



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, November 30, 2021

Day 134

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

10 a.m.

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Privilege Gestures

The Speaker: Hon. members, prior to calling Orders of the Day, as members will be aware, yesterday during Orders of the Day the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo rose on a point of privilege, which I said would be dealt with this morning. The Member for Edmonton-South said that they would like to defer their arguments. I believe the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has a statement to make.

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to atone for my actions in the Chamber yesterday. Somewhere around 3:30 yesterday afternoon, while debating some motions for returns, I engaged in a heated argument with several members of the Chamber, at which point I pointed specifically to the Member for Taber-Warner. The Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo saw me do that and therefore raised the point of privilege.

You know, since the point of privilege has been raised, Mr. Speaker, I have reflected on my behaviour. I reflected on a statement that was made by a self-help guru a number of years ago who said that every time you point a finger at somebody else, there are three fingers pointing back and a thumb pointing up at God, which really makes you think. After thinking, reflecting on this statement, I realized that my behaviour was not becoming of the Chamber, so I offer my unreserved apology to both the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo and the Member for Taber-Warner.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I appreciate the fulsome and robust apology, and I mean that genuinely. Thank you very much for that. I consider this matter dealt with and concluded.

We are at Ordres du Jour.

Orders of the Day

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.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment November 29: Mr. Sabir]

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are on REF1. The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has a couple of minutes remaining should he choose to use it.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo has risen to add to the debate.

Member Ceci: We’ll keep it in the Calgary family, Mr. Speaker. The red tape reduction bill is on referral before us, Bill 80. Of course, we all understand that there are some primary changes across this bill and a number of acts – two, four, six, eight, nine – nine in particular. But there are some of these that for my purposes I want to try and address as they are more substantial and, I think, should have been brought forward on their own under the appropriate minister standing up and bringing them forward as opposed to the omnibus bill that’s before us, that tends to gloss over and potentially water down what’s before us and – I’m not saying that the government is sneaky – sneak in substantive changes that we should be spending more time on. I will try and do that in my time this morning.

Of the more substantial changes in the bill, particularly the area that is in the income support part of the bill, Mr. Speaker, removing the adult learner stream from income support is concerning as it’s been there for a substantive period of time in its current form. This Bill 80 changes that, changes that, I believe, without substantive or stakeholder involvement, review, exploration, the opportunity for particularly those people who will be negatively impacted who have a desire to improve their life situation. They’re on supports at this time, income supports at this time, and they want to obviously get ahead. We know that the key to getting ahead is some continued education in one’s life, where you can parlay that degree or that diploma or that training into additional work, work that’s paid higher potentially than what you’re making now. That is one area I want to spend some time on this morning and why I believe the referral is in order.

I know there are many other areas here, some that affect the municipal area, brought on by gaming, liquor, and cannabis, changes to that area that allow for the introduction of entertainment districts. From my time as a city councillor I can tell you that whenever there are changes brought to the land-use bylaw, there are many, many stakeholders that are interested in that, whether they be property owners, residential property owners adjacent to the potential entertainment district, or commercial, who see that their interests won’t align with potentially the interests of those who are going down into a future entertainment district and enjoying more things there than they could in the past.

Mr. Speaker, the changes to – not to the Municipal Government Act, because that’s not before us – municipal planning are something that’s highly debated and of concern to many. I just wonder if the appropriate minister has had the opportunity to go about broad-based consultations. We just had the RMA and the AM, previously the AUMA, here in the previous two weeks having their annual conventions, and it wasn’t something that I heard government ministers bring up in bear-pit sessions to those gatherings. I just wonder if that would have been a better, an additional time when something like that could have been surveyed with those present, and it wasn’t.

Mr. Speaker, just going on, flipping through the bill and some notes that I’ve made, I think there are some changes in other areas that are relatively minor and could be part of not necessarily a red tape reduction act, but miscellaneous statutes were something that

were brought forward by us as a government repeatedly in the time when we were filling out the legislative agenda of this province, and we could see that some of these changes could have been done in that format instead of the format that's before us.

10:10

Nonetheless, the additional area that I wanted to just talk about briefly before I get into more differently substantive ones in the area that I mentioned off the top is the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019. Yeah, that's the fourth one down in my notes. In that one, in this bill, it retreats from the government's original plan to give the Health minister power to dictate where doctors could work by setting a maximum number of physicians needed by geographic area or specialty unit it negotiates in. That will be how the government negotiates a new contract with doctors going forward.

If you think about it, it is a step back from or a compromise towards doctors. It is a step back from the government being dictatorial to doctors in this province and dictating where they could work in this province, which is pretty drastic when you think about it in terms of a government saying: we want you to practise here; we want you to practise there. That's something that's a really high bar in terms of being able to dictate the working conditions of Albertans, of course, who have specialty training. Dictating where an Albertan can work and can't work is something that I don't think we want to see.

If this bill, as it indicates, retreats from that original plan that was set out by this government and that we argued against vociferously, then that's a good thing. It sort of seems like the government is coming to its senses with regard to how to treat doctors though they've still got a long way to go, because the relationship between doctors and this government, as we all know, as Albertans all know, is still not where it was under the previous NDP government, which was a working-together relationship, a partnership. That partnership is best expressed in the take-back that was negotiated with the AMA, with doctors in this province, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars over the life of the previous contract with doctors. Mr. Speaker, that's how I remember things.

Now on to the Income and Employment Supports Act. I think the work of this government to change that, which was benefiting Albertans who were both getting income supports and benefits and undertaking training in a course, a legitimate course of additional training, to essentially get off income supports – that is the plan. That is why they are going back. This bill removes the access to the training benefit if a person is not accepted in a training program that commences before April 1, 2022.

Essentially, the government is sunsetting a training benefit for people who need it most in this province. It would be useful if the minister can explain why this program is being cut out of income supports. Did the minister not see the benefit of having this as part of the legislation? The fact that people have identified a training program, that they are on income supports, that their family is getting those benefits – those are not benefits that have a great largesse or amount of money to them, as we know. They decide to go for further education, whether that education, you know, helps them become a baker or helps them become a technician in some capacity, where they will ultimately leave income supports and substantially support their own family and access the benefits through companies that they get employed by, which is all good news for our economy, for income support so that potentially more Albertans, different Albertans who need that support temporarily can come into the program. That's going to go away. The training part of it is going to go away. I think that that amendment in this bill is not well thought out and should be reconsidered, its substance, in part of our referral.

Under the current legislation, not the bill, people who qualify for this program: it's a statutory program, so they get it. But with the changes that are being proposed, the minister will be able to decide who gets it or not. I just wonder why this change is being made. Of course, we know that there is another aspect to this that says – it's in section 3. It states that "the Minister may provide foundational learning assistance only if money is available for . . . assistance." Not only is the current program being sunsetted, but going forward, after the sunset of April 1, 2022, I believe the date is, the minister can set a budget amount, and once the budget is reached, then no further assistance will be provided. That's a loss in terms of changing from a statutory requirement to a funding availability.

Obviously, it means that the minister can refuse people in the future, which I think is, from the perspective of a stakeholder, perspective of a client on income supports, obviously quite troubling and concerning. I think it's being done in part because the ministry is being given short shrift in terms of supports by this government. I think if this government hadn't wasted billions of dollars, as they have done and Albertans are aware of, \$4.7 billion, \$1.5 billion – I don't even have to say where they went; everybody knows those figures – there would be more supports for Albertans who need it.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others that would like to speak to amendment REF1? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to offer some comments on Bill 80 and this amendment to refer this bill to committee. I want to focus my comments on two of the sections of this bill, one that makes changes to cannabis sales in the province of Alberta, and then the other comments I want to focus on this issue of income supports for adult learners.

Now, first of all, I want to discuss some concerns that I have with the government's proposal to change the rules around who can sell cannabis online here in the province of Alberta and point out why I think it would be a good idea to set that part of the bill before a committee to get some answers. It was my privilege in the fall of 2017 to act as the Minister of Justice while the then real Minister of Justice was off having a baby. One of the big tasks that I had to deal with when I was covering for the real Minister of Justice at the time was to get the cannabis distribution and sales framework correct.

10:20

The government had struck a Cannabis Secretariat, that was working under the Minister of Justice, and they were looking at all of the things that we needed to do to make sure that we could operationalize the federal government's decision to legalize cannabis for sale while making sure that we had a system that worked for the benefit of the people who wanted to buy cannabis legally, provide safe access to the product, make sure that public safety wasn't compromised, and also to squeeze out the well-developed black market in cannabis sales.

Certainly, when we were considering what the framework for cannabis distribution and sales should be, this issue of online sales was one that the Cannabis Secretariat gave a lot of thought to because under the legalization framework – right? – it is the sole responsibility of the province to distribute and sell cannabis to the people of Alberta. Nobody else can do that, right? Ultimately, the Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis commission is the ultimate party responsible for the sale of the product.

That created a bit of a problem when it came to online sales because, as far as I know, the Internet crosses boundaries, and it's hard to verify whether or not cannabis that is being sold to consumers in Alberta from any website is actually being sold legally, that is to say that they are procured by AGLC and then distributed and sold through the proper channels. The best way to ensure that online cannabis sales would be conducted legally, according to the advice that we got from the Cannabis Secretariat, was to ensure that the online portal for cannabis sales was owned and operated by the people of Alberta. That was really the most foolproof way to ensure that when people were buying cannabis online, they were doing so in accordance with the rules, both of the federal government and the rules that the provincial government set out.

I think it's wise for members to vote to put this bill to committee so that we can ask questions of the government as to what changed between 2017, when we introduced this framework, and now. You know, in his statements on this topic the Finance minister has said that he's very concerned about squeezing out the black market in online cannabis sales. I don't understand how opening up online sales to any kind of provider actually accomplishes that goal. This proposal certainly runs counter to the advice that we received when we created this system, so I'm interested in knowing what changed, and I think that by referring this bill to committee, that would give the members of the Legislature the opportunity to ask the right questions.

As we all know, it's not just ministers who can come to committee. We can call department officials to committee to offer their explanations and come up with the data and analysis that was done to support those recommendations. I would certainly be interested, as I'm sure many of my colleagues would be, as to what data and analysis the responsible departments have done to support moving online cannabis sales away from a site that is owned and operated by the people of Alberta to a free-for-all for private operators, particularly with the issue of black market sales. How is the government going to ensure that the cannabis that is sold online through this private system that they are proposing to operate – how will they ensure that that is being done legally? What additional enforcement costs, if any, are going to be related to this decision, or what kind of enforcement program are they even going to put in place to make sure that this is happening?

That was one of the advantages of the publicly owned online portal, Mr. Speaker. It didn't require enforcement. You know, if people were buying cannabis online in Alberta, it either had to be through this portal or you knew that it was being bought illegally. I think it's only fair for the government to come forward with its evidence and analysis to support this move, how it supports the elimination of black market cannabis sales, how they plan to enforce the rules around private sales, and what those enforcement costs are going to be. Let's make sure that the people of Alberta understand exactly what's at stake with this decision.

The other piece of this legislation that I think deserves significant scrutiny from a committee of the Legislature is the section that deals with the elimination of income support for adult learners. This is something that my colleagues here in the Official Opposition have discussed a number of times. We've certainly cast doubt on the Minister of Advanced Education's assertion that the income supports that are available will not be lost; they're just being shifted to his department.

I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I am not assured by the statements that the Minister of Advanced Education has made on this topic. The last time I spoke on this issue, I raised some concerns about the Department of Advanced Education's budget and their inability to actually spend the money that's in the budget for a

whole host of programs, foundational supports, student grants, student loans, scholarships and awards. There is a bunch of money that was set aside in the budget, the 2020-21 budget, that didn't actually get out the door. The Minister of Advanced Education offered answers that weren't satisfactory, shall we say. They didn't really explain the situation that would have caused the ministry to not spend all of its money.

I am not satisfied with the response that we've gotten from Executive Council to date on this, and I think that by sending this bill to committee, we will actually have the ability to cross-examine not just the Minister of Advanced Education but also his officials and any officials from Community and Social Services who have also been previously involved with the delivery of this program. I think we need to fully understand what's at stake here.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to review the type of students who are at risk of losing their funding. We've heard a lot of derogatory statements made about particular programs or imagined programs in postsecondary education institutions here from members of the government caucus. They suggest that students are a bunch of hippies who are spending their time learning macramé and basket weaving and not learning skills that will improve themselves and allow them to contribute to the betterment of our communities.

Nothing could be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker. The very students who are at risk of losing their support are the very people who need the support the most. The current income support for learners supports students who are learning English as a second language, and might I say that learning English as a second language is incredibly important to allowing new Canadians to achieve their full potential here in their chosen home. It doesn't make sense to me that we would be denying people funding who would benefit so strongly from this. The students who are on the income support learner benefit need to develop their basic skills. If they don't have literacy and numeracy up to a grade 1 level, that is the kind of student who's eligible for income supports, all the way up to a high school diploma.

10:30

Now, we have in Alberta some of the lowest high school completion rates of any province in the country. We leave more students behind than any other province in the country. Certainly, if the Minister of Education has anything to do with it, the ones who do graduate will be significantly worse off than the ones who graduated before her new curriculum is forced upon schools. Regardless, we have significant numbers of people who have never completed a high school diploma here in the province of Alberta, and we desperately need to make sure that everybody who wants to get a high school diploma has the opportunity to do so without facing the barriers that stand in their way.

Now, it's no small thing to be an adult and decide that you're going to go back to school and complete your high school diploma. There is a significant amount of stigma attached to being an adult who doesn't have a high school diploma. So just admitting that this is something that you need is a significant step forward, and we should be encouraging people to recognize that they need to upgrade their education, not kicking them off income supports and denying them the opportunity that they're finally willing to take advantage of.

You know, we often hear members of the government caucus talking about the so-called skills gap here in the province of Alberta. Well, if the skills gap is real, then I think it only makes sense that we'd want to make sure that every Albertan has the opportunity to upgrade their skills so that that skills gap can be filled. Why would we look at a huge segment of the population that doesn't have a

high school education and say, “Well, sorry; now you’re going to have to hope that the Minister of Advanced Education has enough money to help you get a high school diploma, but if not, good luck to you”? I think it stands to reason that we should dig into this issue a little bit more, understand the barriers that people face when trying to complete a high school education, so that we can design programs as a Legislature that will better support those people, not simply kick them off an income support for learners benefit and then hope that the Minister of Advanced Education picks up the pieces.

If the government wants to transition this program, we need to be thoughtful about doing that, and I think a committee is an excellent opportunity for us to come up with thoughtful ways to support those people. For those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I’ll be voting in favour of this referral.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is REF1. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Prior to her comments, if I could just make a friendly reminder to members of the Assembly that whenever possible and not speaking or drinking, we do our best to adhere to the masking rules that are in place.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly appreciate the direction around masking in the House as well. Very appreciated.

I’m pleased to rise and speak on this referral amendment that’s before the Legislature right now with respect to Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). I haven’t yet had the opportunity to speak to this bill, and I’m eager to do so. In fact, I had a number of remarks prepared at a previous sitting, where I was going to be responding to some of the comments that I’d heard from some of the members of the government caucus on this bill, but I will take the opportunity to speak more generally but also to address – I assume there have actually been some comments expressed by the government members that have probably been repeated on a number of occasions when they do rise to speak to this bill.

You know, red tape reduction has been an interesting exercise to witness this government go through. I am privileged to sit as a member on the Public Accounts Committee along with a number of my colleagues, and during the time that I’ve been a member of this committee, we’ve seen multiple ministries come forward and – you know, I have to say that maybe I’m inferring some opinions on to some of the ministry staff, which I should not be – it seems somewhat embarrassing for them sometimes to try to present what they’ve been doing in terms of red tape reduction considering it has been a top priority of this government, but really it’s become an exercise in futility.

But in terms of just counting pages of things, they often seem made up, what they’re doing in terms of red tape reduction. It’s: how many pieces of legislation might be a page shorter now, or are they counting sections of a piece of legislation, or are they, you know, counting versions of a document? Whatever it is, there seems to be this arbitrary kind of sense that we need to just reduce the number as it doesn’t matter if it’s actually serving Albertans better or serving businesses better or serving the industry or stakeholders better; it just seems to be a numbers game.

You know, this is something that Conservative governments have done periodically. They think they are achieving something because they’re reducing numbers of things, but really we have to look behind all of that because, of course, we have learned – most Albertans already understand this – that certain regulations and policies and procedures are in place for good reason, both to see the

efficient administration of government dollars and how it’s being distributed. We need accountability, we need transparency – two words that are not in this current government’s vocabulary – but we also have it for a number of reasons around safety and meeting health standards and regulatory certainty and all of those pieces.

I digress a little bit because, you know, the point about red tape reduction, that we’re seeing in here, is that sometimes it can be quite inane. That’s what I have found. Really, when I look at what a lot of this government has done around red tape reduction, it’s been quite inane. However, there have been circumstances where they claim they’re doing something under red tape reduction, but really it’s quite insidious. We’ve caught that a number of times, and it does often feel like it’s catching something because it feels like these changes are being buried in terms of omnibus legislation or, you know, just snuck in like a small, little thing like, you know, firing the Election Commissioner – we should sneak that in. So it’s been very important for the opposition and Albertans to be incredibly vigilant. And when it comes to Bill 80, Mr. Speaker, this is the case once again.

You know, there are a number of changes to various pieces of legislation. I have to say that I am actually in support of the changes that are suggested with respect to the Alberta Human Rights Act. We know that there is a huge backlog and has been for many years. Attempts have been made. I certainly hope that we can see some improvement in terms of how those complaints are expedited and dealt with while still preserving the rights of Albertans to raise their concerns and file complaints and hold, you know, those actors, government and private, accountable to protecting their human rights. Let’s hope that there’s some improvement on that front.

But one of the insidious changes – and I will refer to it as insidious because it has a very real and detrimental impact on Albertans – is the changes that are suggested in this bill, in Bill 80, with respect to the changes to income support for adult learners. Now, this is why I support this going to a committee on referral, because I think there are a number of questions about these changes that we need to hear more about. It does feel like this change has just been kind of snuck into Bill 80 with the hope that nobody would notice.

Although I’ve been talking for five minutes, I want to begin by talking about what this program is for and who this serves because it’s important to note that the Albertans who are accessing these learner benefits through income supports are Albertans who are underemployed or unemployed and who are looking to, in some cases, get very basic, foundational learning supports in language, ESL, in terms of finishing and completing high school programs and upgrading.

As the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar highlighted, I mean, we should be expecting that all Albertans who complete high school have these basic skills. We should be ensuring that everybody who comes to Alberta even as an adult should be equipped with these skills because they’re the basic skills that we hope everybody has so that they can find meaningful employment, engage as an active citizen in their community, be able to access supports. We know that language barriers and understanding barriers can really hinder people’s access to getting supports. These are the very basic things we should expect.

10:40

I, too, do not take much comfort from what we’ve heard from this government about this being just administrative, because there are changes that have been made, or that it’s going to be covered now by Advanced Education, because we know that the programs are not going to be equivalent. This change in Bill 80 basically says that anybody who’s not enrolled in an adult program by April 1, 2022,

will be cut off. Let's just be clear about what it says. That's what Bill 80 does. It says that you will be cut off those learner supports.

Now, the idea that it will now be covered by the Student Financial Assistance Act or that there are changes in that regulation that will just move it over to that field does not hold up, Mr. Speaker. They don't hold up because the regulation that would provide the same kind of support to adult learners says that those foundational learning supports and assistance will only be provided if the money is available for assistance. It's not a right to a support, which it is currently under the learner supports program, where anybody who meets the eligibility requirements would be able to access it.

It's now dependent upon whether or not this government has the money available. That is not equivalent and equitable support. We've seen this government do this a number of times, when they cut off young people aging out of care from the supports and financial assistance agreement program and say, "Don't worry; we're just moving them over to another adult program," and not all of those young people will be eligible for those programs. But even if they are eligible, those programs are not the same. They're not equitable. They don't provide the same financial support. They don't provide the same consistency in terms of emotional support from a caseworker. They're not the same.

This is exactly what's happening here with Bill 80. They are saying that these adult learners still have access to a support, but it is not the same thing. It's not a legislated entitlement, and it's only if this government has the money available. We know, Albertans know by now how this government handles its money, which is very poorly. Even before the pandemic hit, in early 2020, this government had almost doubled the deficit and lost 50,000 jobs. They gambled away \$1.3 billion on a pipeline, on the bet that Donald Trump would be re-elected. They gave away billions of dollars in their corporate tax cut, which did not generate jobs.

So this government can't be trusted to manage its own budget, they can't be trusted to manage Albertans' money, but now they're saying: "Don't worry. These vulnerable people, these people who are just trying to get some basic skills so that they can fully participate in the workforce and in society, will be transferred to another program if there's money available." Of course, we've seen the massive cuts that have already happened to the Ministry of Advanced Education.

I just want to talk a little bit about a personal story, if I may, about a young person that I know who accessed these learner supports for adult training. My family has been very privileged to have a young man who we consider a part of our family – he's not technically family, but to us he is. He's a former student of my husband who became very close to us, and he actually lived with us for many years. He was born in a refugee camp in Kenya. He's Somali, and he came as a refugee to Canada when he was 14 years old. When he came, he'd had no formal education by the time he arrived in Canada, because he grew up in a refugee camp. He never went to school. He didn't get any formal education. So when he started in our education system in Alberta, he obviously was very far behind. There was language learning that had to happen, and of course he'd had no exposure to formal education before. He also came from a family that was struggling financially, a large family, and he experienced a great deal of hardship in that family.

He technically graduated. I mean, he finished grade 12, you know, on time. He went through ESL. My husband used to work at a high school where he taught ESL. A lot of the young students there were refugees and new immigrants to Canada. This young man is very dear to our hearts and our family, and he really struggled. He actually became close with us at the same time that my son was born. So my son and my daughter consider him an older brother. He has struggled, and he completed grade 12, but he did

not graduate from high school. Shortly after that, he tried to get some jobs. He tried to work on some construction sites doing some cleaning work, that kind of thing, but he soon realized, like we've all realized, that it was difficult to get any kind of long-term, sustainable job without having a high school diploma. So he accessed these benefits to go back and to do his upgrading and to complete high school. That was critical because he was then able to enrol in another program so he could do custodial work. While he still struggles and has struggled with finding consistent employment, he would not have been able to complete high school had he not had this kind of support to do so.

While, again, I understand that the government members will say that this program is still available, we also know that it is very likely to be on the chopping block if they're already admitting in the regulation that that assistance will only be provided if there's money available to do so. We talk in this Chamber over and over again about how important it is to get Albertans back to work. We talk in this Chamber about how important it is to equip Albertans with the skills to be able to engage in the workforce and engage in society.

This is one of those core programs to support doing just that, and we cannot put it on the chopping block or dismiss it because those people who are accessing it may be the most marginalized, may be struggling the most, may not have a collective voice to be able to speak up and to lobby this government and to put their name forward and say: this is where your money is well spent. That is our job in this Legislature, to do that, to be those voices and to say: look, if we are serious about getting Albertans back to work and supporting all Albertans, we have to do it for all of them. All of them.

My colleagues in this House have raised a number of questions. You know, I share the same questions about why this change is being made. Who will qualify under the new program? What are the contingencies, what are the criteria, what are the circumstances in which these people might be ineligible or eligible for these supports? We have not gotten clear answers, because this was kind of snuck into Bill 80. That's how it feels. That's how it feels often, whenever we get these pieces of legislation that amend multiple acts. Some are very minor changes, but some are very real, and some very much can impact people's lives.

Mr. Speaker, for that reason, I believe it is important that in this Assembly we don't just blink and pass this legislation without having a fulsome discussion about how we're supporting all Albertans to actually enter the workforce and get the skills they need to succeed. Actually, let's be clear. It's not even just to succeed; it's to survive. Honestly, when we're talking about helping people get ESL skills and be able to upgrade and get a high school diploma, those are the basic things that we want everybody to have to just survive, and hopefully they can find a way to thrive as well.

I believe it's important that we refer this matter to committee, that we have those fulsome discussions, that we don't let this just be snuck into a piece of legislation, that we get a clear commitment from the ministry as to why this change was made, who will be affected, and that we get clear answers and commitments from the ministers and from this government that we are not leaving these people unsupported, because these people are not outside of us. They are in some cases part of our families, they are part of our communities, and we owe them all a duty to make sure that they are given every opportunity to succeed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: On amendment REF1, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Oh, my goodness, even though it's Tuesday, it is the first time I've spoken in the week. I did not get a chance to speak yesterday. As always, I like to just acknowledge the folks on the front lines, who continue to do amazing work in the midst of the pandemic. It's important to remind folks that we are still in a pandemic. I sure do appreciate your reminder of wearing masks, Mr. Speaker, and of masking, because as we see omicron start to rear its ugly head, I think it's important that we remember just where we're at and how little we truly know about how these things act and manifest themselves. So a shout-out to those on the front lines.

10:50

I'm thinking about the masking thing. I often talk about health care workers, but folks working in retail very much deserve props, because I think probably most of us have been in a situation where we've seen folks in retail have to deal with someone who is not willing to wear a mask. In fact, my local Cromdale Shoppers is always an interesting place to go to. I love it. I go there all the time. It's close to my house. However, you know, there have been multiple times where I've seen cashiers and whatnot have to deal with people who are being very angry and disrespectful, and I just can't imagine having to deal with that every single day. A shout-out to those folks who are on the front lines, because you don't deserve that level of disrespect, and we are all grateful for you for the work that you do.

All right. Before I get reprimanded by the Speaker for being off topic, I will get to the bill at hand, and that's Bill 80. We are on a referral. I haven't had an opportunity yet to speak to this bill, and I very much appreciated the comments of my colleagues, including Calgary-Buffalo and Edmonton-Whitemud, Edmonton-Gold Bar – well, I mean, I don't want to single anyone out because I appreciate the comments of everybody. Unfortunately, I haven't heard from the other side yet. I'm still hopeful that they will, you know, speak to this bill. It is their bill, after all, and if they're so passionate – so passionate – about reducing red tape, you'd think they'd want to stand up and defend this bill, yet we have not heard that yet today. Always the optimist, there's still time for them to get up and to speak to the merits of this bill, but I do think that it says a fair bit when they're not willing to speak to their own bill.

We've raised some really good questions. I know that my colleagues from Edmonton-Gold Bar and Edmonton-Whitemud and Calgary-Buffalo all, even today, asked a few questions, particularly around income support and the loss of the learner benefit, which is something that I am going to focus on in my remarks. I do genuinely have some questions, and I would, you know, love to hear just the justification for some of the decisions that are being made in this giant, omnibus bill. Again, I will retain hope, as I always like to do, because two and a half years in the opposition has meant that I still do have some optimism and some idealism. I think it's important. Check with me again in a couple of years. We'll see.

All right. Again, I mentioned the fact that Bill 80 is this giant piece of omnibus legislation, and what concerns me – and I don't have the physical bill in front of me. As I've said many times before – oh, there we go. Thank you. Can I hold that for a minute? I'm a digital kind of person. I have it in front of me. It is a fairly thick bill, and we've seen with this government – I think I remember one of the early bills just after I was first elected, where they put in a whole bunch of fairly substantial changes within a piece of omnibus legislation, and I'm predicting they do that because it's a way of, you know, hiding some of the pretty regressive changes that they're hoping to make through this piece of legislation. I think – I'm

looking at my colleague from St. Albert – they did that with the AISH deindexing, didn't they?

Ms Renaud: Yes. They did in 2019.

Member Irwin: Yeah. They included that in a piece of omnibus legislation as well, Mr. Speaker. That's quite concerning, that they use this as a tool to hide what they're doing. Of course, this is also at a time when we are in the midst of a global pandemic and we all as legislators and as regular Albertans as well have a lot on our plates. I think it's very easy – you know, it's easy enough for us as opposition to miss some of the things that this government is pushing through. I think my colleague from Calgary-Buffalo maybe used the word “sneakily” pushing through. I don't want to totally presume this government's intent, but again their unwillingness to speak to and defend this piece of legislation does say a lot.

I worry that when they've continued this pattern of making very harmful cuts to the most vulnerable folks, you know, we're just going to continue to see this as we get closer to the next election. I think what's hardest for me about this approach is that our most vulnerable neighbours are impacted the most. That's why we take our responsibility as opposition quite seriously, to speak up and speak out for those folks – right? – just as we did with the deindexing of AISH, which members in this House will recall. I still remember so clearly the Premier mentioning that the cuts to AISH, the deindexing of AISH, would be not onerous. Gosh, what a statement of privilege right there for someone who has been a career politician, is entitled soon to over a million-dollar pension, to say that cuts to someone who's surviving on – what? – \$1,600 a month . . .

Ms Renaud: Just under \$1,700.

Member Irwin: Yeah.

. . . wouldn't be impacted. Gosh. I know my colleague – again, I'll keep speaking about her because she's done amazing work for folks who are on AISH. She tried. She tried living on AISH, and it was very hard. She acknowledged, Mr. Speaker, that she is someone with a lot of privilege, right? She's a white woman with a car and with a roof over her head and family supports and community supports, and it was hard for her. So just imagine – just imagine – what it's like for folks without privilege and without those community supports in place.

I say all that because we see some similar incredibly damaging cuts to folks who have little in this bill, Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). This is why we're calling on this government to refer this piece of proposed legislation, to take a step back and to consider the impacts on our neighbours.

I really appreciated my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud – it's weird to point to her over there, not that I'm referring to her presence or absence – hearing her, if she were there, comments about that first-hand account of someone in her life who's benefited from the learner benefit. I think many of us could point to examples where various government programs have been life-changing to people, yet this government is making cuts.

Thinking of that same Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, I think of the SFAA program. I think of the fact that the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and I – gosh, yeah, I told somebody this story the other day, and it's hard to tell – met with a young Indigenous woman after the cuts were first introduced, and this woman was incredible. She told us how at the age – I might get her age incorrect; forgive me. This was pre-pandemic, and, you know, we all have pandemic brain. I believe she was around 25 or so when we met with her. When she was 24, she was able to use the SFAA funding to go to her home reserve for the first time since birth. She shared

with us just how life-changing that was for her, those cultural supports and connections. This is why we fight. This is why we speak out, because we know – we know – just how life-changing some of these supports can be for people who have very little. She shared with us – I mean, she had a pretty challenging upbringing and being in care, and just, you know, what she experienced, gosh, probably by the age of five is more trauma than most of us will experience in our whole lives, right?

11:00

We fight back with evidence, with data, but we also fight back with stories. I just don't want to be in this Chamber in another year, year and a half and be sharing more stories of how people's lives will be impacted negatively by cuts from this government and cuts that are so short sighted. That's the hardest part. Like, the savings from deindexing AISH – I can't remember the numbers.

Ms Renaud: A fraction of the war room.

Member Irwin: A fraction of the war room, right? We're on, the Member from Calgary-Buffalo, Q2 day. Yeah. We're going to be getting some budgetary updates today. You think about something like the deindexing of AISH, an absolute fraction of a fraction of the budget. The cuts to SFAA: an absolute fraction of the budget. I don't know because, to be fair, I haven't dug into the impacts here, but the cuts to the learner benefits: I'm going to boldly predict that those are a fraction, an absolute fraction of this budget. What's going to happen is that this government is going to have some very short-term, minuscule savings, and they're going to pay for it down the road, and they're going to pay so much more. I think back again to those SFAA cuts, right? By not investing in young people, by not giving them opportunities to go back to school to better their lives, the impacts are going to be great.

I see that I have a two-minute warning, so let me speak a little bit more about the cuts to income support. I really would love for the minister to just talk a little bit more about why they're making the change to the learner benefit, why this program is being cut out of income support. Truly just would love to hear an explanation. We didn't get good explanations when it came to the deindexing of AISH. We didn't get good explanations when it came to the cuts to SFAA. In fact, we got denial and deflection and – what's the word? I won't point because that's not parliamentary, but, you know . . .

Member Ceci: Runaround?

Member Irwin: Runaround: that's not quite the word I was looking for. If it comes to me I'll . . .

Ms Pancholi: Obfuscation?

Member Irwin: Obfuscation: that's a very good one. Obfuscation. Impressive. You must be good at Scrabble. Obfuscation.

I really would love to hear the minister speak to that. What problems did this government see with the program as is? What data, what evidence did she base these decisions on? What's the level of funding difference for part-time and full-time learners with having their funding delivered without having it as a legislated stream of income support? Can she commit that these changes will have the same level of funding? Consultation: who did she talk to? How did they arrive at this decision? If she doesn't have the data and evidence to back it up, which – I hate to say that I am skeptical of a government that rarely makes evidence-based decisions. If she doesn't have that, who did she speak to? Who working on the front lines in education and postsecondary offered these ideas? Can she

provide some findings? Can she table the information that she used to arrive at that conclusion?

With that, again, I urge the Assembly to refer Bill 80 so that we can make the right decision. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on amendment REF1 the hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General has risen.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, oftentimes when we sit before the floor of this Assembly debating bills, I've always said that it is important for us to have substantive, intelligent debate so that viewers at home can better understand what it is that we are debating rather than all of the political rhetoric that absolutely has nothing to do with the bill before us. I've sat here and listened to the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and now the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood talk about Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). The focus of their debate has been on the amendments proposed in Bill 80 to the Income and Employment Supports Act. You'll find that on page 34 of the actual bill.

You know, what they are saying is that somehow this bill will cut funding or cut programs for those who are seeking the training options provided for under the Income and Employment Supports Act. There is no truth to that, Mr. Speaker. The amendments made to the Income and Employment Supports Act: you will find them – and I'm just going to go to the actual bill before us. Oftentimes we sit here and we listen to all kinds. You will find those amendments to the Income and Employment Supports Act in section 10.

10(1) The Income and Employment Supports Act is amended by this section.

(2) Section 6 is amended

(a) by repealing subsection (3)(c) and substituting the following . . .

In the interests of our viewers back home, I'm going to read exactly what the current subsection (3)(c) says in the current act so that they know that all of this stuff that we've heard from the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has absolutely nothing to do with the bill before us.

(2) Section 6 presently reads in part . . .

Then subsection (3), which is what they are focusing on. Now, this is as written in the current act.

(3) The conditions that must be met by a household unit included in the category referred to in subsection (1)(a)(iii) are as follows:

- (c) a member of the household unit, other than a dependent child,
 - (i) meets the age and other requirements provided in the regulations, and
 - (ii) is suitable to participate full-time in a training program for an achievable employment goal.

Now, this is the current amendment sought to be made in Bill 80.

(iii) has been accepted in an approved training program referred to in Part 3 that commences before April 1, 2022.

Now, you would ask yourself: what, then, is the departure from the current provisions of the act? Here, Mr. Speaker, I have the current section of the act. I go back to section 6. Bear in mind what I read before. Section 6(3) currently reads:

(3) The conditions that must be met by a household unit included in the category referred to in subsection (1)(a)(iii) are as follows:

- (a) the members of the household unit are residents of Alberta determined in accordance with the regulations;

- (b) the household unit is financially eligible in accordance with the regulations;
- (c) a member of the household unit, other than a dependent child . . .

Now, this is now speaking to the amendment, to the current provision of the bill. That's (3)(c) that that would refer to.

- (i) meets the age and other requirements provided in the regulations,

which is exactly the same thing as the amendment just carried forward in Bill 80.

- (ii) is suitable to participate full-time in a training program for an achievable employment goal and has been accepted in an approved training program referred to in Part 3.

Almost identical to subsection (ii) in the bill. The only addition is that subsection (ii) is broken down into two in subsection (iii) in the current bill, and you read in the current bill: "has been accepted in an approved training program referred to in Part 3." That phrase you will find in the current subsection (ii) of the current act. The only addition to that subsection is the inclusion of: "that commences before April 1, 2022." That really is the difference between the current provision and amendment made in the current bill.

11:10

The question, therefore, is: how does the inclusion of a program that commences before April 1, 2022, all of a sudden miraculously and magically lead to a cut in funding, in programs and services as the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood would want you to believe? That's really what we are dealing with in this Chamber. They have the bill. They refuse to read the bill. They ignore the content of the bill. They would rather prefer to come here and spew all of the accusations and misinformation that have got nothing to do with the actual bill before us.

Mr. Speaker, there is a second amendment made to that act, two substantive amendments, which is the subject matter of all of this political talk this morning. You will find that – I'm going to go back to Bill 80, section 10(b) of the current act. Again, I want to read for the interest of our viewers back home what section 10(b) currently provides, and then we have to contrast that with the current provisions in Bill 80. Again, I want the viewers to focus on how on earth this amendment magically, miraculously is going to lead to a reduction in funding. It reads, eligibility for part-time learners:

- 10 A member of a household unit, other than a dependent child, is eligible for part-time training benefits under this Division if . . .

Subsection (b) is what this amendment is all about. Now I'm reading from the current act.

- (b) the person
 - (i) is at least 18 years of age and meets the other requirements determined under the regulations.

What I have just read to you is transferred verbatim in Bill 80, and it reads:

- (b) the person
 - (i) is at least 18 years of age and meets the other requirements determined under the regulations . . .

Exactly the same.

- (ii) is suitable to participate part-time in a training program for an achievable employment goal, and has been accepted in an approved training program referred to in Part 3, and
- (c) the household unit and the person meet any other conditions required by the regulations.

Now, let's go back, then, to the actual Bill 80. Number (ii) says that it "is suitable to participate part-time in a training program for

an achievable employment goal." Number (iii): "has been accepted in an approved training program referred to in Part 3." Again, the only thing that that section added was: "that commences before April 1, 2022." Those are the only changes sought by the minister responsible for the Income and Employment Supports Act and the minister responsible for red tape reduction. Those are the only changes that have been made.

Again, I ask all members of this Assembly and for viewers back home to make their own conclusion. How is it that making a bill, a bill that will ensure that adult learners applying for financial assistance for programs starting April 1, 2022, or later are assessed under the student financial aid assistance act and can benefit from new, simplified eligibility criteria, including streamlined application processes and reduced barriers for Indigenous students and sponsored immigrants – that really is what this bill is all about. Not one penny, not one dime, not one dollar has been removed from what they would otherwise be eligible for for this program.

The Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood would want you to believe that this bill accomplishes the opposite. Far from it. Far from it. That is what we sit here every time to listen to from the members opposite. As I have said before, this is the people's Assembly, where serious business is being transacted on behalf of Albertans. It is not a movie theatre, and it is not a political theatre room. I would prefer that the members opposite take us on the substance of the bills before us so that we can have intelligent, substantive debate.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, they talk about billions of dollars. These members opposite, while they were in office for four years, nearly destroyed Alberta's economy. They left us with their multibillions of dollars of debt and deficit every single year that they were in office, in normal times, when we didn't have to deal with the pandemic, when there was no pandemic, when we didn't have to spend an additional \$2.5 billion on emergency health care spending and \$1.5 billion just this year alone. With none of those challenges, they left us with multibillion dollars of debt, drove more than a hundred billion dollars out of our economy, and here they seek to misinform Albertans about this important bill that will make it easier for Indigenous students and immigrants to be able to apply and get into the program that they want.

This province has been a magnet for people who are prepared to come here, work hard, go to school, and be successful. That's one of the things this bill would accomplish. So, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to reject this amendment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on REF1 are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-South has the call.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the referral amendment on Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2).

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, before I begin my remarks, I would like to comment a little bit about the hon. Minister of Justice's remarks and some of the accusations, the mudslinging, the partisanship, and the polarization he's trying to bring to this place. Certainly, for the minister to accuse the opposition of attempting to mislead Albertans or attempting to ignore the contents of the bill and then accuse the opposition of significant amounts of polarization in this place and treating this place as a theatre or treating this place as a place for gamesmanship: I think it is a little bit ironic but certainly quite hypocritical.

This is the same minister, Mr. Speaker, who still hasn't apologized for accusing members of the opposition as well as

members of the media of wanting COVID-19 to kill more people and to continue. This is the same minister who in public accused the opposition of wanting the pandemic to continue and be prolonged in Alberta. That's absolutely outrageous.

11:20

Every single member of the opposition and, I hope, every single Albertan wants this pandemic to end. That's why we've continued to advocate for stronger measures such as real vaccine passports, such as measures that would actually have shortened and stifled the fourth wave of the pandemic, and this minister and this government did nothing.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, certainly, I know we're here to talk about the referral amendment today, and I'll speak to that in some depth. I think that certainly the types of legislation we see coming forward, the types of omnibus bills we see coming forward have become a pattern from this government and certainly from the red tape reduction ministry. This is now No. 2. We saw this throughout this term, and every time we've seen a red tape reduction bill come forward, it seems like the majority of these changes are things that simply are better suited for a miscellaneous statutes amendment act, that are fairly uncontroversial. In fact, in this bill, I think, particularly we see a number of changes such as language and grammatical and technical changes in the Education Act, the Human Tissue and Organ Donation Act, the Public Service Act, the Seniors Benefit Act. We see so many basically minor typos they're fixing in these bills.

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

If that's what the minister considers red tape, then I've got some concerns when I'm talking to small businesses, I've got some concerns when I'm talking to large businesses, and I've got concerns when I'm talking to all Albertans because this government doesn't have their eye on the ball, right? This government does not have their eye on the ball. It's not focused on actually bringing back economic prosperity for the province. In fact, this government has increased the deficit of this province by billions of dollars, increased the debt by billions of dollars, and indeed is doing long-lasting damage to the prosperity of this province, and I'm particularly concerned about that.

I think that today we do need to vote to move this referral amendment and to pass this referral amendment. I think that certainly, when we're looking at the changes in Bill 80, like I said, the majority of them are innocuous, the majority of them are not actually that interesting, but indeed there are some changes that are a little bit concerning, and these, I think, we need more review and proper consultation on, right? We see the adult learner stream being removed from income support programs. We see this very significant and substantive change coming forward in this piece of legislation that I think would be better put forward in its own bill. Unfortunately, that's not where we're at today.

We're not at a point where that's in its own bill, so I think that we need the opportunity to bring this to committee so that we can ask the Minister of Advanced Education the questions that are going to be relevant to that section. This isn't something that is simply red tape. This isn't something that is simply a matter of red tape reduction. It's something that is substantive and will have real impacts on people living in this province. People that depend on these supports in this province are going to have real impacts and see real detriments, in my opinion, around these changes.

I think, really, this would be better off if the government had repackaged this, taken it out of what essentially is a miscellaneous

statutes amendment act, and put it into its own bill and come forward and said, "We're going to have a fulsome debate; we're going to bring opportunity to have this discussion around these changes" and if the Minister of Advanced Education would actually have these discussions and would be able to present things like consultations, present things like evidence or rationale and all these things that are not suited for the red tape reduction ministry. This isn't red tape. This is a substantive change to real policies that have real impacts on people's lives.

There's more. I mean, I think some of the other substantive changes include changes to the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act. We're seeing some changes here where the ministry has said: "Oh, we're not going to make any changes. This is housekeeping." Sure, it may be housekeeping, but this is the least trusted government in the entire country, this is the most secretive government in the entire country, and this is a government that not a single Albertan believes when they open their mouths, Mr. Speaker. So when we look at this and say, "What assurances do Albertans actually have that we won't see changes to health care premiums, and what assurance do Albertans actually have that we won't see significant changes and substantive changes to our health care system as a result of this bill?" the government is unable to provide those assurances.

This is something, again, that would be better suited in its own bill. The Health minister could have had the opportunity to bring it to this House. We would have had the opportunity with the Health minister to debate this bill and talk about the rationale, and the Health minister could have presented consultations, presented evidence, presented information. Instead, we're forced to ask this House to send this bill back to committee so that we can have those discussions at the committee stage. Instead, we have to refer this bill to a committee. We're forced to ask to refer this bill to a committee because we know that this government is the least trusted government in the entire country.

So when looking at these significant changes – and even when the government just tries to sweep it under the rug and say that it's housekeeping, when they try to sweep it under the rug and say, "It's nothing; don't worry about it; it's not important," Mr. Speaker, these are issues that have long-lasting consequences, right? When we don't make the proper effort to pass these bills properly, when we don't make the effort to actually go forward and do the work required, then there are long-lasting consequences, some of which we couldn't even anticipate.

Dropping this in this omnibus piece of legislation, burying it in this omnibus piece of legislation in this very secretive manner – a government, again, that has a reputation and indeed an award from the Canadian Association of Journalists for the most secretive government in Canada – when we see a government doing things like this, I think Albertans have deservedly responded to this government by giving it the lowest trustworthiness rating, this Premier and this government, in the entire country.

This is a pattern, right? These aren't the only changes. We're seeing changes to allow the creation of entertainment districts through municipal bylaw which allow the consumption of alcohol in designated areas. Mr. Speaker, that's not necessarily a bad thing. I think that might be a good thing, and many municipalities might be happy about this. They might encourage this type of behaviour to encourage more economic activity. They might encourage this type of activity to allow different areas to be enjoyed in their municipalities, to use different parks in different manners. But, again, this is a substantive change. This is a big change that will have huge impacts in policing, will have huge impacts for Municipal Affairs, will have huge impacts for so many aspects, and it's not just a piece of red tape. It's a change that deserves proper consultation. It's a change that deserves proper engagement. It's a

change that the Minister of Municipal Affairs should have brought to this place as its own bill.

What we're seeing time and time again is that, bundled into all of these miscellaneous statutes, we see these substantive changes that deserve their own time, that deserve their own proper debate, and we're not getting that. Albertans are being cheated of the opportunity to have proper, fulsome debate on these bills. That's just a pattern of behaviour from this government, that they are secretive, that they are trying to rush things through, that they don't do the consultations, that they don't do the work required, and now we have to ask, through this referral amendment, that we go to committee, that we have the opportunity to request these ministers, to request department officials, to request the relevant stakeholders to all come and present on these issues because these are going to be substantive changes.

How do police associations feel about this? How does the RCMP feel about this? How do Edmonton police, how do Lethbridge police, how do Calgary police feel about these changes? We won't know because the government didn't do the work. They didn't do what they're supposed to do. They didn't actually go out and consult, and instead they're rushing it through. They're burying it in this piece of omnibus legislation, and that's unfortunate, because there may be really good changes in here, and some of these things may be required.

I don't agree with all of them, Mr. Speaker – I think that a number of these changes are problematic – but certainly some of them could have been good, and the opposition could have been convinced that some of these were good. But instead of doing the work, instead of actually going out and working in good governance, the government decided to use their tack of secrecy, decided to use their tack of burying things in omnibus legislation, decided to be less transparent and less accountable, and what we're going to see here, again, is the government, I suspect, ramming through these pieces of legislation, ramming through these omnibus bills, and not allowing the relevant ministers to present the bills properly, not allowing the relevant ministers to do the work that should have been done.

Mr. Speaker, again, it doesn't make any sense. It really doesn't make any sense, because under existing legislation these are all separate, right? They're all treated differently and independently, and that's for good reasons. When we look at the income support systems, for example, when we look at the adult learner streams here in income supports, those affect very specific groups of people. They affect very specific groups of people who need these programs, and now we're carving it out for no apparent reason. Certainly, I think that the Minister of Advanced Education should be given the opportunity to explain this. The Minister of Advanced Education should be given the opportunity to have that discussion with us and talk about why they believe that this is going to be beneficial for Albertans.

11:30

I don't think it's going to be beneficial to Albertans, frankly, Mr. Speaker. I think it's going to be harmful for many specific Albertans, but instead of having that proper debate, instead of having that proper discussion, the minister of red tape, who – and, frankly, we know that the ministry of red tape was designed to try and increase efficiencies in the government, was designed to try and break down the barriers that businesses may be facing, break down the barriers and work interdepartmentally. That was the intent of the ministry of red tape. That's fine. That's fine. It's something that I don't know if you needed a whole ministry for, but it's what this government decided to do. But what we know for a fact is that one minister certainly does not have the expertise in all of these

different areas, and we shouldn't expect the minister to. That's why we have different ministries, that's why we have different ministers, that's why we have different departments, and that's why each ministry has their own department that has expertise in one subject area – right? – in their department.

Mr. Speaker, now we see, instead, all of the questions being directed through the minister of red tape reduction, who's going to be unable to answer these questions, who's going to be unable to sufficiently deal with these issues because that's not their portfolio. That's not their job. Their job was not to cut income supports for Albertans. Their job was to try to cut inefficiencies across government, and this doesn't fit under that mandate. This doesn't fit under that mandate.

When we look at the things like changing the health care premium process and moving that around in legislation, of course, we shouldn't expect the minister of red tape reduction to be able to speak to that, because that's not a red tape issue. That's a Health issue, right?

Mr. Speaker, it really is disappointing what we're seeing in terms of this legislation coming forward. Again, this is something that if we carved out a few pieces and passed this as a miscellaneous statutes amendment act, I know that – and I've been here for almost six or seven years now. I know that in many cases miscellaneous statutes are sometimes passed in one or two days because, frankly, there's just not that much that's interesting in a lot of the grammatical corrections or other things like that.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I think we spent a considerable amount of time once debating the proper spelling of "motorcycle," whether it had a dash or a space or whatever it was. Those are the types of things that typically fit into these types of miscellaneous statutes, but instead, Mr. Speaker, we're seeing that these red tape reduction acts sort of have those elements in them, sort of have these boring elements in them, that are redundancies and that are suited for this type of legislation. But then we also see these sneaky, underhanded changes that are substantive, right? We see these sneaky, underhanded changes that deserve their own bills, that deserve having their own minister stand up and defend them and have the proper debate.

We're not going to get the opportunity here in the House. We're not going to expect that opportunity here in the House. Certainly, the minister of red tape shouldn't be expected to respond to all those questions directly, but that's why we need to go to committee. That's why we need to go to the referral, because the opportunity at committee would be to have those ministers explain that rationale, would be to summon the bureaucrats involved in those processes, involved in those departments, and have those fulsome conversations. I think that's a benefit for all Albertans. I think that's a benefit for every single member of this House because it would allow us to be able to understand the rationale behind every change.

Again, the opposition may not agree with all of them, but perhaps if they had done the work, if the government had decided to actually work together collaboratively and not in this hyperpartisan and polarized manner and, instead of trying to insult the opposition over and over again, if we had seen some collaboration and working together, perhaps we could have supported some pieces of this legislation, and then if they had carved them out into other independent bills, we could have hopefully supported some of those as well. Unfortunately, this is what we see today.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else?

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

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 11:35 a.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Ceci	Pancholi	Schmidt
Dang	Renaud	Sigurdson, L.
Irwin		

Against the motion:

Aheer	Jones	Rowswell
Allard	LaGrange	Sawhney
Armstrong-Homeniuk	Lovely	Shandro
Ellis	Luan	Sigurdson, R.J.
Glubish	Madu	Smith
Gotfried	Nixon, Jeremy	Stephan
Guthrie	Orr	van Dijken
Hanson	Reid	Williams
Issik	Rosin	Yao

Totals:	For – 7	Against – 27
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[Motion on amendment REF1 lost]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 75 Arts Professions Recognition Act

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise and move third reading of Bill 75, the Arts Professions Recognition Act.

Few will argue that the past year and a half has been the most tumultuous and probably stressful of our generation. In the midst of that, we must do what we can to help, including supporting the livelihoods of Alberta's artists. With worry about the health of our loved ones and the stress of an uncertain future, many have turned to the arts for hope and for healing. In times like these not only do the arts have value, but their worth can be almost immeasurable.

Yet I hear stories where artists are not treated with the respect that they deserve. In fact, even just this morning in the House, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar denigrated basket weaving as if it was somehow unrespectful, unvaluable, when in fact it's an art that's very creative, very useful. If he hasn't tried it, he should. I have. The NDP feign love and support for the arts, yet they just use it for their own gain. That's the very attitude that this bill hopes to correct.

Too often artists are asked to work for barely enough to pay for their materials. Too often people think they can ask artists to work for free, rationalizing that it will add to their portfolio and gain them exposure. The total median income for individual artists in Alberta is about \$25,800. That's less than 50 per cent of what the typical worker in this province earns.

We need to stop. We need to stop devaluing our artists. As Minister of Culture and someone who comes from a family of artists, I want Albertans to know that our government values our

culture and creative industries and Alberta's artists. Artists are welcome in Alberta. They have a home here in Alberta. They can have a career and make a living here, and I want all Albertans to join me and uphold the arts sector as a viable profession in this province.

Mr. Speaker, the Arts Professions Recognition Act fulfills a promise made to Albertans in our election platform. This legislation was created after significant engagement with artists and their own professional associations across the province. An online survey and in-person engagement of almost 1,800 artists and arts professionals provided feedback, and that has influenced this legislation. That's why I'm quite convinced that the majority of artists and arts organizations support it.

Mr. Speaker, compared to other provinces, this act is one of the strongest pieces of legislation of its kind. It is deliberately high level, broadly inclusive of all cultures and ethnicities, and supports every artist in this province. In fact, four provinces don't have any measures to protect the status of artists at all. Alberta's Arts Professions Recognition Act outlines the rights of artists to free speech and expression, to form their own associations and advisory boards, which we have already in Alberta through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, to be treated fairly by government and society, and to enjoy the same social and economic benefits available to other workers. In other words, that they might participate in the prosperity of Alberta.

This legislation also honours pay-scale agreements of artists' associations. It honours working condition protocols set in place by their associations. They are protected by Alberta occupational health and safety regulations. Specifically, I think of the Safe Stages requirements and the full binder of supports for that. This act also requires written contracts between artists and government bodies. Actually, it encourages all artists to do it in writing, to get it in writing first. If you need help with that, your association can help you. We will be providing a tool kit, through the department, to help you with that. This legislation: government will model the way for private and nonprofit enterprises to uphold the social and economic rights of artists.

Mr. Speaker, the creative and cultural industries are an integral part of Alberta's recovery plan and are vital for the diversification of our economy. In 2019 the arts sector contributed \$1.3 billion to our provincial GDP, with nearly 20,000 Albertans employed. Through this sector the Alberta government acknowledges that art is an important economic driver that creates jobs and helps with our recovery, and our goal is to grow this sector by 25 per cent in 10 years.

Mr. Speaker, the arts also play an important role in the social fabric of our province. The arts inspire us. They help define how we see ourselves, how the rest of Canada sees us and indeed the world. Arts transport us to a different time or place. They make us think critically about the world around us. It can help us walk a mile in someone else's shoes. It improves our personal well-being. Now more than ever we need the unifying and healing touch of art in our lives. I appeal to all artists in Alberta: make Alberta a better place; bring about that healing that we all long for; speak to us in ways that encourage us and lift us up.

Mr. Speaker, that is why the Arts Professions Recognition Act upholds artists' rights to freedom of speech and expression. This side of the House will never say to artists that you can only play in a sanctioned band, that you can only sing sanctioned songs, as happened to Arturo Sandoval, who eventually defected because of that to the United States, where he won Grammys, Emmys, Billboard awards, an incredible trumpet player. On this side of the House we will protect the freedom of expression of artists.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, this legislation affirms the government's commitment to the value and the economic well-being of artists as professionals, which contributes to the vibrancy of Alberta's cultural life and the sustainability of its economy. If Bill 75 passes, artists will gain the professional recognition that they deserve, and that's why stakeholders support this legislation. The Arts Professions Recognition Act will help secure a brighter financial future for artists in our province, contributing to their sustainability, and will create a culture of success for artists, because when artists are supported and the arts sector grows, we all benefit.

Mr. Speaker, I'm again asking all members of this House for their support for Bill 75, the Arts Professions Recognition Act, at this

historic year: 50 years of arts support and legislation and a minister of the arts and culture, both of those originally introduced by Conservative governments. Today this Conservative government continues that tradition of support for the arts. It affirms the economic contribution and the social contribution of artists, and today we advance that even one step farther.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With that, I adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 4(2.1) the House stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. today.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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