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Day 135

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

9 a.m.

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated.

Prayers

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, please rise for the prayer.

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

You may be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 77

Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has the call.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased this morning to rise and introduce third reading of Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021.

This amendment is an example of our dedication to working with Alberta municipalities to address the challenges that they face. To be perfectly clear, Mr. Speaker, most, in fact almost all, oil and gas companies pay their taxes, but in those few cases where they do not, Albertans are the ones who are hurt. Property taxes are the main source of revenue for Alberta municipalities to provide services and programs for residents and to fund projects that improve people's lives.

Alberta municipalities told us that they needed a way to collect unpaid taxes from delinquent oil and gas companies. Mr. Speaker, our government has listened to Alberta municipalities, and we have responded. These amendments we've proposed will restore a special lien that, once passed, will allow municipalities to recoup their lost revenues. Companies that are in arrears will have 120 days to work with municipalities on a payment plan or risk having their property, including their machinery and equipment, seized to cover the unpaid taxes.

Why 120 days, Mr. Speaker? Because we want the taxes paid, but we also want the companies to succeed and be around to pay more taxes for years and to employ Albertans for years and to send their kids to rural schools to keep them open and to have their employees shop in rural grocery stores to keep them open. If ever there was a bill that understood that we're all in this together and that we all succeed together or fail together, generally speaking, I believe it is this bill. If passed, this bill will strike a balance between tax accountability and municipal sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, in this bill we have also extended the PERC program for two years, preventing municipalities from having to remit education taxes that they simply cannot collect. Bill 77 will give municipalities tools in the long run to ensure taxes are paid and

that revenues are predictable, and ultimately it will mean those municipalities can provide the programs and services that their residents rightly want and need.

I hope that everyone in this House will choose to support this important bill. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill 77. I mean, we've had much debate on this issue in the Chamber, and I think that, on balance, the changes move us in the right direction, but much like many things this government has done, it's one of those situations of: thank you for doing the absolute least you could possibly do.

You know, I think this is one more tool for municipalities to be able to move forward, but, you know, they have been under such significant strain. In part that's due to the pandemic but in part as well due to a government that came in and immediately cut their MSI funding. That has messed around with – and I'll speak to the Calgary experience because I'm familiar with the Calgary experience. All the to-ing and fro-ing and backing and forthing and "We will; we won't; we can't decide on the green line" has sort of set that back several years, and that means that the costs will escalate.

It's rather ironic, really, Mr. Speaker, because, you know, the government claims to have delayed and delayed and delayed and forced this thing back by a couple of years because they wanted to make sure that costs didn't overrun. But by delaying it, by forcing it back from a time when they could have done it significantly more cheaply – and we knew they could have done it significantly more cheaply – from a time where we desperately needed that infrastructure spending, by pushing it back, they have in fact guaranteed the very thing they claim to be against, which is to say that the costs will escalate. That's obviously a significant concern.

I think as well that the disrespect for cities – we had city charters come in. We were under negotiation to move that out, and all of that was repealed, not because it was partisan, not because there's some sort of – I mean, the issues that are partisan usually centre around two things, right? The NDP doesn't believe in trickle-down economics; the UCP does. The NDP believes in early intervention to save money in the long term; the UCP does not. But this wasn't one of those issues. This was just an issue where it was done pretty much just for the sake of doing it. I think that's highly problematic, I would say.

Municipalities have needed action for a number of years. They've been under strain for a number of years, and while it's good to see this step, again, it just sort of all rolls into this government's general tendency about acting last and acting least. That insistence has damaged us in so many ways. I'm just going to go through a couple of examples where that acting last and acting least strategy, the one typified in this particular bill, has been used.

Obviously, COVID is the most glaring one. In every instance, you know, it's clear where the projections are going. You have medical professionals, you have economists, you have pretty much anyone who works with data looking at it and saying: hey, look what's going to happen. Everyone knows what's going to happen, but the government drags its feet and stalls and stalls and stalls and delays and delays and delays until it gets really, really, really, really bad, and then they finally do something. That has had significant, significant impacts on the people of Alberta.

In addition to that, if we look at something like, for instance, the hydrogen strategy – right? – a year ago green hydrogen was impossible. We had to use bottled water according to the UCP. It was ridiculous that anyone would suggest we export by 2030; 2040 was the absolute earliest it was possible. Now here we are a year later and suddenly, “Oh, we’re so surprised; we can’t believe how quickly things evolved,” except that everyone knew. Everyone who was paying attention, everyone who was watching knew. Only the UCP didn’t. So, again, delay, delay, delay.

It’s the same thing with – this government loves to crow about tech investment in this province, but what has happened has happened in spite of this government. When you bring in programs to support start-ups, they have effects down the road. They don’t generally have immediate effects. You bring in programs to support tech, as we did, and they had a massive impact. The government even acknowledges that impact. They get up and say over and over again how great a year 2019 was. Well, of course it was great, because the year was still being impacted by NDP policies.

Then they repealed all those programs, and when investment suddenly declined, they were shocked. So they brought back the programs that they had previously repealed and said were luxuries and no good and bad for whatever reason. They brought them back, and those programs have started to work. But just think where we could be otherwise, because the per capita investment relative to other provinces in this country is wildly below.

9:10

Mr. Speaker, it’s worth noting as well that part of this problem is because of the cuts that the UCP has made. Part of this problem is because of the cuts they have made specifically to postsecondary. There are companies that have not come here because they can’t get the talent, because we’re not pushing out enough graduates, because this government has cut. That’s going to have a long-term impact, and in fact the revenues we lose out on from taxes, from economic activity, from having places for people to work are likely to be significantly more than they saved by cutting universities, but they don’t think about that because it’s not about the long term. It’s not about the health and prosperity of this province for the UCP. It’s about how they can fudge the numbers now to try and pretend they’re good fiscal managers. That, in a nutshell, is I think the sort of primary irritation with this government. So, yes, this bill does something that’s useful, this bill does something that’s helpful, but it does it, you know, years later, and it’s the minimum that can possibly be done.

You know, the government could do a number of other things around municipalities. They could agree to work respectfully with municipal governments. They could agree that when we come to an agreement to have things like city charters, they won’t immediately tear up those contracts. But, of course, I don’t know if anyone would believe this government if they said that they would stick to an agreement that they’ve made because they never have. They tore up contracts with doctors, with nurses, with just about everyone, in the midst of a pandemic, no less.

I mean, my hope would be that this government could work respectfully with people. “Respectfully” is a word that does not appear to exist in their vocabulary, to be honest, Mr. Speaker. I’m trying to think of a time I’ve ever seen them work respectfully with anyone, but I think that’s what municipalities would like. They would like sustainable funding. They’d like to be able to predict what’s coming. I mean, at the end of the day isn’t that what we would all like? Day to day in our lives, in our budgets we need to know what’s coming in so we know what’s going out, so that we can plan and predict our lives. It just decreases stress so much.

But, you know, these poor municipalities just never know what’s coming. They never know what the government is going to provide. Today they’re providing them with the ability to reclaim unpaid taxes, but yesterday they were cutting mass amounts of money. And tomorrow, Mr. Speaker? Who knows? Who knows? I think that really is, at the end of the day, the concern that people have, right? You should be able to count on a government, of all things, to be consistent, to stick to the contracts that it has made, to act in a rational manner based on the evidence that is before it, but you can’t count on any of those things with this government. I’m sure that municipalities are glad to see this, but I suspect that they’re also deeply, deeply concerned about what it’s going to mean in the future.

Think, for instance, Mr. Speaker, of another huge cost downloaded to rural municipalities specifically, and that’s the cost of policing. Now, I’m extremely familiar with this file from years and years of experience, but I don’t deny that the formula needed to change. It needed to be the case that everyone was contributing to the cost of their policing because it was really challenging, especially for those small urbans as they sort of transitioned out of where the province pays and into where they had to pay themselves, to suddenly have this huge burden of cost. They also felt like sometimes they were sort of subsidizing rural policing that the province was paying for. I don’t deny that the formula had to change.

What I think I don’t like about the way it’s gone forward – the interesting thing is that rural municipalities always had the ability to do exactly what the province did for them. They have always had the ability to come to the province and contract for additional officers. They chose not to, which is their right as elected officials. As the people who are paying, they have the right to say, “We don’t choose to do this,” so the province chose for them. The province came in and said, “You municipalities will pay for additional officers,” so they downloaded that onto municipalities. Now, don’t get me wrong. This bill will help some of those municipalities bear some of those costs by allowing them to sort of collect these unpaid taxes, but it’s allowing them to bear costs that the same provincial government downloaded onto them.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, this government has, despite being asked – I don’t know. My hon. colleague from Calgary-McCall has probably asked them 10, 15, 20 times: where is the money coming from to pay for this transition away from the RCMP? Where is the hundreds of millions of dollars that their own report highlighted it was going to cost? Oh, apparently it’s going to fall out of the sky. I mean, we didn’t have that money to pay for COVID supports. We didn’t have that money to support small businesses. We didn’t have that money to have an equitable program rollout to support individual people walking around out there. We don’t have that money to make schools safer or to ensure that per-student funding remains the same. We don’t have that money for universities. But apparently it’s going to fall out of the sky when we transition away from the RCMP according to the minister.

I mean, it’s exactly the kind of magical thinking that this government promised in the election, the magic economy wand, if you will. But I think at the end of the day this cost is going to be extraordinary for municipalities, and this bill will not make up for that cost. Again, I would call this bill the thanks for doing the absolute least you possibly can bill.

Right. Costs of policing: we know these costs may be coming. The government says that there are basically two options. The government can force those costs onto rural municipalities, or it can force those costs onto all Albertans. The government doesn’t have its own money. Money doesn’t fall out of the sky, much though this UCP seems to think it does. Money comes from people. These

hundreds of millions of dollars, which is a significant amount of money, in my opinion, have to come from somewhere. They will either be downloaded onto these municipalities, which results in increased property taxes, which we're already seeing, and, incidentally, you know, at the same time that they downloaded all these costs onto rural municipalities for additional RCMP officers, it doesn't appear that they can provide an explanation for where those officers are or how many of them have come.

And if they can't fill all those positions, then what happens? Are they going to give the money back to those municipalities? I don't think so. I think they're going to keep it. That's a big concern because that's not taking money to pay for a service that you have put on people; it's just taking money. I think that's problematic.

There are a lot of things this government could do to support municipalities. This, I am not denying, is certainly one of those things. It is certainly something they've asked for. I think it's a step in the right direction. But, again, Mr. Speaker, it is, as is always the case with this government, the very least they could possibly do. With that, I think I will say that I am grudgingly in favour of this bill.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak in third reading to Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. Yeah. I mean, I think that my hon. colleague from Calgary-Mountain View just summarized the attitude towards this bill, not just in our Official Opposition capacity but from speaking to municipalities over the last couple of weeks here in Edmonton, with the AM meeting that was two weeks ago and then the RMA meeting which was last week, again here in Edmonton. You know, it was fascinating to take the temperature of the municipalities of elected officials from both of these meetings.

It was quite remarkable just to be with so many people after almost two years of the absence of large gatherings. Everybody was quite forthcoming, you know, to tell us what they were up to and what they needed and, of course, to talk about the legislation of the day. Bill 77 was right there in front of everybody's noses, and it was definitely being looked at with a high degree of skepticism, not necessarily with what is all there in the bill, because certainly the idea to be able to have some more power to foreclose on businesses that were not paying their taxes was something that municipalities and county officials have been complaining about for some time.

9:20

Of course, not being able to have those taxes available to pay for essential services was compromising the budgets of municipalities across the province, and this was exacerbated by the significant cuts that this UCP government has made to municipalities over the last couple of years.

You know, this is almost like a backdoor, begrudging way to acknowledge that, yes, the very significant cuts and the breaking of the trust and the agreement between the provincial government and the municipalities have resulted in significant losses to county budgets, town budgets, and city budgets across the province. This is some small sort of backhanded way to acknowledge that and try to get some of this money, unpaid municipal taxes, from businesses.

It's too late, certainly, right? We know that these are very time-sensitive files, and if a municipality has not been able to lean on a business that has unpaid taxes for some time, you know, then it's very likely that that business is gone, right? For many businesses

them not paying their taxes probably was a sign of insolvency to begin with, and by waiting so long for something like what Bill 77 does, it effectively has put municipalities at the back of the line to collect whatever monies they could from a company that is struggling or that is, in fact, insolvent.

You know, Bill 77 sort of does that. Maybe going forward it could have some positive benefit for municipalities to be able to collect the money that they need to run their operations, but at present it is certainly very late in coming and has put municipalities again where they were already in a tight spot. It certainly hasn't helped them at the very least.

Bill 77, according to my anecdotal research from both RMA and Alberta Municipalities over the last couple of weeks, was greeted with sort of a very lukewarm reception as well. What people were looking for and I think what municipalities were looking for was a way by which the province could act as an equal partner with municipalities through good times and challenging times as well so that they could have guaranteed funding that was stable so they could plan for the future.

That trust was broken with this UCP government over the last couple of years with municipalities. You know, maybe they don't say it to UCP members when they're talking to them, out of deference or out of fear of retribution, but what we see plain as day, and all of my colleagues would concur, is that, no, they're not happy at all. They're less able to provide these services such as protection and security. Policing has been breaking the budget for municipalities for some time. Their ability to maintain infrastructure in the counties and in towns and cities as well has been seriously compromised.

Of course, municipalities are at the very root of many of the essential services that Albertans need to go about their daily lives, right? Sanitation, garbage, water, roads, some social services, policing, fire, emergency services: you know, these are all things that municipalities have their finger on the pulse of and are responsible for to a degree that this UCP government seems to be missing.

When we're talking about building, I would say, a more substantive bill to help municipalities, I think the first place to start is to go to the table and start dealing with and treating municipalities as partners so that the funding transfers to municipalities are not decreed by the whim of the provincial government but, rather, by a formula that reflects the state of the economy and the state of need not just for today but for long-term planning into the future as well.

I don't think it's a coincidence that when we went to both the Alberta Municipalities and the RMA conventions over the last couple of weeks, there was a tremendous turnover, Mr. Speaker, of elected officials. I noticed that the room was considerably younger and more diverse, both in terms of gender and ethnicity, and I think that was a great sign. But, you know, if you're looking for signs and you're looking for harbingers of what's to come, I think the UCP government should take note of that because Albertans were definitely in a mood for voting out low-performing elected officials.

We saw tremendous – obviously, I'd have to check it, but I heard at least two people tell me that there was a 40 per cent turnover from this last election in October from municipalities. And you could see it in the room, you know? I think that's great. I think it better reflects who we are as a province, and I think it sends a message, too, that Albertans are not happy with this idea of austerity and of cutting essential services that allow their neighbourhoods and communities to move forward.

They want to ensure that there are, for example, police there when they need them. They don't need to have a provincial government play political games with an essential service like policing. The idea of squandering hundreds of millions of dollars to

simply change the uniforms and the signage, that reflects maybe a provincial police force, has been squarely rejected by municipalities and counties and the general public as well. You know, if there are literally hundreds of millions of dollars to go through this transition to create a provincial police force, then wouldn't that money be much better served and spent on buttressing essential services that municipalities are responsible for, right?

That's the mood in the room, quite frankly. If people could see, you know, visualize hundreds of municipal elected officials gathering here over the last couple of weeks, what was the biggest signage or badges that people were wearing at both of those things? It was: keep the RCMP. People were wearing those buttons and wearing them proudly, and I'm sure the UCP got that same message that I did, loud and clear, in regard to policing priorities for this province. It's always a good time to take a step back and learn and listen.

Bill 77 has taught us that there's a habit and a pattern of this UCP government responding too little too late. You know, there are some elements in here that definitely we can work with and municipalities can work with in regard to being able to levy liens on companies that don't pay their taxes and so forth and looking for ways to try to get those more than \$200 million that are outstanding in unpaid taxes.

It's interesting how numbers sometimes line up, Mr. Speaker, because, of course, that \$200 million that is out there, probably more than that, really, in unpaid taxes certainly is a reflection of how much it would cost to create a provincial police force, right? You know, think about priorities. Think about what's important and what's important to Albertans, and then build legislation based on that. Don't build it based on ideology or some sort of thing that's been spinning around in the heads of ideological right-wing politicians; just do what's right for the people.

Yeah. Like my hon. colleague from Calgary-Mountain View said, you know, we have to, of course, look for what we have and try to work with that, and this bill is one of those examples. Okay. We've provided constructive criticism, as is our responsibility and our role here in the Legislature in regard to building coherent municipal legislation. I think that now is the time, if you want a hot tip, to build a partnership with municipalities that is reflected in stable funding that can be counted on and that is a reflection of the budget and the capacity of the province, not just build in provincial transfers to municipalities that are dictated by politics and an ideology of austerity but, rather, to build something that people can count on, to build our municipalities so that they can provide the essential services that they need.

9:30

Yeah. Bill 77: I would give it a reluctant, you know, yea vote here this morning, but I think it's a great idea to pay account to what needs to be done with the municipal file in general.

With that, I will cede my time to the next member of this Legislature. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Next I believe I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East has risen.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to take the opportunity to express my support for this remarkable government bill, Bill 77, the Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. Let me first provide my appreciation to the minister for sponsoring this bill, which will allow municipalities to collect unpaid property taxes from some oil and gas companies.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is part of the provincial government's commitment to support municipalities by ensuring a balance

between tax accountability, municipal sustainability. These changes build on a provincial government that gives municipalities a credit on education property taxes paid by oil and gas companies. The provincial government will continue to support the municipalities by extending the provincial education requisition credit, or PERC, program up to the 2023-2024 fiscal year. The PERC program was introduced to help municipalities deal with uncollectible taxes on oil and gas properties in 2015. It helps municipalities avoid significant losses in the short term and allows them to defer payments of uncollectible education property tax to the province.

Canada has the third-most oil reserves in the world, and the huge majority of them can be found in Alberta. Our country, as well, is among the top producing countries of oil while Alberta is Canada's largest oil and natural gas producer. With that, we have numerous oil and gas companies in Alberta which are engaged in the responsible and ethical production and development that helps boost Canada's economy as this industry is our country's largest export.

The provincial government continues to have the most competitive tax system in the country and continues to support jobs in the oil and gas industry. With the job-creating tax cut, Alberta is the most tax competitive business jurisdiction and among the most attractive investment destinations in North America. In addition, the government will also introduce the film and television tax credit, which has been a massive success in attracting major film industry projects to this beautiful province.

The Red Tape Reduction Act was also enacted to help speed up regulatory approvals, attract investments, remove administrative burdens, and modernize many existing pieces of legislation.

As just recently announced, Alberta is moving forward with climate policies that are creating jobs and actually reducing emissions. Alberta's government is using up to \$176 million from the technology innovation and emissions reduction system and the low-carbon economy leadership fund for 16 projects that will cut almost 7 million tonnes of emissions by 2030. The funding originates from the carbon levies paid by the large emitters in Alberta's technology innovation and emissions reduction framework. This will cut emissions while diversifying the economy.

The provincial government also provided a 35 per cent reduction in property taxes for shallow gas wells and associated pipelines. This change will continue for three years. Municipalities will be required to adjust to the revised assessment with no tax credit or funding support. Alberta's government also eliminated the well-drilling equipment tax and provided a tax holiday for all new wells and associated pipelines until 2024.

The overwhelming majority of Alberta's oil and gas companies are responsible job creators who pay their taxes when they're due. There are a few companies who are unable for some reason and especially when made against their assets and properties, as it has been done to other businesses or individuals.

In 2019 the Alberta Court of Appeal ruled that current liens do not legally apply to linear property such as wells and pipelines. As a result of the court decision, there is no effective legal mechanism for municipalities to collect unpaid taxes on oil and gas properties such as wells.

Bill 77 will restore and clarify a special lien for unpaid property taxes on linear property and machinery and equipment. This lien will give municipalities priority over creditors to receive taxes owed with the exception of Crown and environmental regulatory obligations.

Mr. Speaker, numerous statements have been made that having an oil and gas business is promising in Alberta; however, like every other business, oil and gas companies would meet different challenges and difficulties along the way. Some may be due to

management while others would come from external burdens imposed for doing such business, like the federal Bill C-69, which created more red tape that hinders efforts made to bring ethical and responsibly developed Alberta oil to the global market.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, and for other various reasons, a small number of oil and gas companies operating in Alberta have not paid property tax due to the municipalities in which they operate. The Rural Municipalities of Alberta have estimated that the amount owed by some oil and gas companies is approximately \$245 million in unpaid taxes, about 69 municipalities, mostly in rural Alberta. It is also estimated that between 40 to 60 per cent of unpaid taxes are the responsibility of companies that continue to operate in Alberta while the remainder are facing insolvency.

We all know the importance of taxes to our government, whether it may be federal, provincial, or municipal. It is the lifeblood of the government as it is indispensable to the existence of any government, and it is the backbone of local governments. Through their taxes individuals and businesses contribute to funding essential public needs and services, including roads, infrastructure, education, social services, and health care services. Bill 77, Mr. Speaker, is an important step towards ensuring that Alberta municipalities are able to continue and maintain to fund the programs and services their residents need.

The special lien being introduced by the bill, Mr. Speaker, can be made by Alberta municipalities against the unpaid taxes of the oil and gas companies, whether still in operation or undergoing insolvency, and it also gives these municipalities priority over other creditors with the exceptions I previously mentioned. Also, this special lien assigns liability to the owner of the linear property and the operator of oil and gas machinery and equipment for the unpaid property taxes. This has been done as the owner and operator may be different, depending on the corporate structure, thereby leaving no gaps in this legislation.

9:40

The same special lien applies to all the debtor's assessable property located within the municipality, including any assessable improvements to the property. Companies that pay their taxes are not impacted by this change while companies that are not able to pay their taxes should contact their local municipal authorities to discuss the special lien and what it means for their business relationship.

I have previously touched on the importance of taxes, Mr. Speaker, and this bill ensures the collection by the Alberta municipalities of unpaid property taxes by some oil and gas companies. Nonetheless, resorting to stiff actions must not be hastily done. Another amendment to the Municipal Government Act being introduced by Bill 77 is to establish a 120-day redemption period between the time the taxes are due and the enforcement of the special lien processes, which will ensure financially burdened and vulnerable companies have sufficient time to enable negotiation of payment arrangements.

The changes that Bill 77 brings, Mr. Speaker, apply to unpaid taxes owing on the passing of this bill when proclaimed and thereafter. This bill will balance the need for corporations to pay their fair share while maintaining sustainability of municipalities. I again express my appreciation to the minister for making this possible, a needed tool for municipalities as they recover unpaid taxes and to provide incentive to these companies that were not able to pay their taxes to start paying them again. I encourage all the members of this Chamber to cast their support to Bill 77.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows has risen.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021. Broadly speaking, this bill is dealing with the issues the municipalities are facing with unpaid taxes by oil and gas companies. Broadly speaking, it looks at the outcome of a few things. The crises were growing and also the court cases.

First, as a result of two court decisions, that were versus Virginia Hills and Redwater, Alberta municipalities were no longer able to put a lien on companies in order to stake a claim on unpaid taxes. This legislation reintroduces the ability, so they can put a lien on companies. In Virginia Hills the court stated that the section currently provided in the Municipal Government Act allowed for a special lien, but on linear property taxes it was too ambiguous. The new legislation removed that ambiguity, and officials in the tech briefing were confident that that will solve the problems.

But let's see what the municipalities say. Municipalities, yes, of course, were in favour of reintroducing the liens as one tool that would help, to some extent, collect unpaid property taxes against bad actors. But municipalities in particular asked for additional tools that would help with the collection, specifically by stopping the AER from issuing licences to companies that don't pay their taxes. That piece is not included in this proposed legislation that we are discussing. This issue was partially being addressed by AER directive 67, which allows the AER to consider whether to issue a licence based on additional factors. The problem with that is that directive 67 only applies to new companies. The problem is more with the companies already under operation or working, so that directive doesn't apply to those companies.

Since this bill doesn't open up other legislation, it's hard to even propose an amendment on this. Municipalities have requested more transparent public reporting through the AER to gain a better understanding of which companies are bad actors. It is generally viewed that most companies are good players and would pay their taxes.

The other thing is that the government extended the PERC program through the year 2023-24. The PERC, provincial education requisition credit, normally would require the province – the province would require municipalities to levy education property taxes and remit what is owed to the province. Municipalities are forced to pay, whether or not they can actually collect the taxes. This program, PERC, allowed municipalities to offset uncollected education property taxes on delinquent oil and gas properties, bad actors, with equivalent tax credits. With our previous government, the NDP government, we had this program in place. This is a good piece. We believe in and we support the extension on this.

RMA president Paul McLaughlin has made a statement. The RMA conducted a survey with their 69 members in February 2021, and according to that survey the municipalities have \$245 million in unpaid property taxes. RMA president Paul McLaughlin said that since the survey, like, nine months before, the problem is continuing to get worse. The president was also quoted in the government news. It's surprising to see that, first, the government took so long to act and introduce a piece of legislation that can provide a solution to those struggling municipalities to collect the unpaid taxes. That's a huge amount for those small municipalities.

9:50

Now we see that some of those demands and mechanisms that municipalities view would have been instrumental for them to be able to go after those bad actors and that would help collect the taxes are not really included in this proposed piece of legislation.

All we see is that the government has reintroduced the legislation, the tool to put a lien on those companies, and we don't even know what kind of a solution and success that would have for the municipalities suffering from the revenue loss. First, the cost itself, the administration and then, further, after the decision-making, the implementation itself come with a huge cost, and many of those municipalities would not be able to probably afford that. In many cases the cost could have been much higher than the revenue owed to them.

This is a very partial solution, and Alberta municipalities have been asking for this government to provide a better solution, and they proposed what could be a better solution for them. We are not seeing the government listening to the Alberta municipalities, and there is a huge question: why doesn't the government want to legislate that the AER, Alberta Energy Regulator, would not issue licences for the operations of those bad actors? They are making a profit and not paying their due taxes to the municipalities. The municipalities depend on that revenue for their local economy, a number of those things, infrastructure, and they have been suffering due to the economic crisis, and by not addressing their issues properly, it pushed them into a more critical situation.

The government has already downloaded huge costs onto rural municipalities in the past two and a half years. The UCP promised during the elections that they will help the municipalities, that they will help the municipalities deal with growing rural crimes, that they will help the municipalities by bringing investments in, that they will help the communities get more businesses, big corporations, and create jobs. What we have seen in those past years is the continuing pattern. The government kept downloading more and more costs to the struggling municipalities and municipal leaders not even once, not even twice. I had a chance to speak with some of the rural municipal leaders at the past council. They are worried due to the weather conditions – their agriculture sector is not really making the expected level of profits – and due to the low oil prices, that was one of the biggest factors, and loss of jobs. Communities were already struggling, and we saw in this House that the government brought a bill and reduced their MSIs and did not help municipalities to put even a single boot on the ground, not even a single one. The government added cellphone user fees onto municipalities.

We have seen the municipalities one after another stand up against government decisions. It was difficult to see that when municipalities like Camrose and many more – I could name some.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join debate on this? I believe I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview has risen.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 77 in third reading. I'm just going to make sure my notes are pulled up here. Now, you know, this bill is the classic example where this government begrudgingly has finally been forced to act due to municipalities for years talking to the government about needing some kind of tool to be able to collect unpaid taxes, linear taxes.

Now, I'll start off by saying, Mr. Speaker, that we know that the majority of oil and gas companies do pay their property taxes to municipalities and are very good partners, that much of their dollars in funding go toward critical infrastructure like road maintenance, bridges, et cetera. You know, this bill is addressing an issue that has been occurring over many, many years, but I feel it is important to put on the record that we know that the majority of companies are good stewards of the land and good partners. The challenge, of

course – and there always is one – is that some are not being good partners and are not paying their taxes.

Now, you know, I appreciate that over the last few years there have been significant challenges for our energy sector; I mean, in 2015 the global collapse in the price of oil. In fact, a barrel of oil at its high was over \$127 per barrel, and it fell to below \$27. In fact, there were companies that I sat down with in my former role as minister who were losing about \$10 a barrel. They were paying out of pocket to continue to extract due to differential in addition to the low price of western Canadian select.

10:00

You know, we know that there have been challenges. We know that often it is our small to mid-sized companies that are the most susceptible to volatility in the market. Those that aren't fully integrated and don't have a number of revenue streams from different processes are really at the mercy of the global price of oil and global demand, Mr. Speaker, I mean, in addition to constraints that Alberta has in getting its product to tidewater and to those international markets.

This bill, as I started off to say, you know – as my colleagues have noted, over the last few weeks we've had municipal leaders from across the province in Edmonton for a substantial period of time for their fall conferences. Of course, on this side of the House most if not all of our caucus attended many events and had numerous opportunities to speak with our municipal partners. That's how I refer to our municipalities. They are partners. From day one, when we were first elected and I had the honour of being the Minister of Municipal Affairs, I made that quite clear, Mr. Speaker. This bill is proposing a tool that municipal leaders were asking for. What I will say – and I know my colleagues have shared this sentiment – is that the bill doesn't do everything that municipal leaders are asking for. They were asking for a number of tools to help them.

Mr. Speaker, for some rural municipalities, just to paint a picture for folks, they rely on their linear taxes to be able to provide services to their residents. When the linear taxes aren't paid, it puts them in a precarious position. Municipal leaders do not want to jack up property taxes on residents because they recognize that that's an unfair burden to place on residents. I mean, the tools that they have are extremely limited.

I mean, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, this is why we and our leader have recently proposed to municipalities that we would introduce a revenue-sharing model with all municipalities. We recognize that municipalities should budget and be similar to the province. You know, when times are good, revenues go up, but when times are challenged, revenues go down. I've yet to meet a single municipal leader – reeve, councillor, mayor – who disagrees with that. But what's exciting to them is that they know that that bold initiative means that at least the NDP Official Opposition wants to have a true partnership with municipalities.

We took it one step further, Mr. Speaker. Not only did we just give them our word that our new revenue formula will be negotiated – first of all, we're sitting down with municipal leaders to discuss and decide on what's fair. It's not the province just making an arbitrary decision and imposing it on municipal leaders and municipalities. Second of all and what's critical to that proposal is that we've committed to bring it through the Legislature in a bill and to actually legislate it so that future governments on a whim cannot make arbitrary changes to that formula. That is the exact predictability and stability that municipalities have been asking governments for for decades. I know that from having conversations with municipal leaders who have been elected for a very long time.

Where we are with this bill – that was, you know, the NDP Official Opposition’s proposal and commitment to municipalities. This bill is looking to give municipalities the ability to put a lien for unpaid taxes. Now, what’s interesting, Mr. Speaker, is that, I mean, yes, it is a small number of – well, let’s just say that a number of companies have not been paying their taxes. The total right now, to my knowledge, is over \$200 million in unpaid taxes. For many municipalities that is a significant – significant – portion of their budgets.

This bill, like I said, will help address the issue of unpaid linear taxes. Now, there were two court decisions, both Virginia Hills and Redwater, where Alberta municipalities were no longer allowed to put a lien on companies in order to stake a claim on their unpaid taxes. This legislation does address that and will give them the legal requirement and framework to be able to do this. That’s positive. Now, again, municipalities are in favour of this tool that the government is providing to them. However, the rural municipality association, made up of many, many, rural municipalities, was looking for additional tools to help them with collecting unpaid taxes.

One of the biggest things that municipal leaders were asking for, Mr. Speaker, was to provide the AER with the ability to halt issuing licences to companies who don’t pay their taxes. Now, that’s not part of this. The challenge is that you can have companies in one municipality, maybe, that are paying their taxes yet in a neighbouring municipality aren’t. The fact of the matter is that, yes, they now have the ability or will have the ability to put a lien on the company, but the company can continue to acquire new licences. I know from speaking with municipal leaders that they wish that this bill went further.

Now, the province did also extend the PERC program through the fiscal year of ’23-24. That’s, of course, the provincial education requisition. For those Albertans watching at home, municipalities levy the education property taxes – when you look at your property statement, there is your education portion – and they remit the bulk of it, what’s owed to the province. This program right now will allow municipalities to off-set their uncollected education property taxes on delinquent oil and gas companies with an equivalent tax credit. We do support the extension of this in order to help municipalities.

As I mentioned, Mr. Speaker, this provides a tool for municipalities, but let’s look at the relationship between this current government and municipalities. This government has downloaded policing costs onto municipalities, and I can tell you that municipalities are irate. If this government didn’t hear that over the past two and a half weeks talking to municipal leaders around the province, then I don’t know if they’re deaf or maybe they left the plugs in or something. This is a substantive cost being downloaded to municipalities at the same time as MSI is being wound down, municipalities are facing a myriad of cuts from this government along with increased costs.

10:10

I talked to a number of municipalities about the lack of mental health supports that they have in their communities, about the shortage of doctors and nurses, about the shortage of available physicians and surgeons, having to travel hundreds of kilometres each way to get to one of the cities where they can get treatment. We’re talking not just surgeries – I mean, yes, there are critical life-saving surgeries that have been postponed – but we’re also talking about people having to commute on a weekly or monthly basis for procedures. All of these factors have to be looked at holistically, Mr. Speaker.

The government, of course, right now is patting itself on the back for providing one tool to address one piece of a significant puzzle but is not listening or doesn’t care about the fact that a significant amount of revenue reductions and cuts that have been downloaded onto municipalities are challenging them. In fact, we’re seeing more and more municipalities turn over their keys and dissolve because they simply can’t survive and can’t provide their residents with the basic services that they deserve. I mean, essentially through the cuts that the UCP government is introducing, they’re treating rural municipalities as second-class citizens. They’re growing the inequalities between rural and urban. This is a significant challenge.

For that reason, Mr. Speaker, I will reluctantly support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs has risen.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s my pleasure to rise this morning to speak to Bill 77, Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, 2021, in third reading. You know, here we are talking about municipalities in the province of Alberta. I’ve heard a lot in this debate. I’ve contributed to this debate in second reading and, I believe, in committee. The common theme that we’ve heard here is that those that are impacted by this government’s legislation don’t feel like they’ve been heard. They feel like there are so many other issues that are at play that deserve to be addressed.

When we’re looking at ways to support municipal government, I think, absolutely, giving them a way to claim taxes that are owed is absolutely essential. What I think is missing from this is all of the other things that are impacting municipalities and their finances. Being the Culture critic, I’ve talked to communities all across the province, and I’ve heard loud and clear that quality of life is being impacted in rural Alberta especially. When we look at ag societies, for example, they have so many outstanding infrastructure requests. It’s top of mind for them. When it comes to providing quality of life in their community, it’s important. It’s important if you live in a small community to be able to access resources, infrastructure, supports in your community.

I grew up in Whitecourt. It was an incredible small community where we had our swimming pool and our ice rinks. We had our family doctor. We had our hospital. Everything that we needed was accessible in our community. We’re hearing from every corner of this province that those things that communities, families rely on are being taken away. When we look at the cause of that, I would argue that there is a lot to do with some of the decisions and the cuts that this government has made: cuts to MSI, cuts to policing. It’s putting more burden and expectation on our communities, on our municipalities. They’re struggling, Mr. Speaker.

We look at the impacts of COVID. Community leagues and ag societies relied on community participation in order to gain funds, whether that was throwing a carnival in your local community, whether that was the 4-H club having some of their competitions, whether it was a hockey tournament that your small community often hosts. Those things stopped. It’s not the fault of the community, but their ability to regain funds from that lost revenue isn’t there. They’re relying on the incredible compassion and generosity of their community. We’re hearing stories of communities coming together to rebuild hockey arenas out of their own pocket because they need a place for their families and their community to be able to go and skate. That’s not a cost that they anticipated, but in order to ensure that their communities have quality of life, it’s something that community members are naturally doing to come together.

While it's a beautiful story and it's heartwarming to see communities come together to do this, there should be support from government. Unfortunately, that's not the case. We're seeing and hearing from so many Albertans across this province that are repeating over and over: "Why won't this government listen? This is what we're asking for. This is the support that we actually need."

When we look at the Municipal Government (Restoring Tax Accountability) Amendment Act, it's such a small piece of the bigger puzzle. You know, we have seen, over the term of this government, decisions made in isolation. They created a red tape ministry that doesn't seem to be communicating with all of the other ministries. This is a perfect example of decisions made in isolation. They're not talking to Culture. They're not talking to Justice. They're not talking to those other ministries that have an impact on our municipalities. Instead, they're cutting in one piece of legislation and then trying to make up for it by creating this Bill 77 to look at: hey, look what we're doing; we're helping municipalities. Well, they're in crisis.

This is something that they've been screaming about for two years, and now the government is coming in. When it gives them the ability to reclaim funding, we're hearing that sometimes the cost to reclaim that unpaid tax is just not worth it, so their decision is: do we pay all this money to recoup the lost cost, or do we just eat it up? Unfortunately, municipalities are in this place where sometimes it's more cost-effective to just let go of that outstanding tax. To me, it doesn't make sense that you would implement a program that doesn't support the municipalities to reclaim that.

It's not clear-cut, Mr. Speaker. I know that when I was working in social work, we look at the microcommunity and we look at the macrocommunity. The micro was the small, perhaps the individual, the family structure. Then we have to look at the macroimpacts on what that family is. That's community. That's support systems. That's what a municipality is. That's what a community is. It's not just a stand-alone entity. There are so many other factors that go into being a thriving community, and there are so many things that this government has done that are eating away at that macrostructure of communities all across the province, of our municipalities. I think that if we're only focusing on one small piece, the bigger picture is being missed.

10:20

In social work we use a multidisciplinary approach because it takes so many different views and backgrounds to come up with a true support. In this case I would argue that listening to our municipal leaders would be the first step in doing that. You know, people are elected all across the province to represent their constituents, their communities, and provide feedback about what they actually need. When you have community leaders and the ag societies coming to their elected officials in rural Alberta saying, "This is exactly what we need," those elected representatives then come to government and say, "We're struggling; these are our solutions." The majority of the . . . [interjection] Oh. I'll give way to the member. Thank you.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and just join in this important conversation on Bill 77. I think it's an important point because I know, much like the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, I joined the RMA proceedings that took place over the last week, I believe. We heard from many of these rural municipalities exactly these points, that while Bill 77 might be, you know, kind of the least we could do, there are so many other opportunities for us. I think the member was clear that MSI is a big piece of that and other funding models that are important to these rural communities. The fact is that even the idea of ensuring that

there are enough funds in the orphan well fund in the first place, ensuring that there is enough money when these companies are proposing to do this important work in their communities is so fundamental to ensuring the long-term viability of these communities. Many of the municipalities that I spoke to are at a point where they're saying that something has got to give.

Ms Goehring: Thank you to the hon. member. I agree. Something has got to give. What's happening is that the quality of life is significantly decreasing if you're a resident in Alberta. We look at things that this government is downloading, costs onto municipalities. They're downloading costs, they're cutting costs, yet they're not providing important supports and infrastructure that actually help municipalities get out of this debt that they're in. Taxes are going up because of this.

When you're choosing to live in the province of Alberta, there are several different factors that come into place. You want to make sure that your family is going to be safe. You want to make sure that you have access to employment. You want to make sure that you have access to a doctor. When we're looking at the crisis that our health care system is in right now because of the decisions that this government has made, some of those factors can't be checked off the list.

When you're a pregnant woman in rural Alberta and you go into labour and you have a high-risk pregnancy – perhaps you need a C-section, perhaps there are complications – there's concern that your baby will not be delivered safely if you rely on your community hospital. That is absolutely unacceptable. People deserve the right to be able to access quality medical care in their community. If you have a child with high needs and they need specialists and services, the wait-lists for that are absolutely unacceptable. You're forced to come into the cities because there are shortages of physicians in rural Alberta, period.

What is this government doing to support that? They have to look at the big picture of what's happening all across the province. They're failing to do that, Mr. Speaker. We have concerns with our ability to access health care. There are concerns about the ability to access leisure activities because of failing infrastructure, repairs that are needed in communities all across the province, and we're asking our municipalities to do more with less.

So while introducing this piece of legislation is part of the solution, it doesn't address the bigger picture. Is this government going to reinstate MSI funding? Are they going to support the communities all across the province in their infrastructure requests?

I know that when we submitted our infrastructure requests, I reached out to the entire province to talk about what their community needs were from a cultural perspective. Some of the communities are asking for things like accessibility for wheelchair access into their facility. Someone that wants to go into their facility in their community that has a wheelchair can't enter. There are barriers all across the province for people being able to have a high quality of life because of the direct cuts that this government is making.

It's shameful that this is happening. It's shameful that rural Albertans are being forced to pay more taxes. They're being asked to travel to access simple things like a family physician. I know that when I worked in Children's Services, some of the medical issues that we would see from individuals that were living in rural Alberta that were coming to the city to access supports could have been addressed probably pretty easily had they sought medical intervention early. We're hearing devastating stories of the cost of having cancelled surgeries, something that could have been dealt with easily if it had been done quickly and on time. The delays are causing life-altering impacts. Decisions are now being taken away

from individuals because of these delays, and it's happening all across the province.

So, yes, this is a wonderful way to support a community, municipalities in regaining taxes, but I feel that the government is missing the point. It's big-picture stuff. Here we are sitting in the Legislature in the middle of a pandemic, and we're doing what seems to be the bare minimum to support communities, to support people in the province, and to me that doesn't make sense. I think that when we're hearing from communities loud and clear that they're struggling and they need support and they have solutions, why aren't those solutions being considered? Why is this government making decisions without looking at the big picture? They're doing it in silos.

They're not talking to each other when they're making decisions and looking at: if they make this decision, how does it impact down the road and how does it have this ripple effect across all of the other ministries? They're not listening to municipal leaders. We heard that loud and clear over the last few weeks, when all the municipal leaders were coming together to talk about their supports and what they need. People are angry. People are frustrated. People are scared, and they look to government for leadership on that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members looking to join?

I am prepared to ask the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 77 read a third time]

10:30 Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

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

[Adjourned debate November 30: Mr. Dang]

The Acting Speaker: Are there any members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak again to Bill 80, which is the red tape reduction act. Last time I didn't get very far into the bill in my notes, but I'll just, I think, sum up what I had sort of discussed around this bill in my previous notes, which is to say that the first section of this bill deals with the ability to levy health care premiums. It doesn't change anything. That's what's really interesting. Essentially, what it does is that it takes that ability out of the act in which it currently resides. It creates a new section and sticks it into another act and then repeals the old act. The reason this is worth mentioning is because this is literally this government's idea of red tape reduction.

They're literally taking a power or regulation and moving it from one place to another so that it appears there are a lesser number of acts even though there are still the same number of actual rules for humans wandering around out there. That is how they're reducing red tape. In addition, this ability to level health care premiums: it's not what we would normally think of as red tape. What it is is the ability for the government to levy a premium, the ability for the government to say to everyone out there: hey, now you have to pay health care premiums.

I mean, this power existed before. Obviously, the government wants the power to continue to exist, but what's interesting about it is that that has literally no effect on any business anywhere. Not one business out there in the world is helped by this. Not one person, not one business owner, not anyone is helped by this, but they're

going to throw themselves a tickertape parade about how they cut this regulation.

I think it's just really illustrative of this whole government's approach to red tape reduction. It's about shuffling papers. It's not about making anyone's life easier. It's not about supporting businesses to grow. It's about moving things around. This, like, complete absurdity of literally taking provisions that aren't even currently in use and moving them to another act so that you can repeal an act and throw yourself a party about how good you are at reducing red tape is just – I mean, it's completely laughable, and it is this government's approach to this ministry and has been the entire time they've been in.

The other section I managed to get to talk on the last time was the Alberta Human Rights Act. What I had asked was whether the minister could speak to the feelings of the head of the Human Rights Commission on these changes, because I think he's very experienced. He's very good. He cares about making the Human Rights Commission better. I would like to know what he thinks of these changes, because if they are things that he is requesting, then I would be supportive of those changes. They appear to just sort of streamline the process and allow for a few more off-ramps.

Essentially, what that means is that what they're doing is that they're allowing serious complaints, complaints that sort of have a chance of success or are properly placed in the human rights tribunal. There are often things that are otherwise meritorious complaints that just don't belong in this particular location. I'm not saying that complaints that are being dismissed are necessarily without merit, just that this allows them to sort of streamline, to do the thing that they're meant to do, and to kind of off-ramp other things. At least, that's my reading of it. I would love to hear, you know, what the thoughts of the head of the commission are, because I think it's worth hearing from some expertise on this.

Other changes that occur in this bill – and there are a lot of them; this is the classic definition of an omnibus bill – are changes to the Credit Union Act, which seem mostly okay although I'm open to being convinced on this; changes to the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, which, I think, are really interesting. This is this government backing off again on its war with doctors, which is a good thing. Don't get me wrong for a second, Mr. Speaker. The fact that the government has backed down on this is a very good thing.

I think what's problematic is the fact that the government had to back down on this in the first place, the fact that they attempted to do this. You know, they say that it would have the impact of ensuring – sorry. By "this" I mean that the government brought in a bill to allow the Health minister to dictate where physicians could work. This actually doesn't improve the situation with rural health care; it makes it worse.

The reason it makes it worse, Mr. Speaker, is because someone who's a new doctor coming to Alberta who's thinking, "Oh, where am I going to set up practice?" might consider a number of locations. But if you tell them, "Wherever you set up, that's where you're going to be for the rest of your life; it doesn't matter about your spouse, it doesn't matter if you have kids, and it doesn't matter if you need services that are in a different location, if you want to move provinces; you go there; you may not be able to work anywhere else ever again; we maybe won't give you a practice licence to move from, say, Lethbridge to Calgary; and in addition to that, when you leave your practice, you have to pass it to someone else, or you're not permitted to leave," that is extremely problematic, and it is exactly the sort of thing that would make people really reluctant to set up in areas where they know there isn't a lot of demand to take on those practices after them. I think this measure on behalf of the UCP contributed to the problems with the

ability to attract rural physicians. Repealing it is definitely good, but, boy, it sure took long enough.

Additionally, there are changes to a number of different provisions, but I think one of the things that's really worth talking about here is changes to the learner benefit. Now, there has been a considerable amount of debate in this House around this particular area. Certainly, there appears to be what we would call a difference of opinion with respect to the facts, so I will lay out the facts, which I believe support our position, which is that the learner benefit is gotten rid of and that there's no requirement that individuals would still be able to access this.

Now, the reason that this is problematic is because we are in a situation where a lot of people are potentially needing retraining. I mean, it's been this way for a while in Alberta, but as we try to sort of transform our economy here in Alberta, people are going to need retraining, and they should have access to that. Again, as I've said a number of times, most people in this province, in my experience the vast majority of people, want to work. They want to have a job. They want to contribute to society. They want to pay their bills. They want to be members of society, paying their taxes and participating in democracy and just being involved in that way. The members opposite do not seem to share that general view of humanity, but I think there's a lot of really solid evidence to support it. So the learner benefit is a good thing.

Now, I know the members opposite have said repeatedly: "Trust us. Don't worry. We're still going to do it." But, I mean, this has happened. This has probably been the worst set of debates as to the facts, if you will, in this House, and I always feel that debating on the facts is ridiculous, because while everyone may be entitled to their own opinions, they're not entitled to their own set of facts except, it appears, the UCP. They say: "Well, don't worry. We're still going to do it." Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not good enough.

The point of this House is to examine legislation. The point of this House is to see what is in the law that we, the Legislature, are passing. The suggestion that somewhere else some other law, which can be changed by cabinet on a whim – and this government has a lot of whims – will hold them to account in some way is just, I mean, absurd. To suggest that because they've said that, we should no longer worry about this really just undercuts the function of Legislatures and the reason for the existence of the people in this room.

10:40

The people of Alberta pay a fair amount to support the Legislature. I think this is good. It is democracy in action. Members are elected to represent their constituency. We are sent here, and we are sent here to do a specific job. That job is to look at the legislation and, based on what's in the legislation, form an opinion and have a conversation, have a conversation with each other and with stakeholders and with constituents and with the entire province, with the media, with any number of people. That is an incredibly important function. I know the UCP don't agree with this. They don't think that the job we do here in this Legislature is an important one, and, you know, I think that speaks more to them and to their character than it does to the function of this place.

Mr. Speaker, the legislation removes the learner benefit. Whether the members opposite want us to believe, "Oh, don't worry; we're not going to do anything," past experience would suggest that that's not the case. Past experience would suggest that on December 31 a whole bunch of important stuff is going to come through because this government, despite the fact that it's like, "Oh, that's just the date on which it happens; it just happens that everything drops at 5 p.m. on a Friday; it just happens that the coal report is going to come out on December 31, when everybody is away for vacation" – but

it doesn't just happen. Those are dates. They are dates that are picked by this government with the intention of hiding from Albertans their actions.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what you don't do if you're proud of your policies, if you're proud of your actions? You don't hide them. You don't drop them on the 31st of December. You don't drop them at 5 p.m. on a Friday. That's not how you behave if you're proud.

Mr. Speaker, I think I'm not willing to take the government's "trust us." I think that what they are doing here is repealing a benefit that is important, a benefit that supports our economic transformation, a benefit that supports Albertans who want to work hard, who want to retrain, who want to have good-paying jobs that can handle their mortgage and their rising insurance and their rising electricity costs and all the other rising costs that this government has foisted upon them, and I think we should be supporting them to do that.

My primary objection to this bill is that it takes away from individuals supports that they previously had, supports that would have allowed them to continue to pay their rent and feed their family while they were in school. If the government doesn't intend to do that, if it is their intention to continue to provide that benefit, all they need to do is amend the legislation so that that doesn't happen. I feel like there's a really easy way to do that. Just saying, "Oh, well, just trust us" – I mean, it's not just us in the opposition here. Polling has been done that shows this is the least trusted government in Alberta history. People do not trust them, and with good reason, Mr. Speaker. I could lay out a long list of the number of ways in which they have gone back on their word time and again.

Now, sometimes that's been good. For instance, you know, when they called diversification a luxury and insisted that rather than helping start-ups and new businesses with venture capital, instead of providing those programs, instead of providing the tax credits that would support new businesses, we should cut taxes on established businesses making more than \$500,000 a year, that was a bad decision on their part. They went back on it. That was good. They went back on hydrogen. From laughing at it and saying that it was impossible and that we could never export it before 2040, they've backed off on that position. That's good. They allowed coal mining in the Rockies. They've backed off on that position. That's good as well.

I think the reason, primarily, that Albertans don't trust them is because of the bad things that they have done, and, Mr. Speaker, I will have much more to say about this.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise to speak to Bill 80. I feel like I was here just yesterday speaking about this legislation. I appreciate the comments that we just heard from the previous member, and I think that a lot of my comments will focus on some of the same things and themes that that member brought forward.

[Mrs. Frey in the chair]

Many of us have raised concerns specific to the training supports that are being essentially repealed through this legislation. The fact is, again, that we can't debate any of this in silos. I think it's important to recognize again that we've seen so many devastating cuts to people who need to be supported right now more than ever through the pandemic, that have traditionally had supports in place to ensure that they were at least – you know, there's a lot more work that we should have even been able to do on top of what was in place previously.

Of course, when we were in government, we made that commitment to important initiatives like – and I've talked about it many times, Madam Speaker – indexing AISH and seniors' benefits and other programs. Unfortunately, instead of following through with that commitment that we heard from this government when they were in opposition, when they were on the campaign trail, we saw quite the opposite.

Instead, you know, what did Albertans who so often rely on these fundings for one reason or another, whether it's because potentially they lost their job due to the pandemic and restrictions that so many Albertans were affected by, whether it was somebody who has a severe disability or had been injured on the job – whatever the reason that they might be accessing these programs, instead of being provided with extra benefits through this process or at least a continuation of the benefits that were in place already, we've seen quite the opposite from this government.

As I've said before, unfortunately, I've even heard disparaging comments from government caucus members about how they're wasting their money on things like, you know, Cheezies and watching cartoons instead of getting the training that they might be trying to access. Instead of recognizing the complex and significant difficulties that Albertans have been faced with through this pandemic, we have those kinds of dehumanizing comments again. When it comes to supporting them in the real world and through legislation, unfortunately, we see the government hiding significant cuts to programs like the income and employment supports programs that are in this legislation and are being covered up through the guise of red tape reduction. We continue to see this government go down this path of what might be considered omnibus legislation, where they're saying that it's simple red tape reduction, but in fact when you get into the details of the legislation, you see that it is going to have a significant impact on Albertans.

Again, this isn't the first time that the government has made decisions that are going to impact many Alberta families who might be considered vulnerable, those who access the seniors' benefits and other income supports. We saw in September 2020 this government updating their policy manual for income support, and we've heard countless stories – I'm sure every MLA in the House here today has heard people come forward to their office asking what they're supposed to do since their supplemental benefits such as the additional shelter allowance have been clawed back by this government because of those changes to the policy manual.

Again we raise these concerns with the minister responsible for these important programs. Unfortunately, there isn't even a willingness to accept the fact that this is the case, which is so devastating because, as I said yesterday, the first action of being able to ensure that we are strengthening these programs or making sure that if there has been a mistake that was made or an issue that has arisen because of decisions by this government – the first thing we need to do, the first action, is just recognizing that there is an impact happening to Albertans.

10:50

Again, when we look through Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2), we are raising our concerns specifically around the Income and Employment Supports Act. Again, we have an unwillingness from the minister responsible for this important act to even recognize that there could be an issue being created here, saying that a new program has been created and it's going to make sure that all of these people still receive the same benefits that were in place.

I guess, unfortunately, like so often, we are going to have to wait for the estimates process, for the budgetary process to take place, to hopefully maybe get some answers about if this line item is going

to be cut because of the decisions that are being made through this act and the changes to the Income and Employment Supports Act, if there is a reduction of Albertans that have been able to access this and get that training that they need so desperately right now, whether it is ESL training or any other training that might be beneficial to themselves and their families just trying to make it by because, unfortunately, we aren't going to get those answers here.

We've heard from the previous member that spoke and from many others that it's fine for the minister to stand and say that there aren't going to be any significant changes to the program or the funding and that everything is going to be okay, but the fact is that we don't get to see any of those numbers in front of us right now. We're supposed to be expected to accept it at face value, but too many times we have heard one thing from this government and its ministers, and unfortunately something quite different came to be.

That can be said for changes to income supports. I continue to hear again, as we head into the holiday season, that Albertans accessing income supports, a variety of them, are very concerned – this happened last year, I believe, and it's happening again this year – that they are unsure of how the payment dates are going to fall for them. They're unsure about how they're supposed to make ends meet because this government – I'm not quite sure what the reason is that they made this decision, if it's about trying to move certain dollar amounts into the next budget cycle or what it is, but they continue to play with people's lives in the form of confusion around income supports and income benefits. It has been disastrous, Madam Speaker, for all those Albertans.

I'm very concerned that the changes to income and employment supports through this legislation, specific to educational benefits for Alberta families, are going to head down that same path. I think it's important to recognize as well, Madam Speaker, that this government has also been responsible for cutting nearly \$700 million from our postsecondary institutions already, so not only are we talking about the fact that Albertans that previously expected to see this money available for them and their families to gain training – not only are they potentially going to be losing the benefits of such an important program, but also institutions who may have been relying on the funding that comes from being able to offer these training opportunities are quite likely going to see a reduction in their numbers on top of the \$700 million that has already been scaled back.

We heard just yesterday, I believe, in question period about the fact that Keyano College is losing, I believe, upwards of 70-plus workers or staff already. Again we're talking about massive layoffs across our postsecondary institutions across the province and, unfortunately, still an unwillingness from this government and from this minister to take responsibility for the devastation that is being caused by the changes to funding for postsecondary.

As I stated yesterday, these supports, these training supports that are being changed through this legislation, are not only going to affect Alberta families, but we also see postsecondary institutions being forced to raise their tuition as well, and on top of that student aid is potentially being scaled back, and on top of that, Madam Speaker, if an Albertan is to potentially take out a loan so that they can further their education, the interest on that has also been increased because of decisions by this government. There are so many things that are being piled on top of each other. The changes that we're seeing through Bill 80 are just another one of those factors.

I continue to think back to other decisions that this government has made, maybe not affecting the people who would primarily rely on funding through this program: changes to minimum wage for youth under 18, the decision of this government to roll that funding back. Whenever we see legislation like this come forward, where we are changing eligibility or changing programs that so many

Albertans rely on, I think back to my own family history – and I’ve talked about it before – the fact that my mother raised me as a single mom at the age of 14. She was lucky enough to have certain supports in place to, you know, finish high school and be able to go off to university, but so many Albertans don’t have that same privilege and don’t follow that same path.

We need to ensure that at no matter what point in somebody’s life they are, these supports are in place to ensure that the income supports are in place if they decide to go back to school, whether it’s somebody that is potentially new to Canada that needs that ESL training or whether it’s somebody that is looking to diversify their skills through specific programming. We should never be putting barriers or hurdles in place for those families, and it really seems that through the decisions that we’re seeing in Bill 80 and other decisions from this government, that simply is going to be the case.

I think back to the decisions that this government made to issue T5007 income tax forms, something that has also been brought up in the House, a statement of benefits. So many Albertans who had accessed funding through programs like this one found out at tax time that they were going to have their Alberta child and family benefit scaled back because they were now being asked to claim supports, like what we see here in this program potentially, as income for their family.

Again, when we talk about being able to reduce child poverty, as the NDP government was able to do from 2015 to 2019 by 50 per cent, I think that we should continue to be focused on that, continue to support families no matter where they are in their life, whether they need supports or not. Again, I don’t see this doing that.

I think that this government really needs to go back to the drawing board and evaluate the decisions that they’re making when it comes to income supports for Albertans, the decisions they’re making when it comes to how we are supporting our postsecondary institutions because we continue to hear the idea of brain drain and the fact that for employers, as they’re seeking new economic opportunities and where to lay foundations, a large consideration, potentially the biggest one, is the talent pool. We are signalling to these corporations that we don’t have the willingness to support the further education of Albertans, that we are potentially going to be losing experts at our postsecondary institutions, and we are making it more expensive for students to be able to gain that expertise as well.

These compounding factors continue to signal to corporations that are potentially looking to set up shop in our province that we aren’t necessarily as serious about our talent pool as we should be. It’s truly unfortunate because Alberta has so much to offer in terms of our landscapes and our people and our opportunities, but unfortunately, because of the decisions of this government, it seems that, you know, there is sometimes a little less to look forward to when looking at our jurisdiction, because of these decisions.

With that, I can appreciate other pieces of this legislation where we do see some clarifying language. I think that it’s absolutely disappointing that again this government is hiding important changes to income supplements and income supports to Alberta families in a piece of what they call a red tape reduction implementation act or red tape legislation. We continue to see this from the government.

I think they truly need to go back to the table and have a discussion with experts about how we are truly – if they are so bent on taking money away from our postsecondary institutions and taking money away from Alberta families, they should at least have a concrete plan of how we are going to ensure that people aren’t falling through the cracks and institutions aren’t falling through the cracks, because at this point it truly doesn’t seem like anyone has

their hand on the wheel. This is not surgical by any means, and it’s truly disappointing.

With that, Madam Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this today. Thank you.

11:00

The Acting Speaker: Any other hon. members wishing to speak? I believe the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs will be next.

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Madam Speaker. My congratulations to the minister on this latest red tape reduction bill. As we all know, this government campaigned on a promise to reduce red tape by one-third. We all know this because they take every opportunity to tell us so. They advertise it. They hold press conferences. They issue press releases. They send out talking points. At this point it seems like they congratulate themselves every time they reuse a paper clip.

Back in 2019 the government determined that there were a total of 670,000 requirements, so to reach the magic one-third, the government has to eliminate about 233,000 of these. Together with this bill, the five – five – red tape reduction bills so far have eliminated 3,300. Congratulations to the minister. At this rate you just need another 348 red tape reduction bills to go, 348 more self-congratulatory press releases, 348 more press releases, and 248 more sets of talking points. Madam Speaker, if you don’t see the irony here, it’s because you’re not looking. The fifth red tape reduction bill is totally underwhelming in scope and ambition. By the minister’s own count it reduces just a lacklustre 870 requirements.

Madam Speaker, that’s probably fewer regulations than this government brought in to regulate the personal lives of Albertans during this government’s switch on the pandemic lockdowns. How many requirements did the vaccine passports create? You remember the vaccine passports – right? – the ones that the Premier promised not to bring in. Are we counting these in the list of 670,000 regulations? Albertans would like to know. How about the vaccine mandates this government flip-flopped on? How about the head count limits on how many people Albertans can invite to their own homes? I bet the minister isn’t counting those.

I also bet the minister doesn’t count all the backdoor regulations it brought in with the TIER program or the regulations it has adopted to control land development or public access to Crown land. Madam Speaker, this government is going backwards. You see, these examples of regulation apparently don’t count because, like the government before it, the government has a blind spot when it comes to pushing its very own agenda, which brings us back to Bill 80. This bill isn’t really about broad-based red tape reduction; it’s about tinkering with regulations to achieve multiple specific outcomes in a way that minimizes public scrutiny, so indicative of this government and this Premier.

I, for one, greatly applaud any and all measures to promote economic growth without picking winners and losers in the market. Without picking winners and losers in the market. Red tape reduction can and should be one of the most important ways of achieving that, but what I see scattered through this bill and others is an attempt by this administration to pick winners and losers through its red tape reduction efforts, seeking again to curry favour with various lobby groups that support this government’s own agenda.

Madam Speaker, when I get out with Albertans in the business world and I talk to a lawyer who says that since this government decided to reduce red tape, now, when tens of thousands of Albertans have to file their annual return, it means one more piece

of paper than before this government took it on themselves to reduce red tape, it makes one shake their head. When I talked to a lawyer on Friday who says that land titles is now at 93 days between the buyer and the seller – it's only three or four days in Saskatchewan. It means that tens of thousands of Albertans are sending tens of millions of dollars out of Alberta to Ontario and New York and Chicago because this government really doesn't care about red tape reduction.

I was in a building in Calgary four or five years ago, eight or nine storeys: absolutely full of people, tens and tens of people everywhere. Madam Speaker, six months ago I was back in that very same building: one person in the entire building. I sat with him, and he told me about his cogeneration activities and how he had just turned down a project that was connected to greenhouses because of this government's red tape and regulation that would have meant that project would have cost a million and a half extra. He couldn't justify the investment and the return, particularly when he looked around an empty building.

Madam Speaker, we have a government that cares more about virtue signalling than really getting the job done. We have a government that has created unfairness with its corporate cronyism. There's so much more this government has to do, and I hope that sometime in the last 18 months they find an ability to really, really legitimately reduce the burden of red tape and regulation on our free-enterprise people, on our small business. I've made the suggestion that I think they should start by eliminating the 2 per cent small-business tax like Saskatchewan did on a temporary basis, like Manitoba already has at zero.

Mr. Bilous: An NDP government did that.

Mr. Barnes: An NDP government did that.

Let's help free enterprise. Let's help business. Let's care about Alberta families and Alberta free enterprise.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this morning to speak to Bill 80, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). You know, I've spoken to this in a referral, an attempt that we had made to have this referred to committee to further explore all of the pieces of legislation that this one act is going to impact and that was denied.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

During the debate that's occurred with this piece of legislation, we've heard all of the different portfolios that are affected. We've heard terms like "omnibus." We've heard terms like it being so big that there's no possible way to really get a handle on everything that this government is trying to do. When we look at the portfolios affected, it's Health, Environment and Parks, Advanced Education, Municipal Affairs, Seniors and Housing, Finance. One of the biggest suggestions that I would have when we're looking at reducing red tape would be reducing the ministry of red tape because these are all pieces of legislation that have a minister responsible. The ministers that are responsible for all of these portfolios could make these changes.

There are pieces of this legislation that are huge. We heard the Member for Calgary-Mountain View talk about the impacts on physicians. Here we are in the middle of a pandemic, with an ongoing fight between this government and our health care team,

and they're proposing legislation that is going to force physicians to stay in the place where they start their practice. How is that enticing to physicians to come to the province of Alberta? It simply doesn't make sense, Mr. Speaker.

You know, we've heard that there were some easy solutions to some of this. Some of these changes in Bill 80 could have been done under a miscellaneous statutes amendment act. That would be some of the technical, grammatical changes under the Education Act, the Human Tissue and Organ Donation Act, the Public Service Act, the Seniors Benefit Act. It was something that our government did. We introduced kind of housekeeping legislation, and it's a regular practice of government. But what does this government do? They create a red tape reduction and call it a win. I simply don't understand how creating a ministry to change some grammatical errors makes sense. We see this government, you know, making these financial decisions to create a new ministry to do something that every minister currently in the Executive Council could do, and to me it seems like an attempt to kind of hide some of the legislation that they're doing, which is quite concerning.

11:10

One of the big impacts that I see is when it comes to access to education funds for those on supports. Now, I've said in this House before that I was involved in the Terra program, which is an organization that supports young parents. One of the programs that this organization has is to help young people, young parents, transition from high school into whatever their future holds. One of the big pushes from Terra is to help support young people getting into postsecondary. These are parents. These are young parents who had extensive supports while they were attending high school. They were funded. They were able to focus solely on their school and being a young parent. Now, with this legislation having impact on that access to funding for postsecondary, what does that mean for these young parents?

Well, I can tell you that it's going to significantly decrease the ability for them to be able to afford postsecondary, not just because this is being reduced, but it's taking away the opportunity for them to be able to be a parent and be a student. When young people are making decisions on what is important right now, it's going to be putting food on the table, and if they have to give up something in order to do that, it's likely going to be postsecondary. That, to me, is absolutely heartbreaking.

When I attended there – I was there in my 12th grade – I received an incredible amount of support for me to be successful in postsecondary. Based on a lot of the work that I had done with the counsellors there and the school staff, I was able to identify a career of choice, and for me that was social work. In order to be able to do that, I needed to rely on supports from the government because I was a young parent. I was a single parent. I had another human being that was relying on me, and part of my success was also his success. If I was bettering myself as a young parent, a young person, who truly wanted to be able to give back, who truly wanted to make a better life for not just me but for my young son, I needed support and I needed help. Because those supports were available, I was able to transition into postsecondary and feel like I could truly focus on raising my young son and attending postsecondary to better my life.

Now, the career in social work has been one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. The skills that I learned, the groups of individuals that I have met over the years really, really created a beautiful environment for not just myself but for my family. I think of those experiences as a young person in postsecondary. I didn't have the average experience. I wasn't going out partying. I wasn't going out socializing. I didn't join a sorority. I went to school, I was

supported by the government in doing that, and then I went home and I studied and I raised my child. What this piece of legislation does is that it takes away that ability for individuals to access financial support to be able to go back to school. My experience is just one demographic. That's young parents that want to be able to continue with their education, who deserve to continue with their education.

It's not surprising that this piece of legislation was introduced to look like this when we saw the debate about minimum wage. One of the criteria this government implemented with minimum wage for young people was that they did not need to be paid minimum wage as long as they were not in school. That is absolutely unacceptable. It creates a space where people are choosing to work or go back to school.

Clearly, this government has made decisions over and over and over that undermine the pursuit of higher education. The cost for a young person to be able to go to school, to postsecondary in the province of Alberta is almost unachievable for so many, especially if you're struggling financially, if you're part of a vulnerable community who doesn't have access to unlimited funds to be able to do that. Education should be a right. If you want to pursue postsecondary and make better of yourself in order to fulfill your dreams, in order to, you know, give back in whatever way you see, you should be able to do that. When I look at legislation, the Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, that is not red tape reduction. That is a cut to individuals that are no longer eligible to access postsecondary. Hiding it in this piece of omnibus legislation is shameful.

We're in the middle of a pandemic. For so many, their livelihoods have been disrupted. I'm hearing from so many working Albertans that are looking at having to restructure their finances, having to look at new career choices. One of the best ways to look at a new career choice is to look at your skill set and perhaps take that current skill set and apply it to a different career. With the trades you could be a carpenter and be able to transition. Maybe you worked industrial. But then you should be able to say: "You know what? If I went back to school, I could take some programming and go into film and take my current trade, my skill set, and apply it to a different industry." To be able to do that, Mr. Speaker, you need to be able to access postsecondary.

For some, believe it or not, they don't have access to unlimited funds to be able to do that, to be able to continue to pay for your children, to be able to continue to pay your skyrocketing insurance on your vehicle, to be able to continue to pay for your mortgage and the astronomical cost of your utilities. These are all decisions that this government has made that are making it way more financially disruptive to so many across the province, and they're hiding it in a piece of legislation that they're calling red tape reduction.

It sounds nice. It sounds like they're going through and they're making it easier for Albertans. I would argue that this piece of legislation does the exact opposite. It makes it much more difficult for so many when it comes to living in the province. They're hiding it, and it's so frustrating to see things in this legislation that should have been dealt with in the responsible ministry.

You know, when it comes to the AGLC, for example, we're getting rid of the income from online sales of cannabis. That's revenue. Why would the government take that out? It doesn't make sense. This is something that our government implemented when cannabis became legal in Canada. It made sense for the government to be able to distribute online cannabis, and lots of the feedback that we heard was that not everybody would have access to a local store. People that lived in places that perhaps didn't have a cannabis store located in their community could easily go online. It's regulated.

It's safe. The government was making a profit from that. Why is that being removed? It's put in here without any explanation.

11:20

There are other impacts under AGLC that had this been with the ministry, perhaps more of these questions would have been answered rather than putting it under this red tape reduction. Reducing revenue: how is that red tape reduction? It just doesn't make sense.

When we look at the other pieces of the AGLC and them wanting to introduce a designated entertainment district, I think that there is definitely a benefit to that. When I speak to, you know, some of the business communities, they think that that's a great thing, but they had questions. What does it mean for safety in those areas? Are there additional measures that are going to also be required when we're designating some of these places in municipalities?

I know some of the examples. If you look at the area of Whyte Avenue, there's an incredible culture there of entertainment and dining, but there are also increased security and safety measures that have been put in place in that community because of the distribution of alcohol. So when we're looking at these entertainment districts, are there concerns being addressed from municipalities saying, "Sure, we would love to provide this"?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to join debate on red tape reduction. The government has brought forward a red tape reduction bill every sitting, and every time they have put forward a red tape reduction bill, it further confuses me, in my mind, on what red tape really means. As my colleague from Edmonton-Castle Downs was talking about, when you are in government, when you're in charge of a ministry, I think your job is to make sure that your department is run in an effective and efficient manner. Your job is to make sure that the program that you're responsible for will run in an effective and efficient manner. If it's not, I think that you're not doing a good job.

When we were in government, for instance, I was responsible for the AISH program. There were a number of long-standing issues with that program, and we worked on many of them. Even at one point the Auditor General weighed in on the efficiency of that program. The AISH application form, a quite simple example, was 22 pages, and in the information the government was collecting on that form, there was a fair bit of repetition. The feedback from Albertans receiving AISH or those who were helping Albertans get AISH was that we should simplify this form. We worked with the stakeholders, worked with the department, and we were able to cut down that application from 22 pages to, I believe, 16 pages. Then it was a two-step process. First, you were given financial eligibility forms, then other forms, and then the medical eligibility form, almost a three-step process. We just created one form that was given to whoever was asking for that and applying for AISH so that they can give the information once and submit that. That simplification of the process, in my mind, was, I guess, reducing barriers, reducing red tape, and making sure that the processes were effective and efficient.

But with this government, they have to create a new ministry so that that associate minister can find opportunities in other ministers' files to make their process a more efficient endeavour. I would say that the minister responsible isn't in the best position to know what's in their file, what the processes are. Just creating another job

for another member of the caucus doesn't make things efficient. When you look at this bill, that clearly shows that this has nothing to do with red tape reduction.

For instance, government is getting some revenues from online cannabis sales. I guess taking that revenue stream out is somehow red tape reduction in the UCP's mind. I'm pretty sure that the Minister of Finance is in a better position to include that in some budget bill or some other money bill, that this is the revenue that was coming in and we would no longer collect it, and give some intelligent reason why they're not doing it anymore. What I'm trying to say is this, that I don't know how that is red tape reduction.

Same thing with changes to the Income and Employment Supports Act. The Income and Employment Supports Act contains a program called the learner benefit program, that provides opportunities for students, for low-income Albertans, for newcomers to get grants to upgrade their skills, to improve their language skills, and for occupational training as well. It's an important program. In particular, in my riding it's a very important program. The government already made some changes to that program last year by adding the aggregate amount that students receive in terms of their living allowance and tuition fee into their income just to strip them of benefits such as low-income medical benefit, dental benefits, child benefits, those kinds of benefits. Those changes didn't bring any revenue to the government, but they made that change so that they can strip those low-income Albertans of their benefits and make life even harder for them.

11:30

Now, that program, which is the Income and Employment Supports Act learner benefit program, has set legislated criteria within that legislation and regulation that provides for health benefits, provides for a generous child benefit, and focuses on making sure that students who don't have the wherewithal to pay for postsecondary education have supports available to make sure that they have a chance to be successful, they have a chance to improve their skills, they have a chance to learn a new trade and retrain themselves. That's a program that is statutorily mandated. What that means is that when an Albertan qualifies, meets the criteria set in the legislation and regulation, for that program, then the government of Alberta will be obliged to pay those benefits to all those who are applying for it.

In the name of red tape reduction the UCP government is continuing their policy of attacking students, attacking low-income Albertans, attacking newcomer Albertans and the programs they rely on. That's one such example, and that's hidden in their red tape reduction bill. As of April 1 next year, 2022, they're eliminating the learner benefit program altogether. There will be no learner benefit program as of April 1, 2022. They're eliminating that program in the name of red tape reduction. That's not red tape reduction. That's straight austerity. They're telling colleges that they will replace this program with another program that will be contained in a regulation that they propose and share with some colleges. That will come into force on January 1, 2022, for programs starting April 1, 2022.

But the difference between the current program contained in the Income and Employment Supports Act and the proposed program contained in Alberta regulation, the foundational learning assistance regulation, is huge. As I said, the current program is a statutorily mandated program while the new program is nowhere close to what the existing program is. Section 3 of the government's proposed regulation reads: "Notwithstanding anything in this Regulation, the Minister may provide foundational learning assistance only if money is available for foundational learning

assistance." The government is replacing a statutorily mandated program with a program that will be delivered at the sole discretion of the minister only when money is available. If there is any other interpretation of section 3, I urge anyone from the front bench of the government side . . .

Mr. Bilous: First two benches now.

Mr. Sabir: First two benches, because there are enough ministers and secretaries. All those who voted for a smaller government, please take note.

If there is any interpretation of section 3 other than what I proposed, I would urge any member of the House to please get up and tell me that. I would be happy to give way to an intervention as well should the minister or any member choose to interpret section 3, which replaces the existing program and says, "notwithstanding anything in this Regulation, the Minister may provide." "May" is a word, Mr. Speaker, as you would know from your background as well, that is used where something is permissible and not mandatory. It's used where you're providing for discretion. "The Minister may provide foundational learning assistance." And then it says, "only if money is available." No matter how you read it, how you interpret it, what that means is that the minister, in his sole discretion if money is available, might give some benefits.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is my second opportunity to speak to this bill, Bill 80, Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act, 2021 (No. 2). I'll keep my comments this morning fairly brief as many of my colleagues have already outlined the numerous challenges that we've identified in this current piece of legislation. You know, I thought it was fascinating when I was listening to the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, who talked about the fact that there are a number of pieces of legislation or processes that the government has introduced that have actually created more red tape, yet the government continues every session to come up with a bill that is looking more and more like a shiny hood ornament than it is in fact taking meaningful steps toward reducing red tape.

My colleague the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs very aptly put it that red tape reduction should in fact be the job of every single minister. That was the approach that our government took, looking at what regulations can be streamlined, what can be improved, what could be eliminated. But here we have a government that claims that they are fiscally conservative, yet at every turn this government is spending more and more money.

In fact, I found it fascinating listening in question period the other day to the Premier accusing the NDP government of deficits, when in 2019, pre-COVID, this current UCP government ran the largest deficit in Alberta's history. Over \$12 billion. This was pre-COVID. And every Albertan I talked to is scratching their head saying: "What did we get for \$12 billion? Nothing."

Mr. Speaker, some of these changes, in fact, all of these changes could be brought forward in other bills. In fact, previous governments would bring in, every session, an omnibus bill to do some housekeeping and cleaning up. That's where you would see changes to certain pieces of legislation that were slowing down business.

11:40

Now, what is funny is what's not in this bill even though it's supposedly eliminating red tape. Where is the elimination of the red

tape when it comes to the supports for small businesses in COVID? Despite what the minister says in QP, I know first-hand that there are hundreds of businesses that have been waiting months – months – to receive support. Maybe the government could start by reducing the red tape that they put up for businesses that are struggling to survive, who cannot access supports. The government continues to roll out these piecemeal, small grants, the latest one \$2,000 per business – of course, businesses will tell you that their debts that they've racked up are significant – to help them transition online. Now, I support that notion. It should have been brought in about 18 months ago, when everyone first moved online because of restrictions that states and governments put in place around the world. But again, you know, if we're serious about supporting business on that front, then the government should stop talking about moving at the speed of business, stop moving at the speed of government, and roll these supports out to the very men and women who are hanging on by a shoestring.

Mr. Speaker, I am confident that I will have numerous opportunities to speak to this bill throughout Committee of the Whole and in third reading. But, as I've mentioned, there are a number of issues that I have with this current piece of legislation, which I will not be supporting.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to join debate?

Seeing none, I am prepared to ask the question. First, though, the hon. Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction has the opportunity to close debate on this.

Ms Fir: I'll save my comments.

The Acting Speaker: Perfect.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 11:43 a.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

For the motion:

Dreeshen	Issik	Sigurdson, R.J.
Fir	Jones	Singh
Frey	Long	Stephan
Getson	Nally	Toor
Gotfried	Nicolaides	van Dijken
Guthrie	Pon	Walker
Hanson	Rowswell	Wilson
Horner	Savage	Yaseen
Hunter	Schulz	

12:00

Against the motion:

Bilous	Eggen	Goehring
Carson	Ganley	Sabir
Deol		

Totals: For – 26 Against – 7

[Motion carried; Bill 80 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: Mindful of the time, under Standing Order 4(2.1) I believe we are adjourned until 1:30 today.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12:01 p.m.]

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