs. Like I mentioned, Madam Speaker, by strengthening democracy and modernizing our electoral system, it contributes to investors’ confidence.

Bill 81 will improve our electoral system by banning foreign money from Alberta politics. It will allow only those who live in Alberta to contribute to a third party for election advertising and prohibit those not living in Canada and non-Canadian corporations and organizations from donating to political advertising. Foreign entities have no business interfering in Alberta elections. Our province belongs to Albertans, and elections should remain a time for Albertans to discuss and determine the fate of the province without the involvement of foreign influence. It is not acceptable to allow external influences to meddle with the electoral process of our province.

Should foreign money be put in place during an important exercise of democracy in our province, then we would be seeing political agendas that would not benefit Albertans, who would be experiencing foreign entities promoting their own plans, that tend

to be disadvantageous to Albertans. This bill, Madam Speaker, will amend the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act by explicitly disallowing election advertising contributions made to a third party other than by a person ordinarily resident in Alberta. Bill 81 . . . [interjection]

Ms Ganley: Sorry. Did you want to take an intervention? Oh, you are going to take an intervention. [interjections] Hey, I like interventions as much as the next person.

I'll make my question brief. The member is talking about people who shouldn't be allowed to engage in various issues for various reasons, and that's fine, but this is clearly an ethical comment. I'm just a little curious what ethical examination the member himself did before commenting on something that changes the rules for financial contributions for candidates and before commenting on something that changes the ability to buy memberships, which could clearly sway an election or a nomination contest, in light of the allegations that the member himself faced.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, hon. member, for such an important question here and raising that concern.

We know that funding is important for election campaigns, but it is also important that there must be a limit on an amount a political party or candidate can spend during elections. Bill 81 ensures that there is an election expense limit for registered parties, Madam Speaker. It sets that the limit is calculated by multiplying \$1.16 by the number of registered voters. The amount of \$1.16 is used by B.C. as well, multiplied by the number of voters, and it varies on how long the campaign period is. In Ontario and Quebec they also use a set amount multiplied by the number of voters to determine the election expense limit in their jurisdictions.

Madam Speaker, I'll continue with my expression. Similarly, Bill 81 explicitly disallows political advertising contributions to a third party or

a corporation, unincorporated association or organization that is incorporated, formed or otherwise organized outside Canada and

- (i) that does not carry on business in Canada, or
- (ii) whose only business activity in Canada consists of doing anything to influence electors to vote or refrain from voting or to vote or refrain from voting for a specific registered candidate or registered [political] party.

In other words, the bill will not permit a foreign entity that is not engaged in business in Canada to make political advertising donations to a third party. Even if that foreign entity is engaged in business in Canada with the purpose of influencing voters to vote or not to vote in general, like promoting that all the leaders are incapable so everyone should not vote, or if their purpose is to encourage Albertans to vote or not to vote for a specific candidate or party, then the foreign entity is prohibited from making third-party contributions in accordance with the bill. A political party constituency association or candidate will be also disallowed to make political advertising contributions to a third party.

As can be seen, Bill 81 is about 320 pages, both sides. With your kind indulgence allow me to highlight some of the changes this bill carries, Madam Speaker. Bill 81 would establish the last Monday in May as election day in Alberta, removing the advantage a governing party currently has and increasing trust in the democratic process. This will ensure that the sitting government will not be campaigning at taxpayers' expense during the campaign while delaying an election to their advantage. Alberta is one of only two provinces in Canada not to have fixed election date legislation, the other being Nova Scotia. Both the Canadian and United Kingdom parliaments have also adopted into law specific fixed election dates. Consistent with the establishment of a set election date, the bill will

make the start of campaign periods the day the writ is issued instead of February 1.

This bill will also establish a formula for redeeming election expense limits for parties, which would reflect the increasing cost for campaign expenses. Currently there is a flat limit of \$2 million; the new limit would be \$1.16 per registered voter.

Bill 81, Madam Speaker, will make voting easier for Albertans by providing flexibility for increasing the number of advance voting stations where needed. It would also require voters to produce identification to vote in provincial elections, as in municipal and federal elections, increasing the integrity of Alberta elections. Likewise, it will allow voter cards to be sent electronically as well as by mail. It will change legislation so employers are only obliged to give an employee time off for voting if the employee's schedule does not provide the employee with three consecutive hours to vote during advance voting or on election day.

The amendments will also help voting places run more smoothly and efficiently by allowing election officers to fulfill a variety of roles instead of being restricted to specialized duties.

9:20

This bill also introduces minor changes to election-related legislation to make sure they're aligned and the language is consistent throughout. It also updates the language in and adds references to the Recall Act and the Citizen Initiative Act to election-related legislation. This act also clarifies that the Election Commissioner cannot start a citizen-initiated petition while allowing rules for the citizens' initiative vote to be made by regulation.

The expense limit for nomination contestants will be increased by this bill from 20 per cent to 25 per cent of a candidate's limit. It will also make contributions to nomination contestants, those seeking to be the official candidate in a riding, not part of the donor's maximum contributions.

With all that said, Madam Speaker, the bill carries the changes needed to strengthen our democracy. This bill gets big money out of Alberta politics by prohibiting other jurisdictions and foreign entities from unduly influencing Alberta elections. We do not want to see and experience foreign agendas advancing to the detriment of Albertans. We want to leave the core of the electoral process to Albertans. We want Albertans to continue to choose their leaders freely, without the control or command of foreign money.

In closing, Madam Speaker, let me again express my support for the bill. Thank you very much. [some applause]

The Acting Speaker: I would like to think that the applause is for me.

Any other hon. members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, I'm pleased to rise and speak to this bill. I think there are a lot of concerns in Bill 81, probably more than can be covered in the time allotted to us. Now, the first concern, obviously, and one of the biggest to me, is the idea of allowing people to buy memberships for others. I think that's a pretty bold position for a government to take while their leader is under investigation for, I mean, exactly those allegations. So I find it a little questionable, and it highlights some interesting issues with our current Conflicts of Interest Act in this province. That act focuses primarily on financial things, all things financial. It's a conflict of interest if it's money related. [interjection] I will give way.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you. Madam Speaker, perhaps a question to the member because we did hear Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview

crow about the constitution that the NDP have. Now, there are two constitutions, federally and provincially. I searched them both. Article 2 in the provincial constitution deals with party memberships, and I didn't see any prohibition on paying for someone else's membership in their constitution, knowing as well that the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, the EFCDA, at section 25 deals with party memberships but only to the extent that it makes it clear that a party membership, until it's over \$50, is not a donation to a party. That's why membership to a political party is mentioned at all in the EFCDA. There's never been a prohibition on paying for someone's membership. Can she confirm to us with one hundred per cent certainty that she's never ever, ever heard of a union paying for a member in the New Democratic Party of Alberta's membership ever? If she could advise us that she's aware of that.

Ms Ganley: I'm happy to do that, Madam Speaker. I'm not aware of any such thing having occurred. I mean, that doesn't definitively tell you anything. It just tells you that I haven't heard anything. It's a bit of an odd question from the hon. member, again, in light of the fact that he is a member of the party whose leader is under review. In addition, I think that in light of the members heckling and losing their minds about how it's not classy to ask a member who was under active investigation for fraud, forgery, and bribery whether he ought to be commenting on these things, that was a bit of a funny question.

Madam Speaker, I would say that the concern is that this would allow people – it makes legal that which was of concern in that very leadership race, and that's problematic. I think the idea that, you know, the members of the party select the contestant and that those members sort of all have to come forward and get their own memberships is an important one because, again, the concerns that we have seen recently sort of centre around whether there were valid memberships and whether the e-mail addresses associated with the memberships were valid. Those are all very real concerns that were at minimum shared by the current hon. minister of economic development and trade at one point.

They're certainly not concerns that exist only on one side of the House. I mean, I believe that there are members of every party and that there are people of every political persuasion who care about these sorts of issues and who care about the members being in a position to select candidates and select leaders. Now, that isn't to say, of course, that there shouldn't be, you know, some sort of restriction on these sorts of things. But, yeah, I think it's important that people buy their own memberships. So that's a big concern for me.

Another huge concern in this act is that there is no limit on donations to nomination candidates. Again, this is a huge back door for big money to come back in. Why? Because when those nomination contests end, any additional sort of money winds up with the party. This essentially opens the door to do indirectly what one cannot do directly, which is to, say, donate unlimited amounts of money. It allows the influence of big money back into politics.

I think, Madam Speaker, if we look around, you know, at what is currently happening, it's my belief that that is potentially of concern. If there is one thing we have seen, it is that the quality of candidates that are coming forward, the actual individual people who are sitting in those chairs are extremely relevant to the policies of a government, policies which at the end of the day impact the lives of each and every Albertan. I think that this is a huge issue.

[The Speaker in the chair]

You know, there are a lot of policies that we see coming forward from the members opposite that I think are of concern generally to Albertans. One such policy, for instance, has to do with restricting

access to medical procedures for women, for transgender people, for any number of individuals. That's a big deal, Mr. Speaker, and it is not, I believe, a value shared by everyone who would consider themselves a conservative. For someone who would consider themselves a conservative but doesn't buy into all that sort of social conservatism, I think it would be very troubling to have this sort of unlimited amount of money coming in and potentially influencing elections because it leads to a party that doesn't represent their values any longer. We have exactly that situation here in Alberta.

The members opposite seem to find this extremely funny. I don't really see how. I mean, allegations of election fraud are not that funny, Mr. Speaker. I think this is a huge concern. The unlimited money coming in is a huge concern. The comments of the Member for Calgary-East, that were, I mean, loosely at best related to anything in the bill, were a big concern. I think, in addition, the way the criteria are framed around third-party advertisers is also a concern for me.

9:30

One of the other things in terms of governments that we see as a problem is, you know, that we have a bunch of independent officers, and we want them to be independent, Mr. Speaker. It's really critical. There have been allegations, you know, historically, currently, in this province, in other provinces, in other countries about sort of appointing, essentially, political people to these positions, right? Because those people, the people in these sorts of roles like – well, I guess the Election Commissioner doesn't exist anymore; it's the Chief Electoral Officer now. But these are critical roles, critical roles for oversight in democracy, and we're seeing some folks come up sort of for having someone appointed. The Information and Privacy Commissioner: also a very, very important role, and what we need is people who are independent in these positions, but the changes here that allow these super sort of broad criteria that are, like, open and subject to wild interpretation really invite political parties to appoint people who are not serving in the interest of the public but are serving in the interest of the party of the day.

I will highlight the provisions that I feel are of concern.

In determining whether a third party is affiliated ... the Chief Electoral Officer shall consider ...

And there's a whole list of things. I'm just sort of picking sections. ... including whether a person holding any of the following positions ...

So whether they're similar positions, interactions, or agreements. ... the extent to which the third party participates in ... decision-making ...

I mean, those are broad but not as concerning.

The one that I would say is of most concern is section 5.2(d), which finishes as:

... including the extent to which [a] third party has been involved in electoral campaigns or made public statements in support of or in opposition to [a] registered party, a registered candidate of [a] registered party ... other registered party or a registered candidate of any other registered party;

And then (e), which says:

the political programs, advertising materials and policy statements of [registered third parties].

Here's my concern with that, Mr. Speaker. Say that someone is a parent of a disabled student, and they want to advocate for their child to have access to education. I would call that a pretty legitimate position. Say that they come together and they create an association to advocate on that issue because they care, because their child has a disability, because other children have disabilities, and they feel that those children should have equal access to education. So they come together, those parents, and they create a third-party advertiser. Then, say, you know, the third-party advertiser

is doing its thing. It's successful in the way that third-party advertisers can sometimes be, and it sort of brings the issue to the public consciousness. We've seen this a lot with this government; we've seen, you know, signs about saying no to coal. We've seen signs about protecting education, about protecting health care. These third-party advertisers can do a good job of bringing issues to the public consciousness.

Now, I'm not suggesting that power can't be used inappropriately – it absolutely can – but the point of democracy is for everyone to be able to engage. So if someone wants to run an education campaign to make their neighbours understand why it's important that all children have equal access to education, that, in my opinion, should absolutely be their right. If we make it the case that it isn't their right, I mean, arguably, that's a constitutional violation, but in addition it's a huge ethical problem, in my view.

So now we're in a position where, say, that person has been associated with a third-party advertiser, they've done this work, and they think, you know: "I want to go further. I want to put my name forward for whatever party I've chosen, and I want to run for election to go to the Legislature and bring even more attention to this issue, to the issue of ensuring that children with disabilities have equal access to education." Now suddenly potentially there's a problem with that advertiser who may have gone on, because there's no time limit in here. So the person leaves the third-party advertiser. They go and put their name forward for a nomination, and now suddenly there's a problem with that advertiser being able to advertise. I don't know. I think that's problematic. That's just one example of the way in which this criteria is potentially overly broad and could potentially have consequences that we don't want it to have. I would say that that is a big concern. Yeah. I think anything that would become problematic for that parent in that situation – I don't know. To me, it reads like that's a possibility.

I mean, I'm certainly happy to have the minister stand up and explain what prevents that from happening, but it looks to me like if somebody, if a third-party advertiser was advocating on that issue and a candidate was specifically running for a nomination on that same issue – i.e., ensuring that children with disabilities continue to have access to education – potentially that becomes problematic. There would be a determination of those entities being affiliated. I don't know. It doesn't seem like that could be the intent of the legislation, or I would hope that it's not the intent.

In addition to that, I think there are several other sort of – no; I would say those are the main ones. Those are probably the main ones.

There are also changes with respect to the power of the Election Commissioner. In this case I more so have a question because what's happening is that the Election Commissioner is no longer able to cease an investigation. They can refuse to conduct an investigation, but they can't cease one. They can only give notice of a refusal to the party who requested the investigation or all parties at the conclusion of an investigation. This is really interesting in light of the fact that when this government scrapped the Election Commissioner, they were under active investigation by the Election Commissioner at that time. Now that may or may not continue, but they're making provisions as to who gets notified of what and when at the same time that that's potentially ongoing. I find that troubling and problematic, which sort of brings me back, I suppose, to the initial statement I had before this Legislature shortly after the UCP had . . . [Ms Ganley's speaking time expired] Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess I'll get a chance to bring that up in my next go-around.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has risen to join in the debate.

Mr. McIver: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this. I wasn't planning on it, but some of what I just heard kind of inspired me to get on my feet. I have to say that I was highly entertained by the comment about: if a party wants somebody nominated, it could affect everybody's life. Well, there are 87 members in this Chamber that affect everybody's life. The hon. member seems troubled by that. I guess for those watching at home – all 12 of them – what we just heard: the NDP just accidentally told us the difference between them and us. We trust the people of Alberta to elect responsible people. They want to prepick everybody so that they get people that will just do the exact things that they want to do, because they don't trust Albertans. They don't want anybody named on the ballot to get elected. See, the hon. member didn't even consider the fact that when somebody gets nominated, they still actually have to win the election. Most of us here on all sides of the House won an election probably with four or five people in that election, and the voters decided. But in the NDP world they want to decide everything themselves.

What was really rich, about three minutes after the hon. member said that – she talked about: well, what if the party just did stuff to appoint people? This from the party who appoints essentially every member that ever runs for them in any election, with a couple of exceptions but not very many, Mr. Speaker. They're offended by their own behaviour. I know that they accidentally said it out loud in here a few minutes ago, but they did actually say it out loud in here a few minutes ago. They said that the most troubling thing is if a party appoints their own people. That's kind of almost the definition of the NDP. They just appoint all their own people.

9:40

I'm glad to hear them admit that that's a problem, Mr. Speaker, because that is the difference between the folks on that side of the House and the folks on this side of the House. You know what? There are people that come here with different skills, experiences, life experiences, things that they do, and certain of us have more or less to offer in different areas. But you know what's important? You don't get to decide who those people are. It's equally important that I don't get to decide who those people are. The voters of Alberta get to decide who those people are, and on this side of the House we trust the voters of Alberta. We want our province to be in the hands of the people of Alberta.

But over there they like to appoint everybody. In fact, it seems to me that it almost sounded from that speech like the election itself is quite an inconvenience, that they should have their leader appoint everybody that sits in this room and that should be just fine with everybody. Well, that's not how democracy works in this great country of Canada. There might be countries in the world where they run things like that, but not this one. Yet we just heard a former minister of the Crown more or less advocate for that. Wow. Wow. [interjection] I think I have an intervention here, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps if I could ask the member this question, then. Perhaps, in light of this information that he's speaking about, perhaps instead of the NDP, as we refer to them in this room, perhaps we should start referring to them as the OAP, the Old Autocratic Party. Perhaps the member could let us know if he agrees with me or not.

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's understand that the NDP actually could be called the Old Autocratic Party, but they're actually called the New Democratic Party despite the fact that their behaviour and their speech tonight sounded more like the Old Autocratic Party than the New Democratic Party. But, respectfully,

the name of their party is the New Democratic Party, whether they live up to that or not.

The people that were appointed when they were in government gave Albertans a whole number of gifts that they didn't appreciate, starting with the carbon tax. They showed the maximum amount of disrespect to the rural people in Alberta with Bill 6, where – after Albertans working the land, raising livestock, raising crops – they said that they were going to create an attitude of safety. Mr. Speaker, I mean, wow. I guess that's what happens.

Maybe the member was partially right. When all the people that run in the election are appointed, that's sometimes the risk you take, right? They are the ones that messed up the electricity business. They are the ones that drove over \$100 billion worth of investment out of this province and took the jobs away from 180,000 people. Mr. Speaker, these same folks that have members that are in favour of Extinction Rebellion and stood by Suzuki when he was essentially advocating for violence to make a political point. I guess despite the fact that the member probably hadn't rehearsed that speech and might not have said all those things, the NDP tonight accidentally admitted who they are. I just thought for those watching that they should actually recognize just how obvious that was.

The Speaker: Are there others?

I might just provide the House a small reminder that from time to time the Speaker will allow some discretion with respect to relevance. I just want to let the House be reminded that that is equally applied amongst all sides of the Assembly.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Bill 81 in second reading. I mean, considering the sheer volume of this bill, you know, traditionally we speak in second reading in general terms and looking for themes and direction. I must say, you know, that this has got to be perhaps the biggest or the second-biggest bill I literally have ever seen walk through the door of this Chamber. I think that, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview pointed out to me, perhaps the MGA is bigger in scope and sheer size, but, I mean, this is a formidable piece of legislation, running at 159 pages. With that, I think we need to make sure that we are giving it due consideration and looking at it in its entirety and looking at it in detail as well.

What I hope to do here this evening – I want to make sure I share my time with other members – is to just talk about some of the general themes that we see in this bill and where we can look for places to perhaps improve the bill. Of course, when you're talking about election statutes, it's an evolution, Mr. Speaker. You have the basic precepts of democracy and voting and so forth, you know, for citizens to exercise that right, but it's not just as simple as that because, of course, the other element in elections is money and what money buys in an election.

Here in 2021, of course, it has a lot to do with not just reaching people on an individual basis, which is very important – I mean, I've certainly won elections just by that simple door-to-door, personal interaction – but also across the province using various forms of media to get your message across as well. Of course, you need to purchase that media and purchase that capacity. It's very important that you exercise all facets of democracy in the widest possible way, but you must make sure as well that money is somehow moderated so that you're not allowing the people with the most money to have the most power and thus gain the power in this Chamber and be in charge of the province.

When I reflect on that in a general way, you know, I always think about other democracies and how they function and how we can

learn from them. Perhaps the biggest, best example is right next door to us, in the United States of America, where big money has literally overrun the democratic process in the United States, and it influences every action that takes place by elected members and political parties and every level of government in that country. First and foremost, I think that all of us need to take two steps back and always make sure that we're not allowing that level of big money to influence the way that we run our democratic process here in the province of Alberta.

I was just talking to one of my colleagues and was reminded that she also had served as a delegate for PNWER, which is the Pacific Northwest organization that includes a number of states and provinces around this part of North America. I was just reminded – and she was as well – about just how astounding it was to talk to our American counterparts and see how much money they had to raise every day in order to maintain their electability in the next election. The degree to which they had to raise money compared to what we do here, with certain restrictions and laws that we have in place, was exponential, and it literally, Mr. Speaker, interfered with their ability to do their job as a democratically elected person, to represent their own particular area.

They were so preoccupied with raising money. They did, in confidence and in a friendly trade chat between nations, offer this information. Sometimes, with a few drinks, it helps to lubricate the process, right? One gentleman told me, "If I could ascertain that I was not going to get money from a conversation with a constituent or with someone in my area within the first few sentences," he had to move on to the next person, not because he had an issue to deal with but because he needed to put a certain amount of money into the bank every day to make sure that he could be competitive in the next election. Mr. Speaker, I don't think that's the way to run a democracy. Every step of the way, when we build legislation around election statutes, we have to make sure that we are keeping it as a fair, accessible process that all Albertans can access.

9:50

Some parts of this bill – I mean, the scope of it is immense, right? It has changes to the income tax act, the Alberta Senate act, the Citizen Initiative Act, the Election Act, the election finances act, the Legislative Assembly Act, the Local Authorities Election Act, the Recall Act, and then changes to terminology therein as well. I think we need to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, with this bill, at 159 pages, and make sure that we're debating it properly and looking at that basic principle that I outlined here this evening; that is, to make sure that there's no way by which we can exceed reasonable limits for expenditures in our own elections in our constituencies and across the province as well.

Again, the one that sort of jumped out and that we saw jumped out straight away for the media and people who analyze these things was this whole idea of financing and being able to put money into nominations at a constituency level. We know that in some places you have contested nominations, that in some other places you don't have contested nominations. I mean, it's as simple as that. You know, we've had the good fortune as we have grown as a party to have many more contested nominations, which is, I think, a sign of a healthy democracy.

However, the idea that you can in those nominations – and the government could correct us if we're wrong here. I mean, this is an organic process that we engage in here. But if there is a way by which people can make donations without a set limit into those nominations for their party contests, then that is a red flag that tells us that perhaps this is something that will allow money, through the back door, to be put into both the constituency coffers and into the

provincial party coffers as well. I mean, that's the main concern that jumped out at me with this bill straight away.

You know, when we had our Bill 1, I think it was, when we were in government, we tried to build a process by which we could get big money out of politics, right? We had limits for how much you could spend on a constituency level and on a provincial level as well, banning donations and so forth. I mean, I think it was a pretty good first step, the Bill 1 that we put in place. I think it really helped to bring things to a more local level, right? In 2015, for example, you saw individual constituencies spending more than \$100,000 or \$120,000 or more on a single constituency election campaign. For many other parties this just was not attainable. So having basic limitations on how much you can spend on a constituency level during an electoral period I think was a real step forward for this province.

But I think that potentially – and maybe, you know, there's some clarification that can be brought across from the other side – this idea that you can donate to the individual constituency nomination meeting and donate more than a limit and then move that money to both the constituency bank account and to the provincial bank account: that's a problem. You know, maybe it's hard for . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. I have provided significant leniency with respect to relevance. However, I'd just perhaps remind the member that we are currently debating REF1 with respect to the bill that's before the Assembly. Maybe he was just taking the long way around to make that point, but it certainly is . . .

Mr. Eggen: You know what? Thanks for that, Mr. Speaker. This is my first chance to actually speak to this bill, so there I was just in my speak-for-the-first-time mode.

I can always add a subjective clause which would suggest that, of course, REF1 is an appropriate way by which we could take a step back to deal with a 159-page bill and get the answers we need, especially in regard to the nomination donation section of this bill, which, in my first reading, is the most troublesome part of this bill. By referring and taking a step back on this, I think it's not unreasonable, and of course I did have that at the back of my mind somewhere.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will cede the floor to others. I hope that we can get answers to those things, and I hope that we can perhaps take some time to build an Election Statutes Amendment Act that is reasonable and does serve democracy and the people of Alberta.

Thanks.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on amendment REF1, are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to this referral motion. It's an important one, and I will outline my arguments briefly and quickly. First and foremost, the main reason why this bill should be referred to the committee for further consideration is this, that every time the UCP comes close to our election laws, we get scared and Albertans get scared. The reason for that is that the Premier himself is still under investigation for the 2017 leadership race – that's a fact – and there are six to seven members of cabinet and caucus who were reached out to by the RCMP in relation to that leadership race.

Those things make us concerned about anything the UCP does with election laws. If they want to change election laws, they should come clean on all the allegations of those investigations. What they have done further: the Election Commissioner, who was investigating them for that investigation – they banded together and fired that Election Commissioner as well. That's why we get concerned. That's why we get scared. That's why I think this referral motion is

important, that it be referred to the Families and Communities Committee, I believe, where we can look into this bill in further detail, where Albertans can weigh in on the provisions of this bill, because it's an important bill. It relates to democracy and democratic institutions. That's why this bill is important. It's important that it be referred to the committee.

The second thing is that there are a number of changes in this legislation, some of which can be tracked back to the work of the Democratic Accountability Committee, but a number of them cannot be tracked back to the work of that committee, meaning that some changes recommended by the Democratic Accountability Committee are inserted in this bill by the UCP, and from the appearance of it, it looks like they are for the benefit of the UCP and not to strengthen democracy. They didn't consult on those changes either, the changes that benefit them.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For instance, this legislation will allow people to buy memberships on other people's behalf. I'm sure that there is some investigation going on in relation to exactly the same thing, a member buying memberships on behalf of others using their credit cards. Hence, there is an investigation. We cannot just let those changes pass through. Those changes need to be debated, need to be deliberated, and Albertans need to be given opportunities to weigh in. That's why this referral is important.

There are changes to nomination contests. This bill makes significant changes to those contests. More importantly, they're getting rid of reporting and accountability in those contests. They're letting the money flow from those contests into the party coffers. Hence, there are changes in overall spending limits as well.

10:00

When we became government in 2015, the first thing we did: we changed the election finances law and levelled the playing field. Before then an Albertan could contribute \$15,000 in a normal year and \$30,000 in an election year, and both corporations and individuals could do that. We banned corporate and union donations, and we brought down that limit to \$4,000. We put a limit on nomination contests as well, so it's not a contest of just those who have the resources and those who have the money.

These are significant changes. These will change the shape of our democracy, and I don't think that that was recommended by the Democratic Accountability Committee. These are the changes, I think, that suit the UCP and their donor base. They're not for the benefit of democracy, and that's why I think it's important that this bill be referred to the committee for a detailed analysis. I mentioned earlier that it is reducing transparency in our system's election finances law, and there are certain restrictions on third-party advertising as well that need to be deliberated on and consulted on. It is for all those reasons that I urge all members of this House, for the benefit, for the sake of democracy, to refer this bill to the committee, where we can look at it in detail, where we can invite Albertans, subject matter experts to weigh in on this.

With that, I move that we adjourn debate on this and let members think about it.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 78

Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021

Ms. Sweet moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 78, Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 78, Alberta Housing 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 Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment November 22: Ms Sweet]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we are on amendment REF1. Are there members wishing to join debate on the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to speak to this bill and to speak to REF1, which moves that the bill be referred to committee. I feel like, in terms of my comments on things we could do with this bill, referring it to committee is probably the politest way I could put it. This bill accompanies UCP action to cut funding for affordable housing to just over one-sixth of what it would have been under the NDP plan. Now, I'll choose my words carefully lest an hon. minister get up and try to rewrite history although why they would do that immediately after I spoke when everyone can see *Hansard*, I'm not really sure, but there you go.

This bill is extremely problematic, and I've laid out a couple of reasons why in the past, but I think it's worth restating why it's extremely problematic. Why should it be referred to a committee? Well, what this bill does is that it gives the minister the ability to designate something as affordable housing, not with restrictions, not with requirements of, like, it being a certain percentage of your income or, you know, a certain percentage of market value or tied to anything at all. It just gives the minister the ability, for whatever reason the minister has, to point to something and say: now that's affordable housing.

I mean, I guess that's one way to create affordable housing – I'm using air quotes, I guess, for the benefit of *Hansard* – but it's not really a way to create affordable housing because even though it's been called, quote, unquote, affordable housing, it's not necessarily affordable. It's just called that because the act has given the minister the ability to call anything she wants that. That's extremely problematic because in addition to the UCP's moves to cut affordable housing, to sell off affordable housing with no requirement that the housing remain affordable, we now have this measure that just creates a lack of transparency.

I mean, this is the fundamental problem with this government, right? They want to be able to talk about the good things that they're doing, but none of the things they're doing are good, so they have to invent things.

An Hon. Member: Come on, there's got to be one. Just one. Not even one good thing?

Ms Ganley: I'm sorry. Would the member like to intervene?

An Hon. Member: No. I just like to heckle.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, all comments should be directed through the chair.

Ms Ganley: Certainly, Madam Speaker. I'm sorry. The hon. member was quite loud, so I thought perhaps he was attempting to intervene and just forgot to stand.

Certainly, it's the case that – where was I? Oh, right. Simply giving the minister the ability to call things affordable housing is not the correct way to increase affordable housing because while it may allow them to create flashy news announcements and try to mislead the people of this province, I think what it doesn't actually do is create any affordable housing, which is kind of the point.

Now, I'm sure that the UCP – I mean, they seem to have pivoted off this, but they often stand up in this place and say: oh, it's about fiscal responsibility. But here's the thing: cutting affordable housing is not fiscally responsible. I can't state that more clearly. I'm going to say it again: cutting affordable housing is not fiscally responsible because it is far, far cheaper to invest in affordable housing, to house people in affordable housing than it is to house them in the justice system, which is often the alternative. At a time when we're seeing mass increases in homelessness, due, I would say, not entirely but in large part to the actions of this government, taking steps to reduce the amount of affordable housing is absolutely the wrong direction.

I think that one of the things that has been demonstrated by piles and piles and piles of evidence is that it is very difficult to deal with any other challenge you have, be it an addiction, be it a mental health challenge, if you don't have someplace to live. Living on the street is incredibly hard. You have to be constantly aware of danger from around you because you're not in a protected environment. You're sleeping outside. It's cold. There isn't enough to eat. You're trying to sort of bring your possessions with you. You're trying to find enough money for food for that day. You're trying to find some sort of shelter potentially. Again, you're sort of in a position of constant fear, if not fear of someone stealing your possessions or fear of someone physically injuring you, then potentially fear of someone coming along and moving you on from the place where you finally come to sleep after potentially days of being awake.

It is not an easy lifestyle, which is why affordable housing, in particular housing first, is such an incredible model because people for the most part want to be contributing members of society. They want to give back, to have a job, to have a place to live, to make a difference in the world around them, but it is very difficult for them to be focused on that when they are focused on their day-to-day survival. Giving them a place to live allows them to shift their focus. It allows them to have a warm, safe place to sleep and access to food.

That just makes a world of difference in your ability to deal with everything else in your life. Once you have a home, you can deal with your addictions, you can deal with your mental health challenges, you can deal with your lack of education or your inability to find a job because, again, it's extremely challenging, if you're living on the street, to gain employment. There are a whole bunch of things. You need addresses for benefits. It's just extremely problematic. So people wind up in situations where they're in these incredibly difficult situations.

10:10

This is one of the things – I think I mentioned this in my last speaking – I'm proudest about that we did while we were in government. We made it the case that a bylaw ticket for something like failing to pay for your C-Train no longer meant that you would go to jail if you didn't pay it. We had that in Alberta. Up until our government came in, it was the case that if you had a bylaw ticket and you didn't pay it, a warrant would issue for your arrest, and you were issued what are called days in default, which essentially meant that in lieu of being able to pay your ticket for loitering, which is just being where you ought not to be, which if you have no place to go because you're homeless is, I mean, a ticket you're likely to get, let's put it that way, for riding the C-Train without paying, for failing to have your dog on a leash, those sorts of things – you don't go to jail if you don't pay that ticket anymore.

That makes a big difference. It makes a big difference in the lives of a lot of people, and it can change the trajectory of their entire life. Once you've been to jail once, once you're in the system, there is clear evidence that you are more likely to go back there than an

average member of the public, so keeping people from going into the justice system and into the prison system and into the police system in the first place is a much more effective way of reducing social disorder.

That was a very long way of saying that the UCP may save a little bit of money in this budget, but the downstream costs that they're going to face in five years, in 10 years are going to so dwarf the small amount of money that they cut from affordable housing that you just can't call it fiscally responsible. There is just no universe in which you could call it fiscally responsible to save, you know, just under a billion dollars now and spend several billion over years and years and years, not to mention the impact on the lives of those people who could otherwise have gone on to have a totally different trajectory, who could have avoided going to prison, who could have avoided – living on the street demonstrably tends to shorten people's lifespans, even if it's only for a period of time, so this is a big deal for people.

This, in my view, Madam Speaker, is an extremely, extremely bad bill. It is made worse by the fact that the minister continues to stand up over and over again and claim that this will increase affordable housing without any sort of argument to support that. Like, sometimes we disagree on things that are kind of arguable, right? Sort of both sides of the argument have some valid points. This is not one of those times.

The idea that cutting the funding for affordable housing, that allowing affordable housing to be sold off with no requirement to use the money from the sale for more affordable housing, with no requirement that the affordable housing stay affordable – this actually happened to a building in the riding I had previously represented, Calgary-*Buffalo*, where it was a CMHC program. It was a federal program, but the lease had come up, so there was no longer a requirement for the building to be affordable, and the society that ran it began raising the rents immediately.

I know that the members opposite will talk about the mixed model. I think the mixed model is good. It's a good model. I totally agree that that is a great way to move forward. The problem with this bill is that whether you're using the mixed model or not, cutting funding for affordable housing will not create more affordable housing. There is no amount of efficiency in the world that will cause that math to work out, and it's incredibly troubling to me that the UCP keep saying it because I can only speculate – they haven't given us an answer to this yet – that what they intend to do is to use this ability to call things affordable housing when they are not and then march out to the public and say: "Look, we increased affordable housing, and it had no impact at all. It didn't make the health care system less expensive. It didn't make the justice system less expensive. It didn't improve homelessness, so I guess we'd better just completely cut it now because we made all this affordable housing and it didn't work."

That's really troubling to me because, again, calling something affordable doesn't make it affordable. It just opens up all of these arguments that are extremely problematic and that are one of the things that I have sort of always found most problematic, and one of the things that drove me into politics to combat was this tendency to try and call something something it isn't. I think that's problematic. You know, there are tough decisions to be made. Everyone who has ever governed has made tough decisions. I wouldn't deny that there are tough decisions over there, just the same as we had tough decisions on our side. I wouldn't even deny that they've made the occasional decision right. But in order to make those tough decisions appropriately in a democracy, the people of the province need to know what's going on. I mean, passing a piece of legislation that says, "Henceforth the sky shall be

orange" will not make the sky orange. It will only mean that we call it orange. Likewise, passing a piece of legislation to allow the minister to call things affordable housing will not make them affordable. It will not make homes for people.

This bill troubles me. It troubles me from a social policy perspective. It troubles me from a transparency perspective. It troubles me from a perspective – yeah. I mean, I guess that just comes back to transparency. In order to have sort of rational and meaningful public conversations about these things, what we really ought best to do is to avoid provisions exactly like those that are in this legislation. Selling off affordable housing will not create more. I feel like the minister has stood up so many times and engaged in this sort of magical thinking . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, just a reminder that we are on the referral amendment. Are there any other members wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for *Edmonton-West Henday*.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an honour to rise this evening to speak to the referral on Bill 78, of course, the *Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021*. I really appreciated the comments that we just heard regarding this legislation and why it should go to referral. I think there are some important points to be made about the fact that just because we call it affordable housing doesn't make it so, and maybe I'll get to more of that in a short period.

You know, I continue to see this government doing what's politically expedient for themselves. Obviously, we are held for the most part to four years of being in government unless an election were to be called early, and some of the decisions that this government is making, I mean, looking back at Bill 81 and the decisions they've made around recall legislation and so on and so forth – a little off the point, obviously, Madam Speaker – it seems that they're making these decisions like a government that is on their way out. I would say that Bill 78 is no exception to that. Again we see decisions that are being made that are true to conservative ideology, I suppose, where they will sell off assets that belong to the public or that are under government control at this point to, well, either get liabilities off their own books or to turn a profit in the short term but, obviously, to the detriment of Albertans, in this instance Albertans that need support more than ever. It's so unfortunate.

10:20

Another great example – obviously, I'm not sure if the minister has decided to change course specific to the issue of government registry land titles, because there was a big discussion happening around the sale of those. Again, advocates to keeping it in-house were saying: why are you even considering this? Obviously, we have budget concerns before us, and those need to be tackled – I mean, I would argue that this current government has not been able to tackle that in any meaningful way – but you are going to sell these assets, often in a way that is not best for the public interest, just to make your balance books look good in the short term and leave the real problems and decisions that are going to have to be made to the next government.

You could say the same thing about affordable housing. There were many different decisions that this government could have made if they were truly concerned about affordable housing stock. You know, the previous member made the point that this current UCP government is only committing one-sixth, or so I believe was the number that they used, of the investments that the previous government have made, and of course they are trying to roll it out in a much different way. They're telling corporations in some cases, as seems to be the case under this legislation, that they are going to

be able to buy up whatever they deem as affordable housing and try to turn it over.

Obviously, Madam Speaker, why we need to send this back to committee and why I support this referral is the fact that we need to ensure that there are criteria in place that will ensure, again, that the corporations that may or may not be considering getting onboard with this process are going to ensure that the best result for Albertans is the end goal, not the best return to investors. That should not be the top issue, at least when it comes to being an advocate and being a minister in such an important role as ensuring affordable housing stock.

Again, no government has been immune to considerations of these four-year election cycles, but it seems that when we consider the decisions that this government has made, you know, I really can't imagine a group of people who have been so concerned about their electability or political expediency compared to this one. It goes back again to the decisions, to what we've seen: a 24 per cent reduction in rental supplements in Budget 2019-2020, the \$53 million cut in housing maintenance over three years in Budget 2020. I mean, the list is long, Madam Speaker. Honestly, I could probably fill my entire time talking about the decisions that this government has made that are going to hurt Albertans.

Obviously, one that I continue to go back to is the decision they've made, changing course entirely from the commitments that they made to Albertans when they were in opposition and again when they were on the campaign trail of staying committed to indexing of AISH, indexing of seniors' benefits. Again, this is a government that continues to commit to one thing and do a completely different thing when they have to make that ultimate choice.

Madam Speaker, that takes me back to the fact that we continue to hear from this minister that we should be fully confident that the regulations that are going to be put in place are going to ensure that the funds that are created from selling off these assets or what they deem as affordable housing are going to be reinvested entirely into affordable housing. The fact is that based on the decisions that this government has made over the last two and a half plus years, we truly cannot take the minister's word for it. It's truly unfortunate. I wish that wasn't the case, but we've just seen time and time again around AISH, around seniors' benefits, around temporary accommodations funding – and, again, here's another issue where I have constituents on a daily basis coming to me saying that they are losing, you know, upwards of \$300 a month because of a decision that was made by higher-ups.

We come into this House and we ask about it, and the minister says that there have been no policy changes. Well, there is a breakdown in communication here, obviously, somewhere, Madam Speaker, because the people in my community who desperately need this funding and need these supports are being told for the first time that they are no longer going to be eligible while in most cases they should be. These are people, again, that are going to be put out of their homes, that may have children, that are trying to, you know, stay in school or whatever it might be, but we are telling them that we're more concerned about the bottom line of our provincial budget. Again, the minister says that nothing is changed policywise, so are they enforcing something that's already in place that wasn't previously being enforced? Maybe that's the case. But, again, the decision that is being made to enforce something like that is putting people in jeopardy.

Again we go back to this idea of political expediency and the decisions that this government is making to make themselves, I don't know, in some twisted reality look better by what they feel is reducing the debt, but as Albertans can tell, that has not been the case by any means, Madam Speaker.

Again, I'm supporting that we take a step back, send this to committee, have some real conversations about what the regulations should look like before any member is able to say yes to this. I think that we all agree that there is a desperate need for affordable housing solutions. Obviously, from the discussions that we've had, we come from very different angles on this, and as I said last time, I for the most part believe that these should be publicly funded and publicly delivered as best as we can with the help of nonprofits in our community, which have been doing a lot of this work up until this point. By no means is it perfect, but in a lot of cases it is about funding coming from the provincial government. Of course, this minister and this government have made it very clear that is not a top priority for them. It's not a top priority to ensure that historic levels of funding are rolling out by any means.

Again, we look at the one-sixth figure that this current minister is putting forward, especially in the midst of a pandemic as we continue to have to deal with the effects of that. By no means is there enough funding in place to ensure that people have affordable housing and can remain in our communities, not pushed out into the street. Again, we look at the decisions that this government has made around income supports, around special needs assistance for seniors around the – I was saying “temporary” before – supplementary accommodations benefit, the seniors' lodge assistance program, and that's only about direct funding for housing for the most part, obviously, but then we were just discussing earlier funding for those who are trying to continue their education, again, with the increases to postsecondary costs. These are all things that are compounding on the backs of Albertans. We can't accept these things in silos. Many households are potentially having to deal with all of these things being piled and that burden being put on them.

Albertans are desperately calling for this government to take a step back and really consider what they are proposing here because we aren't getting any commitment to a certain amount of new affordable housing through this legislation by any means. We aren't receiving a commitment that the funding, again, is going to be a hundred per cent put back into affordable housing stock from the sales of the assets that we might have on hand, and unfortunately instead of doing the work, the hard work, that has to be done to invest in the affordable housing stock that we have in the province that's already existing, that very possibly needs significant repairs, this is a government that's not willing to get that hard work done. It's not easy by any means, but unfortunately what this government is proposing right now I do not believe is going to put us on track to get the historic amount of houseless Albertans and Edmontonians back into affordable housing that they deserve so desperately, Madam Speaker.

Then just last week, I believe, we had affordable housing advocates on the front steps of the Legislature raising their concerns about this move, raising their concerns about the lack of transparency and lack of regulations that are attached to this, concerns that those dollars won't be reinvested into affordable housing and also just pointing out the fact that up until very recently the city of Edmonton and, I'm sure, many other municipalities who are trying to deal with these concerns were essentially left to the very last hour to figure out how they were going to ensure their shelters were able to stay open.

10:30

You know, we saw an announcement from this government, and I know that the city of Edmonton was appreciative of that, but I think we all have to recognize that while shelters are a temporary accommodation, we need to ensure that people are able to get back into housing that suits their needs. I don't think by any means that we should be willing to accept a placemat on a floor and think that

that's acceptable compared to ensuring that people have a safe place to raise their family or raise themselves.

There are so many concerns in here. I think that one of the biggest ones, again, is that we haven't received real answers from this minister. The minister continues to believe that somehow they are the best thing that's ever happened to affordable housing, that they are making the biggest investments ever, and that everything is fine and dandy, but the fact is that that is not the case and that is not what we are seeing in our own communities and as you walk through Edmonton, frankly, Madam Speaker. Again, this is why I'm supporting this referral motion that's on the floor to move this to committee, because I believe we need to have a full conversation with, first of all, people that are going to be affected by the housing management changes, I believe, and the criteria that this minister is considering in terms of performance measures.

I mean, again we're being asked to support quite significant changes to the current system without any real explanations of necessarily why this has come up, what these performance measures are going to look like, how they are going to affect the funding that is given to nonprofits or corporations or any other interested organization. We don't have clear details about how many properties this minister or this government believes are going to be turned around in a short period of time or assurances that those are going to remain affordable, that there won't be increases to the rental costs of those. I mean, the list is long, Madam Speaker, and again partnering that with the fact that AISH benefits are not going as far as they have in the past because of this government's decision to deindex those even when they committed that in the past . . . [Mr. Carson's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I will take this opportunity to remind all members that we are on a referral amendment. That means comments should be related to referring this bill to committee and not on the bill itself. If we would like to have the debate on the bill itself, we could deal with the amendment and then go about that business.

Just a friendly reminder to all members that if you would like to have a conversation, perhaps the lounge is a better place to do it than in the Chamber while others are speaking.

Now I will ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to speak.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Bill 78, Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021, on the referral. I think that when we talk about the importance of the work that the committees do, I think it's great to highlight that the process of a committee once it's received a referral is to really look at the legislation and look at where there are still outstanding questions. I think that through this debate on Bill 78 we've heard some significant concerns about this legislation, and there are significant questions that aren't answered, so when we're talking about a referral, I think that's the perfect opportunity to give Albertans the ability to pose their solutions, their feedback, their concerns to the bill.

I hear that this piece of legislation is quite concerning, and I've spoken in the House to talk about that myself. When we talk about the housing currently in the province, there is a significant lack of accessible housing, affordable housing, safe housing, and the solution to that is that the provincial government needs to build more affordable housing – period; full stop – not sell it. [interjections] You know, I find it interesting that they're laughing that this is the solution to housing, so I would suggest that perhaps me saying it is humorous, but if they referred it to committee, it would allow Albertans impacted to provide that feedback.

You know, not listening to the opposition is a strong theme, but not listening to Albertans is also a theme that this government has, and having an opportunity to refer it to committee, where Albertans that are impacted by this piece of legislation that does absolutely nothing to actually work with municipalities to build affordable housing in the province in the middle of a crisis, would be beneficial. To hear from those that are impacted, I think, has incredible value, and it would give the committee an opportunity, especially government members, to hear from those that are struggling, to hear from those that are being impacted by the cuts that this government has provided. I mean, they think about things that . . . [interjection] No. Thank you.

I think the opportunity to hear from Albertans is essential, and when a matter is referred to committee, it provides that opportunity for all members to hear the concerns. Now, I know that our critic from Edmonton-Riverview has been a fierce advocate for housing in the province. The Member for St. Albert has been a fierce advocate for housing. I know that many of us have heard from Albertans, have heard from those workers in the front line that are providing services to those that are impacted by lack of housing, and none of them are saying that selling off affordable housing is the solution. When it comes to really hearing what the concerns are and hearing what the solution is, I think that having this matter referred to committee makes the most sense.

When we have a committee talking to Albertans, there's an ability to do incredible outreach and to do a robust assessment of what Albertans are thinking, and it provides an opportunity for those individuals that want to provide their feedback. It provides a direct line to be able to do so. Once that committee has received all of the feedback, it then allows an opportunity for those to come forward and provide presentations. I think that this government is afraid to hear what those people have to say because they would say loud and clear that this piece of legislation actually does nothing to support increasing affordable housing in the province.

We've heard members across the aisle. Specifically, I can recall the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon standing in this Chamber bragging about how he led the initiative to stop housing in his community. He literally was proud of the fact that he was able to organize his community to stop housing that would support young people in the community. It was NIMBY at its greatest. So when we have members of the opposite side of this House talking about how proud they are to stop housing for individuals that truly need it, I can only guess that having this referred to committee would be a concern. They don't want to hear from Albertans. They don't want a report done by this committee, to bring forward to the House, to outline exactly why this bill does nothing to support affordable housing. I think that when we have . . . [interjection] Go ahead. [interjections] Well, absolutely.

Mrs. Frey: Thanks, team.

I just wanted to touch on a couple of things. I heard, you know, the member opposite make quite a few accusations there, and I certainly don't imagine that anybody on this side of the House, especially not the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, would ever actually suggest that he doesn't want more affordable housing in his riding. However, there are some interesting interpretations on that side of the House tonight on a variety of topics.

10:40

What I would say, you know, I would ask the hon. member: how many times did they accept an opposition referral amendment to committee? How many times did they listen to Albertans when they were in government? How many times did they accept the olive branch and want to listen to more Albertans? They certainly didn't

do it on Bill 6. They certainly didn't do it on rural crime, Madam Speaker. They certainly didn't do that on the carbon tax. I would just ask the hon. member since she seems to be spreading some interesting narratives today – I mean, in question period there was straight-up fake news. I'm just curious how many times she actually accepted those . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. members, there's an hon. member who has the floor right now. I cannot hear what she's saying, and I'm pretty sure that no one else can either. Again, if you would like to have conversations, perhaps the lounge is a better place to do that.

The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Mrs. Frey: Yeah. I'll just conclude my comments by saying, Madam Speaker, you know, that I'm really interested to hear: maybe she can illuminate us as to how many times they accepted these referral amendments.

Ms Goehring: Well, thank you very much to the member. I would suggest that perhaps she should read *Hansard* and look at what that hon. member said about his ability to stop housing in his community. He was proud. It's on the record. Perhaps you should read that.

When it comes to accepting amendments while we were government, there were several that we accepted, and I can say with confidence that I was a chair of one of the committees that accepted some of those referrals. So perhaps, again, if she read *Hansard* before she got up and spoke, it would be less embarrassing for her to make these accusations in the Chamber. [interjection] You know, at this point I don't want to take any interventions because it's fake news, as she said, coming across the aisle.

At this point I think, you know, it's very clear that this government doesn't want to hear facts. They don't want to hear from Albertans. They don't want to talk about the ability for them to accept an amendment to refer to committee. When our government did it, I was the chair of a committee that had referrals . . . [interjection] Absolutely. Go ahead.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much to my colleague. There are two questions that I want to ask and that I wish she would expound upon. First of all, in this current piece of legislation – I know the minister is chirping from the other side – there are no dollars committed to building new affordable housing units. The bill is touted as supporting affordable housing, yet all that the government is proposing is selling off of current government stock, yet there is no legislative requirement for the proceeds of the sale to be reinvested in affordable housing. No, I'd love for the minister to expound on this, because there's no requirement for the sale of current housing stock being sold to the private sector, that the proceeds be invested in affordable housing.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much to the member. That's the point that is raising so much concern that we would like to expand and explore. This government is saying words, they're saying things that say: oh, yeah, we support legislation; we're supporting affordable housing. Then put it in the legislation. If you're selling off affordable housing, make it a requirement in this legislation to actually use that money towards affordable housing. Make it a requirement that the sale actually has to ensure that those people are making it affordable housing.

I think that by having it referred to a committee, it gives that opportunity for those questions to be asked and for a report to be done, to provide to this Chamber, about what people expect from their government. It's not just language that they want. They want

clear action. They want language in the legislation that actually supports individuals being able to access affordable housing in the province of Alberta, period. This legislation doesn't do it, and by giving the opportunity to have it referred to a committee, it would allow those individuals to come forward, bring forward their concerns, bring forward their solutions. It'd give us an opportunity to hear from the municipalities that have been ignored. It would provide an opportunity to hear what they actually need.

We know that municipalities are struggling. They're saying that they don't have affordable housing. They want a voice at the table. Having it referred to committee actually allows for that voice to be present. It allows those individuals, those stakeholders, to come to the committee to express their concerns, to provide solutions that actually are effective to achieving affordable housing in the province.

What I'm hearing across the aisle is a fear of hearing the solution. They talk about this bill being, you know, the solution to affordable housing, but it doesn't actually do anything to ensure that Albertans have access to safe affordable housing. When we do refer to a committee, they're responsible to listen to Albertans. It's transparent. It provides an opportunity to hear from individuals. It provides an opportunity for the committee to discuss, to ask questions, and then complete a report, that then would be provided into this Chamber. It's transparent about what the process is. Then the minister can directly respond to those individuals that we know are reaching out and expressing concern. This way it would be done in a nice report. It would be done in a way that is very transparent, which is something that this government has not been. It would give people the opportunity to be able to say how desperate they are for real legislation that supports affordable housing.

We've seen homelessness in Edmonton increase. We've seen poverty increase. A lot of that is, unfortunately, due to the decisions and the policies and the cuts from this government. When they cut things like AISH, the seniors' benefit, rent supplements, it's making it so much more difficult for Albertans to access affordable housing. When you're part of the problem that's creating those in need of affordable housing, it would only make sense that they don't want to be part of the solution to get affordable housing done, and it would only make sense that they would say, "No, don't support this amendment, because we can't be transparent; we don't actually want to do anything about it," which is very concerning.

When I see that we have a referral to committee, I just don't understand why they would want to vote it down, why they don't want to hear from Albertans. I would really implore that everybody in this Chamber, every member, really consider what they're hearing from their constituents. I can't imagine that they're asking for the sale of affordable housing. I can't imagine that they're asking for ways to make it more difficult for them to access safe housing. When it comes to voting for this amendment, for this referral, I would suggest that every member in this House vote in support of it. All we're asking is that it be referred to committee to allow the committee to do the work that they do, to provide more space for Albertans to be able to express their concern, express their solutions about what would actually make this piece of legislation beneficial.

We've heard from so many Albertans about their concerns, from municipal leaders questioning why this government isn't listening to them and why this government isn't partnering with them. It takes all levels of government to really come up with a strong affordable housing strategy and a plan and then an action that is going to follow through on that. Why they would say no to the ability to hear from all those leaders, to actually create true affordable housing in the province of Alberta, is beyond me.

I would really suggest that anybody that's in the Chamber would support our referral to committee. I think every individual has that ability to make a decision, and when it comes to affordable housing, we hear the words that they support it, that they want to see it, but we need to see action, Madam Speaker. The way to have action is to open it up, to refer it on to committee, to have all those individuals that sit on the committee listen to Albertans, hear their solutions, hear their struggles. It's hard listening to Albertans that are struggling. It is heartbreaking, the stories that we hear, and sometimes part of this job is listening to the human impact of the decisions that are being made.

10:50

I think the ability to sit in a committee and reach out to Albertans and say, "We want to hear from you; we want to know what's happening; we want to know what we can do to make this the best piece of legislation" is part of that solution, giving Albertans a voice when they're telling us they don't feel heard, that they don't feel like this government is listening. What a wonderful opportunity for every member in this House to really step up and listen to what Albertans are saying, and the opportunity to do that is to have it referred to committee.

With that, Madam Speaker, I will take my seat. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to rise to talk about Bill 78. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs' comments on the referral amendment. I'm not sure if she lost track of that throughout her speech, but we are speaking about a referral amendment right now. It is probably important, maybe, for the House to have a refresher on what a referral amendment means. This is an amendment that is being brought forward by a member to refer this bill back to a standing committee, which essentially would mean that the bill would die. There are 24,000 people on a waiting list for affordable housing right now, so I reject the recommendation from the Official Opposition to move a bill to committee for it to die. I really strongly encourage the hon. minister not to do that because I think that it would be very, very problematic for people waiting on the waiting lists.

Further than that, I do feel obligated to respond to some of the ridiculous remarks coming from the Official Opposition this evening in regard to their history in the 29th Legislature, when they were government, when it came to referral amendments. Madam Speaker, I can let you know that the former NDP government never passed one referral amendment that was brought forward by the opposition. Not once did they send a bill to committee on the recommendation of the opposition. I know. I was the Opposition House Leader for a long time, as you know. Now, what they did do often, though – and they brought it up, so it's relevant to the referral here, briefly – is that they often referred their own bills to committee when they screwed them up. That did happen a lot. The former Government House Leader, Brian Mason, had a great career inside this place. Those of us who know him would say that, for sure. [interjection] The what?

Mr. Turton: The automotive bill.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Correct. The automotive bill they messed up.

Actually, here's the famous one. The former member for the minister of agriculture's riding . . . [interjections] No, no, no. The current minister of agriculture, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Allard: Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Drumheller-Stettler. The former Member for Drumheller-Stettler had a great bill on property rights here, and the then Government House Leader and the NDP of the day didn't know what to do, because it was so good. But they couldn't pass it, so that one magically went to committee even though the opposition did not want that to happen. There are lots of examples like that, but certainly not once did they take the recommendations of the opposition. And you know what? They probably should have because it would have stopped certain things like the carbon tax, Bill 6, and many other terrible pieces of legislation that we saw come from the NDP government of the day.

In this case, though, this is a piece of legislation that's trying to be able to create capacity in affordable housing inside our province. Again, 24,000 people waiting for an affordable housing spot inside our province, and if the minister was to listen to the Official Opposition, that would mean that this would go on longer before there could be solutions for those individuals.

At its core this bill will create a pathway for partnerships. I think, Madam Speaker, what you may notice is that the NDP really don't like partnerships. They don't like partnerships with the private sector. They don't like partnerships with the social services sector. They certainly don't like partnerships with religious organizations. We see that quite often from the Official Opposition. I think, again, we just figured out what was going on . . . [interjection]. This is my first time doing this, but I'd be happy to yield the floor to the hon. member.

Mrs. Frey: You know, I was really enthralled by the remarks of the minister. I was curious. He started talking about how the NDP doesn't really like partnerships, but it seems to me that they've really liked a partnership with Extinction Rebellion lately. So I'm curious if the hon. Minister of Environment and Parks could maybe illuminate some of those things that we see in the shadows there from the NDP and perhaps bring some more clarity to the Chamber. [interjection]

Mr. Jason Nixon: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall was just celebrating his long relationship, I think, with Extinction Rebellion. I didn't quite catch it. But what I will say, Madam Speaker, is that we're a long way – I know that look – from the referral amendment, which was your point.

I do think that the hon. member is correct. I won't spend any more time than necessary talking about the NDP's bizarre partnerships with extreme environmental organizations and anti oil and gas organizations while I'm talking about a housing bill. I do think the point is clear that the NDP only want to partner with people that are like-minded to them.

You have to ask yourself, when you're looking at this bill, why they would not want to partner with nonprofit organizations to create housing, with the private sector to create housing along the way, with housing bodies, municipalities, and others to be able to create housing capacity for 24,000 people that are waiting. The NDP want to act like they're the champion of the less fortunate inside our province. We all know that isn't true, because if they were, they wouldn't spend their time trying to do things like carbon taxes, that raise the price for everyday Albertans, including the poor, in fact, disproportionately the poor when it comes to carbon taxes.

Again, Madam Speaker, this issue of partnerships, specific to this, is very, very important because we see it time and time again. We see the NDP, when it comes to the provincial parks system, not wanting to partner with conservation organizations all across the

province. They did everything they could to fight against nonprofits when they wanted to help with our parks system. Now, why would that be? You're going to see a couple of other examples of this I have in a moment, but I would suggest to you that it's because they're not unions. If we were to come forward with partnerships for the parks system that had union employees, all of a sudden – because the NDP would have to check with Gil McGowan and their bosses over there. I know they get mad about that, but it's right there in their constitution. They've got to give them a call to get permission. Clearly, if you're dealing with a nonprofit organization like Trout Unlimited, the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, the friends of Kananaskis, the friends of Bragg Creek, all of these great organizations, the NDP do everything they can to stop them.

Now, the same thing you see – well, you know, Madam Speaker, we're not talking about parks today, but I hear some of my hon. colleagues asking about CPAWS. CPAWS, at the end of the day, is a foreign-funded environmental organization dedicated to sterilizing the landscape in the province, so they like that.

But, again, back to housing. [interjection] I hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. He's up there talking away about this because he doesn't like the private sector either. He'll only stand up inside this House . . . [interjection] Are you asking me to yield way?

Mr. Bilous: Yeah.

Mr. Jason Nixon: No. I don't want to hear that right now, Madam Speaker. What I want to talk about right now is the lack of desire for partnership.

Now, on this bill itself the hon. member doesn't want – the only thing I can conclude is that he doesn't want to see the nonprofit sector helping. He doesn't want to see the private sector helping. Only if they're unionized with their big bosses, Gil McGowan and others, will the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and his party support them. That is the appearance of this.

Now, you know my father, Madam Speaker, of course, a long-time CEO of the Mustard Seed. After he retired from the Mustard Seed, though, he spent his retirement gig . . . [interjection]. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview is asking if my dad was the executive director. He did start out as the executive director, but he finished as the CEO. Thanks, hon. member. I was an executive director at the Mustard Seed, though. Thank you for asking. I really appreciate your time.

Now, back to this. He went to Oxford House afterwards, which is a nonprofit organization that buys housing for ex-addicts. You wouldn't even know where they are. They are throughout all of both Calgary and Edmonton, all across much of the United States. On any given street inside your community there could be an Oxford House. You would not know that it's there. It's a community of former addicts living together, with a high success rate. Very few problems that I can ever think of historically have happened inside those communities. This is a nonprofit organization who is partnering with government to be able to create housing, which is all that the minister is simply trying to do. But, again, you continue to see the Official Opposition digging in their heels, pretending they care about people that need low-income housing, but they really don't, Madam Speaker, because if they did, they would support this legislation and the organizations that want to make low-income housing inside the province. But they can't.

Now, I know some of the members across the way. I do think that they care about people that need low-income housing. You have to ask: why would they work so hard at 11 o'clock at night to try to send a bill to committee to kill it, not to help 24,000 people needing housing inside our province? I have to conclude that it still comes

down to the fact that it's not unionized organizations. They only want big government, and they only want the union. At the end of the day, if you look at their party structure, you know why. Their entire constitution is based on union management.

11:00

Now, Madam Speaker, I had an opportunity once to be an observer at an NDP conference, an AGM, a couple of years ago. Now, unlike ours, where we let the observers go all around the convention and enjoy their time – and I hope that all members across the way get a chance to come to a Conservative convention sometime – they kept us all in a rope fence right in the middle of the room. Us Conservatives, we had to be surrounded by a rope, and everybody knew I was there. I couldn't hide. They knew I was there. We sat there and we watched. You know the thing that's striking? It's just all unions. They have to do exactly what the unions tell them to do on the floor. It's voted in union blocs. They decide what will take place. The unions are the bosses, and that's okay. It's okay. But we should be clear about what their party structure is. It's about unions. It's right inside their constitution, and the only reason that they won't support these types of partnerships is because they're not unionized.

That's shameful, Madam Speaker, because at the end . . . [interjection] Oh. Looking forward to this. Yes.

Mr. Getson: Minister, I really appreciate the enlightenment when it comes down to the motives behind the NDP for referrals. My concern is that I was part of the minister's committee, and we genuinely want to try to get the 80,000 units out there for the folks. We had 144,000 that were being held up. Maybe the minister can talk about the NDP occupation when they were in charge and what they did for . . .

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall. Point of order.

Point of Order Relevance Insulting Language

Mr. Sabir: Under 23(b)(i), speaking to the matters not under discussion, and (h), (i), and (j). A couple of things. I have worked in the housing sector in a homeless shelter for five years. I have seen people on the streets. I do know what housing means. Personally, I have lived a paycheck away from homelessness pretty much the first eight, nine years in Canada. So far whatever the minister has said about this bill, about how the NDP doesn't like partnerships, about unions, and all that: that is complete garbage.

The next thing that the member that was intervening said was about the NDP occupation. Again, the 2015-19 government was elected by Albertans. [interjections] Referring to a democratically elected government as an occupation, I think that's taking . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I just want to hear the point of order.

An Hon. Member: So do we.

Mr. Sabir: It's a point of order. I'm arguing a point of order. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Guys, I don't want to be here all night, you don't want to be here all night, so let's get to the business of this Chamber. Right now that is a point of order.

Mr. Sabir: The member referred to the NDP's four years as an NDP occupation. The Speaker of the House has cautioned, strongly cautioned, another member for using the same language. I think that a person born and raised in Canada talking about a democratically elected government as an occupation is disrespectful to those who have seen what occupation means. That kind of language clearly creates disorder in the House, and it should not be used. Every time the member will use that language, I will object to it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. Madam Speaker, on the point of order this is clearly a matter of debate, but I don't want to waste any more time on it. Clearly, we hit a sore point with the NDP when it was brought up. The destruction they put on this province: I understand why they would have a sore point about that, the worst government in the history of the province. Happy to withdraw the comment on behalf of the hon. member because I'm very interested in what he has to say, not the NDP's defensive remarks.

The Deputy Speaker: That's a good place to end up. Just a reminder to all members of this House to watch the words that we say and the manners in which we say them.

The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has 36 seconds remaining on his intervention.

Debate Continued

Mr. Getson: Well, thank you for that. I'm now educated that apparently saying "occupation" – I should have used the word "occupied." If that's still offensive, well, the members occupied the position of government.

Mr. Bilous: Call an election.

Mr. Getson: What they really did on the housing file because – quite frankly, when I was part of it and looking at it, it hadn't been touched in 20 years, and it was in absolute disarray. If they put their money where their mouth was, they would have done something before, when they occupied the position of government.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you for the question, hon. member, or through you, Madam Speaker, to the hon. member. We hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview going crazy over there, from what I can tell, about these comments, heckling away about this because, again, I think we hit a sore point. I think we hit a sore point. He has been standing in this House tonight trying to filibuster and kill a piece of legislation that would create housing for 24,000 people. If I was him, I'd be upset about that being pointed out, too. Look how upset he is. He is upset.

Now, the reason he's upset, though, again, is that he doesn't want anybody to point out the fact that their amendment, that he supports with his party tonight, would kill the bill. This is a referral amendment that was brought forward by the Official Opposition. The context of the bill is not relevant to this portion of the debate as you said, Madam Speaker. The NDP need to explain why they would waste legislative time bringing forward a referral amendment to kill a bill that is going to help create housing for 24,000 people that need it inside this province.

That's shameful, Madam Speaker. My constituents would be shocked. Actually, I don't know if they'd be that shocked because they lived through abusive stuff from the NDP in the past, and they know their record very, very clearly. Certainly, where I come from, the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview – I hope he comes to Sundre or Rocky Mountain House one day. I know the hon.

minister for jobs and the economy has been inviting him to Rocky Mountain House, and any time that he'd like to come have a town hall in Rocky Mountain House, we can enjoy that. If he'd like to have a comparison on the government's record between that and the NDP, I would enjoy that in Rocky Mountain House and would really enjoy watching that show from a distance.

But back to the referral amendment . . .

Mr. Bilous: I'm happy to come.

Mr. Jason Nixon: He's happy to come. Good. We're going to set it up. We're going to get it going in Rocky Mountain House. We'll send him the invitation. In fact, we'll get the minister of jobs to send him a bus, just like we promised, and we'll bring him out to Rocky Mountain House.

Back to the point, though, Madam Speaker. It's upsetting them. You see it right now. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall got up on a point of order, quite upset – and that's fine – about the comment that the hon. member made. I've withdrawn on his behalf. But he did work with the homeless, and I want to thank him for that. So did I, just up the street.

You know, Madam Speaker, I'm happy to say this. I worked for an organization that was not unionized. Our employees went to work each and every day to help the poor inside the province. That member did work for an organization that was unionized. That shows where his priorities are when it comes to an issue, and that's okay. There's nothing wrong with working for a union, but to be clear, that is the main goal of the NDP. They wake up every morning. They can't support anything that doesn't support the unionized because they work for Gil McGowan, and they get upset. This is why you see stuff, just two weeks ago, as the youth wing of the NDP Party set up motions to block coastal pipelines.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Sabir: Madam Speaker, 23(b)(i), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." Clearly, the minister is ranting way offside. It's clearly a point of order.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Madam Speaker, if we're going to start calling things that close to relevance, then the NDP likely can't speak anymore inside the Chamber. This is clearly a matter of debate. I'm clearly drawing a distinction between their unionized support and the fact that they have to do everything the unions say – I'm making that argument very clearly – which is why they're bringing a referral to a piece of legislation in this House to try to stop a bill, because their union bosses are making them. That's the point of my argument on the referral.

Now, I also have to say, Madam Speaker, that I haven't heard the NDP talk to the referral yet, so I would be curious as to your thoughts on that.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. minister, I have said multiple times now that we are on a referral amendment and we should speak to the matter at hand. We have been offside for quite some time, and while I can appreciate that your comments were coming back around to the matter at hand, which is the referral and why this bill should or should not be referred to a committee, I expect those comments to happen now. You have four minutes remaining.

Debate Continued

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. They will continue to happen now. I hear your instructions loud and clear. Again, I want to stress that our job is to explain why and convince members not to support an NDP motion that is to kill a bill. That is solely my point.

11:10

I understand we're hitting a sore nerve because they don't like to have their union connections discussed inside this Chamber. Every time that happens – we've seen it for the last 20 minutes – they can't control themselves once it's started to be pointed out: point of order after point of order after point of order because they don't want you to know why they moved this referral amendment. They moved this referral amendment to stop 24,000 people from being able to get low-income housing inside this province because they don't want to support anybody but unionized organizations, Madam Speaker. It's shocking. They want to pretend that they are great champions of the poor. They're not. This is a great example of that today. They will side each and every time with union organizations over top of nonprofit organizations that are working very hard to be able to help the unfortunate inside our province.

I certainly would encourage all members of the Chamber not to entertain this ridiculous motion from the NDP and to understand exactly what it is. It is purely designed to kill this important piece of legislation. I can't come up with any other reason why, Madam Speaker, other than they've got to appease their union bosses. They have no choice, obviously. Why else would you try to vote against this? If this is your reason, that you just want it to go back to committee to die, and you can't rise inside this Chamber and give any other reason, then I think we have to just conclude that the NDP are sticking with their record of listening to their union bosses and doing everything that they can to be able to make sure that they appease those types of individuals.

I find it shocking: the absolute, from my perspective, constant attack from the Official Opposition when it comes to the nonprofit sector, from my position, the complete disrespect for the nonprofit sector inside this province, which I worked for before I was in politics and I will return to when I leave politics. That is appalling, that we see that from the NDP each and every time. We are seeing it again with this referral amendment, a continued attack against the social safety net of our province because they don't like them because they're not unionized. Sometimes I think they don't like them because often they're religious organizations who have dedicated their lives to helping protect the poor, and the NDP think the only thing, the only people that can help poor people inside our province or those who need help are union organizations or the government.

I have to tell you, Madam Speaker, that that's not the case, and that's why we should reject this referral amendment. I encourage the NDP to take some time to actually go out and talk to those who work with the less fortunate inside our province, understand the organizations there are, and there are a lot of them. Each and every one of the members of this Chamber: if you go back to the community – I know many of you have – and spend some time talking to the social safety net of our communities, the nonprofit organizations that help with everything from housing to getting seniors groceries and food, you will find that the vast majority of them are not unionized, that they are often religious based – thank you for your service – of many different religions, not just one religion. They're often the private sector or the community as a whole coming together, and they do a better job than the government.

I remember when the former Premier of our province Ralph Klein was trying to get the homeless shelters upgraded inside Calgary. He did not go to the union. He did not go to the government. He went to the Mustard Seed. They turned it around for a fraction of the cost, Madam Speaker, and that's what the NDP want to avoid.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that the previous speaker's comments illustrate a point that you can say whatever you want in this place regardless of how far it is from the truth, and you're entitled to it.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Point of order. Madam Speaker, I rise on 23(h), (i), and (j). I am just shocked.

The Deputy Speaker: Hold on. I think it's probably best if you wait until I recognize you to speak before you speak. This truly is a point of order? The hon. member.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was so shocked that I forgot to let you recognize me. I do apologize. I rise on a point of order, 23(h), (i), and (j). This actually is a point of order, not a matter of debate. You can't do indirectly what you can't do directly in the Chamber. The hon. member has been here a long time.

Mr. Bilous: You do it every day.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Oh, Madam Speaker, he's so upset. He can't even let me get the point of order out. I mean, he may as well just stand up and withdraw at this point. You cannot call a member a liar in this Chamber, directly or indirectly, and that's what that hon. member just did. He should rise and apologize or withdraw.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The member was almost gone, and he got something on the tail end, but the member didn't accuse the member of lying. The member generally talked about the decorum in the House – oh, he's gone – how the debate can go further away from the truth and is not based on facts. It's clearly not a point of order, by any stretch, and I do not believe that member said to the minister of environment that he was lying. That was not the case.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, we are not very productive this evening. In terms of debate I think this is a good time to remind all members that language and tone matter, despite how tired we might be, and we should all hold ourselves to the highest decorum in this Assembly, as Albertans expect from us.

I will ask that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview continue with his remarks given the caution I just gave.

Debate Continued

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Quite frankly, in question period the Premier begins most of his responses saying something similar, so I appreciate your ruling, and I would really have questioned had this been a point of order. Regardless, what we saw in the previous speaker's discussion, the Minister of Environment and Parks and Government House Leader, was very little discussion on the referral that is before the Chamber and, quite frankly, a

speech that smacked of a government desperate to hold on to power and attack the opposition in every way they can.

It's been very clearly outlined by my colleagues on this side of the Chamber why we are opposed to this bill. Nowhere in any of the pages of this bill does it commit a dollar amount to building new units. It will not address the issue of homelessness and houselessness.

In addition to that, where this flies in the face of Albertans and the very people that the hon. minister's family serves through the Mustard Seed, an organization I'm very familiar with, there is no legislative requirement for the proceeds of the sale of any government-owned affordable housing units to be reinvested in affordable housing, period. The proceeds of the sales go into general revenues. Madam Speaker, if that's not a slap in the face to the very people who face this issue day to day, I don't know what is.

So the purpose of this referral is to kill this bill, one hundred per cent. Why? Because it's terrible. It doesn't actually build new units. It doesn't help to address the core issues of homelessness. What's actually ridiculous, Madam Speaker, was the previous speaker's 15 minutes – I don't even know what that was; a rampage, diatribe – attacking the opposition for doing our job, which is to apply a critical lens to each piece of legislation that the government brings forward, the same role that every opposition has served, well, since . . .

Mr. McIver: Try 2005.

Mr. Bilous: Let's try 1905.

Mr. McIver: I'm just helping here.

11:20

Mr. Bilous: I appreciate the Minister of Municipal Affairs attempting to help. I was trying to think of the phrase as opposed to the year, which I appreciate, and that's what I was going to say. Anyway, regardless, we all understand where I'm going with this argument, but I appreciate that this is really a team effort going on here.

So the challenge, Madam Speaker, is that the NDP opposition can't support this bill for the very simple fact that it does not address the issue of creating new affordable housing units. I think it's ridiculous that the Government House Leader goes on about whether or not this bill supports unionized or non-unionized workers. Like, it's absurd. This has nothing to do with that, nothing to do with it.

Clearly, to the Albertans watching at home, they see a government that's desperate. They see a government that's arrogant. I find it fascinating that the government is as arrogant as it is today. I don't think that any government should be arrogant. We are elected to office and should be humbled by the fact that we are elected to office, not bragging about the fact that we are where we are.

The fact of the matter, Madam Speaker, is that arrogance toppled a 44-year dynasty. Forty-four years. I appreciate the fact that most members who are here today were not in this Chamber to witness it. Most. [interjections] I appreciate what it actually is. It's laughable that the current government is heckling over the fact that the ND government was one term. If you are that confident in the job you are doing, call an election tomorrow.

Mr. Jason Nixon: We've got a fixed election date, buddy.

Mr. Bilous: There actually isn't a fixed election date. Under Premier Prentice there was a fixed election date, and he broke it and called it a year early even though it was legislated.

You know what's rich, Madam Speaker? Members from the other side of the House can dish it out and dish it out, but when they get it back, they cry. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to find words for what is happening in this Chamber right now. We are on a referral amendment in second reading. There are multiple conversations happening across the aisle, around the aisle, between. I appreciate that some of this is fun, and then some of it is not. We can have a tolerance for this and be okay, or we can have no tolerance for this and continue, which I think is probably the manner in which we should proceed for the rest of this night. There is a considerable amount of offence that is taken, and we're not actually doing what we are supposed to be doing in this Chamber. For the Albertans that are watching or not, I think we owe it to them.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview on the referral amendment.

Debate Continued

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am happy to bring this back. I mean, you know, quite frankly, this is the slippery slope that we go down when the previous speaker is making comments trying to incite disorder.

The Deputy Speaker: If you please, hon. member, we're going to reset, and we're going to get back to the meat of the matter. I'm going to make sure that you have the attention of this Assembly and the ability to speak here.

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Madam Speaker, I appreciate that. What I'm addressing is the fact that those kinds of comments that are meant to create disorder in this Chamber will be addressed.

Now, back to the referral motion. Quite frankly, there are two overwhelming arguments for why members of this Chamber should support this referral motion. That's, quite frankly, because, one, Madam Speaker, this very bill does not actually build any new housing units. It doesn't address the root causes, as my colleagues have pointed out time and time again.

Number two, I mean, even if we look past that – I appreciate that we can't look past that because Albertans that we're engaging with are frustrated at the fact that, you know, the government can pitch this bill as doing one thing even though it does not do that. Albertans are feeling frustrated. If you're going to add to the stock of affordable housing units, then do that. Don't pretend you are and not through a piece of legislation that just sells off existing stock to the private sector but does not actually add stock. There are issues within that because private-sector entities can sell off or convert units to market units and, in fact, reduce the number of affordable housing units that exist. This bill does the opposite. In fact, Madam Speaker, we should call this the sell-off of Alberta housing in the province.

In addition to that, a very simple request of the opposition is that if you are going to sell these units and somehow magically unicorns pop out and new units will come onboard, then at least from the sale of these units place those dollars into a separate account that will be reinvested into affordable housing. But the government hasn't even done that.

Madam Speaker, there are a number of examples from when we were government and we didn't set up a separate fund, and the opposition, some of who are current government MLAs today, jumped up and down and accused us of, you know, siphoning this money back into general revenues. But somehow today is a different day, the shoe's on the other foot, and suddenly it's acceptable. If the government is genuine – and through this piece of legislation they're not, which is why I support the referral

amendment – in building new units, because there's no commitment in this bill to actually build new units, let's at least ensure that the sale of government units, those proceeds, will go into a fund that will build more units. That at least would add to the current inventory. But it doesn't.

You know, I think that for the Albertans that were watching, they appreciate the fact that what the previous speaker went on about was absolutely absurd. And, again, the reason the opposition challenges this bill is because it doesn't actually contribute new units. It doesn't actually address the issue, and that, Madam Speaker, is why I'm supporting the referral and why I can't support the bill. It doesn't actually address the issue. We're putting a fresh coat of paint on the same vehicle if you want to continue with this analogy. That's not upgrading it. It's not improving it. It's not actually taking meaningful steps.

For those reasons, Madam Speaker, I urge all members to support the referral and why I cannot support this bill.

11:30

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to thank the hon. member for the amendment. I will not be able to support it for many reasons. I am pleased to voice my support here today on this important bill, that will ensure that affordable housing is available to thousands of families that are wait-listed for months. Bill 78, Alberta Housing Amendment Act, 2021, will be a key initiative to improve and expand affordable housing here in Alberta. I would like to thank the Minister of Seniors and Housing for taking the initiative to implement ways to ensure housing is affordable to all individuals across Alberta. This is a significant bill that will allow a new way of expanding and collaborating to improve and strengthen the housing sector within our jurisdiction.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Member for Calgary-Cross for convening the 2020 Affordable Housing Review Panel, which brought together stakeholders to offer suggestions on how to make the affordable housing system more sustainable while still meeting growing demand. This review would not have been possible without the support and assistance of the private and nonprofit operators, housing advocates, policy and academic experts, and real estate investors and developers with a variety of options and knowledge on affordable housing. During engagement sessions the panel heard from about 160 people, groups, and businesses and received more than 120 written comments. As well, I extend my appreciation to the 2020 Affordable Housing Review Panel and everyone who has participated in the crafting of this important legislation. The proposed changes for Alberta's housing sector are recommendations that will improve access to safe, reasonably priced housing.

Madam Speaker, we will take aggressive action over the next 10 years to provide more affordable and accessible housing options for low-income Albertans. It is obvious that for tens of thousands of Albertans, the existing system isn't working. Alberta's government has developed nearly 1,500 units in the previous two years.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Sabir: Madam Speaker, 23(b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." We are speaking on a referral

motion. I appreciate the member wants to add his support to the bill, the actual bill, but the member has not said, except for the first line, anything about the referral motion. I would urge you to caution the member to speak to the motion.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Madam Speaker, the opposition has moved a referral motion to move a bill to committee. The hon. member is rising to talk about the importance of the bill and why he would not want it to go to committee. While I understand that the hon. Deputy Opposition House Leader may not want to hear the arguments of why the bill should not go to committee, I do think that the hon. member is a member of this place and certainly has a right to say why he does not want that bill to go to committee and why he thinks it's important that this bill passes.

The Deputy Speaker: I would agree that the hon. member has the opportunity to explain why he doesn't want the bill to go to committee, which is the debate on the referral amendment. However, I, too, struggle to find that loop closing in your debate. But I'm sure the hon. Member for Calgary-East is getting to his point on why or why not he supports the referral amendment, and I will give him the opportunity to do so now.

The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Debate Continued

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like, again, to thank the hon. member for bringing this amendment here. I will not be able to support it for the many reasons which I'm stating in my expression here, why it should not go to the committee, why it should be debated in the House.

There are thousands of people who are waiting on the wait-list here, and it is obvious that for tens of thousands of Albertans, the existing system isn't working. Alberta's government has developed nearly 1,500 units in the previous two years, but the investment will not be enough to keep up with the rising demand. The rent supplement program funding was increased by \$16 million in Budget 2021, rounded up from \$15.5 million in government communications.

The new program will give vital housing assistance to approximately 11,600 households every year, an increase of 3,800 from the previous year, in 2021-2022. The rent supplement program will receive a total yearly budget of \$68 million, and we will continue to safeguard the most vulnerable in order to ensure that they're not forgotten in times of need. The time of need is right now, not six months from now, the need to attract more outside funding and delivery methods as well as enable more innovative finance and transfer options. Long-term strategy corporations will assist in meeting Alberta's various demands now and in the future. This plan is community driven and aimed at improving community outcomes. Providing secure, stable housing is part of Alberta's recovery plan to achieve economic development and, importantly, to ensure that Albertans have the basic necessities to survive at this time.

Madam Speaker, more than 110,000 low-income Albertans reside in affordable housing as of April 2021, with over 24,000 on the waiting list. That's why we need right now to make sure this bill passes this legislative session, not going to the committee. The figure has more than doubled. Now is the time to take action, to meet the growing need for housing that is both safe and economically affordable.

November 1, 2021, Alberta's government made the affordable housing strategy public. The government has developed a strategy to modernize the affordable housing system to better meet the needs of Albertans and bring it in line with other jurisdictions. The

government wants to provide a better environment by concentrating on partnerships. That's something the opposition has raised many times, and with increased investments and innovation this will ensure a more long-term affordable housing system that increases access to affordable housing. Alberta's shifting demand as well as tenants' efforts to achieve housing independence will give continuous assistance to those who are most vulnerable right now.

Madam Speaker, these efforts will be in line with the Affordable Housing Review Panel's recommendation. I am pleased that all 19 submissions in the panel's final report were approved by the government. As the panel's first suggestion, the government should focus on creating an appropriate provincial strategic plan for affordable housing that includes both short- and long-term goals and objectives. Alberta's government has already taken steps to be more innovative in housing solutions, including responding to three of the panel's recommendations. Many initiatives by the Alberta government have already been put into action through the Canada-Alberta housing boost. The modernized rent supplement program allowed more Albertans to be covered as well as provided a temporary benefit to working families and maximized federal resources.

11:40

Madam Speaker, the launch of the online housing portal helped many applicants determine their eligibility as well as connected them with providers and housing options that match the needs across the province. In Morinville the opening of Paul Krauskopf Court, the community's first net-zero dwelling development, ensured the building generated all of the energy it requires with solar panels, which lowered utility costs, and ensured that rent remains reasonable in the long run.

In Lethbridge an announcement of funding of a mixed-income housing development for seniors was initiated, with the residents being able to pay rent at a rate that is appropriate for their specific circumstances. This initiative is also a test bed for a public-private partnership strategy to develop funding and management.

As well, I was pleased to be part of the government's announcement of a capital grant of \$1.1 million for the Homes for Heroes Foundation's 20-unit housing construction in Edmonton. Madam Speaker, in 2019 15 units were opened at ATCO village in the Calgary-East constituency to serve veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, and I was happy to be able to support this great initiative. Residents in the village transition, with a goal of having each veteran leave the village and re-enter mainstream society employed, stable, and self-sufficient. Homes for Heroes know that far too many veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces are struggling in their effort to leave the forces and return to civilian life, and many will find themselves on long and difficult pathways to homelessness.

I am grateful to know that their vision is to have veterans in need progress towards a secure, self-sufficient life through access to housing and a robust support system offering stability and dignity and would like to thank all the officers and staff of the Homes for Heroes Foundation for providing a clearly caring, innovative, and comprehensive solution to homelessness among our veterans.

Madam Speaker, lastly, the YWCA courtyard project uses shipping containers to create affordable homes and barrier-free living in Banff. Because of its net zero energy footprint, the property will be cost-effective for both tenants and the housing provider.

Madam Speaker, the Alberta Housing Act lays out the groundwork for providing affordable housing in the province, and we need it right now. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation is managed by the Alberta housing authority, AHA. This framework restricts the formation of new collaborative relationships, and the

proposed legislative changes will enable ASHC into joint ventures and partnerships, including new definitions of "affordable housing provider" and "accommodation" that will enable more types of partnerships, provide accountability mechanisms for known HMB providers, enable a shift to competency-based HMB boards, and simplify the administration.

Bill 78, if passed, which we need right now, will reform the act to give the authority to implement measures indicated in the 10-year plan to promote new partnerships and ensure oversight, attract investments into affordable housing, strengthen governance and capacity for housing management organizations, and streamline administration. To help more Albertans in need of affordable housing, the government must form partnerships with commercial and nonprofit developers and operators. The proposed revisions will allow the government to develop this partnership, paving the way for the transformation of affordable housing. A basic step towards establishing new co-operation models is to define "affordable housing provider" and "affordable housing accommodation." Allowing the Alberta Social Housing Corporation to form joint ventures and partnerships will attract private and nonprofit involvement, allowing the government to accommodate more people without bearing all of the operational costs.

That being said, Madam Speaker, the government of Alberta will make it easier for Albertans to identify housing alternatives, understand eligibility requirements, and connect with a housing provider, which includes continuing to invest in the web tool, find housing. Tenants will have more alternatives and flexibility in how they meet their specific requirements by making it easier for them to access managed housing supports. As tenants strive for housing independence, assistance in improving their personal situation will make it easier to apply for affordable housing and to simplify eligibility requirements so the regulations are more fair for everyone.

Madam Speaker, Bill 78 as well will ensure that affordable housing providers and new collaborations will be overseen and held accountable, allowing the minister to impose certain knowledge or skills requirements on housing management boards. At the end of the day, this strategy aims to accomplish the following results by 2030: to serve 82,000 households, an increase of more than 40,000, or 25,000 families, over the previous year as well as increase housing supply by 13,000 affordable housing units while also ensuring that available apartments meet a variety of needs from the most vulnerable to those with more moderate needs, and increase the usage of mixed-income complexes.

With that, I will encourage everyone to vote against this amendment. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there other members to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to rise in the House on behalf of my constituents and add my comments to the referral amendment. For the record I just wanted to say that I will be speaking to support the referral amendment. Before I start my real comments and feedback to the legislation, I just wanted to say the background of this very debate. I'm reading the information according to CHMC, Canadian mortgage and housing association, the term that's agreed upon in the affordable housing sector in Canada and also in Alberta. It states that "housing is considered 'affordable' if it costs less than 30% of a household's before-tax income." People who spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing are in core housing need.

Madam Speaker, my purpose in reading this statement is that when I see that we have about 25,000 people on the waiting list for

affordable housing in the province, I can surely claim that if all those people in this province who are spending more than 30 per cent of their income apply for the affordable housing, the list will grow surprisingly. It's not only ethnic communities, non-ethnic communities. I deal with a number of people. People who work in my office, people who worked with me, and people I know from communities spend way more than 30 per cent. As well, single mothers, single parents that I personally know spend 40 per cent to 50 per cent of their income to afford their housing and are not on the list.

11:50

What this minister is offering in this legislation is more than 80 per cent less investment into the program than the previous government and asking the opposition and Albertans to believe in her mystery plan that will address the affordable housing crisis, that continuously keeps growing. Her claim has not been supported by a single piece of legislation in this bill. That's all the opposition members have been asking and raising questions and concerns about when it comes to the debate and the job of the opposition. That's what we're trying to do.

Not only this, but I tried several interventions to the government House members and to the minister. Not even a single answer on those interventions, and the government has ignored when my colleagues say again and again and refer to the arrogance of the government and the government House members, and that's where we're speaking from.

That's the least we could do, to send this bill to a standing committee. There is no other alternative for us. All we are trying to

do is to serve the public and find the mechanism in this parliamentary democracy that could help to address that very issue. That's what this referral is saying, and that is why I'm asking the members of both sides to support this referral. What is missing? At least we could do our due diligence. If due diligence of government is not agreeing to our point of view, the other philosophy, our ideology, our plan, then at least do your due diligence. Hear from Albertans. There's not even a single line in this bill that tells us what the stakeholders tell this government to do. That is missing, and that's all we are saying in this amendment. I think this is a very reasonable ask, and I ask all the House members to support this amendment.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to the referral amendment?

[Motion on amendment REF1 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: We're back on the main bill, Bill 78, in second reading. Any members wishing to join the debate?

Seeing none, would the hon. minister like to close debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 78 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thanks for all the progress tonight. I move that we adjourn the House until tomorrow at 10 o'clock a.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 11:55 p.m.]

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