



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday afternoon, February 24, 2022

Day 3

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Third Session

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Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)
Copping, Hon. Jason C., Calgary-Varsity (UC)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)
Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (Ind)
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Dreeshen, Devin, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake (UC)
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Glubish, Hon. Nate, Strathcona-Sherwood Park (UC)
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Hanson, David B., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
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Kenney, Hon. Jason, PC, Calgary-Lougheed (UC),
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Loewen, Todd, Central Peace-Notley (Ind)
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United Conservative: 60

New Democrat: 23

Independent: 3

Vacant: 1

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Nixon, Jeremy
Pancholi
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Amery
Frey
Milliken
Rosin
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Yao
Vacant
Vacant
Vacant

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 24, 2022

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Hon. members, please remain standing for the playing of *God Save the Queen*.

Recording:

God save our gracious Queen,
Long live our noble Queen,
God save the Queen!
Send her victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God save the Queen!

Members, I ask that you please remain standing.

Statement by the Speaker

Ukraine

The Speaker: As Speaker of the Alberta Legislature, the province with the largest concentration of Ukrainians in Canada, in a country with the second-largest diaspora of Ukrainians in the world, I say that today we are all Ukrainians because we believe that all peoples of the world should be able to choose democracy over tyranny, and for that reason the Legislature of Alberta is with Ukraine and prays for peace.

As the saying goes in Ukraine and, even more importantly today, for those confronting the Russian aggressors and protecting their families: [Remarks in Ukrainian] Glory to Ukraine. Glory to the heroes.

I ask that you remain standing in solidarity with the people of Ukraine as we play the national anthem of Ukraine.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, today I'm very pleased to have a face that many of you will remember and know and appreciate sitting in my gallery today, Wayne Drysdale, the former Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. I think everyone will agree, all of our favourite Drysdals; his wife, Sherry, is also joining him.

They are joined by Vaughn Bend, the CEO of Aquatera Utilities. Please welcome them.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, also seated in the gallery of the Speaker today are Mountain View county councillor Alan Miller and the Laubenstein family: Scott, Heather, Gunter, Martin, and Linea.

Today in the public gallery are special guests of the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul. Please welcome Her Worship Elisa

Brosseau, mayor of Bonnyville. Welcome. Thank you for joining us.

Ministerial Statements

Ukraine

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I stand on behalf of the government of Alberta to express our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the great modern democratic Ukrainian state. As you eloquently noted, Alberta has been built in large part thanks to the contribution of hundreds of thousands of Canadians of Ukrainian origin. We owe much of our own freedom and prosperity to people of Ukrainian descent who have built our own society, so there is a special, deep, and abiding relationship between Alberta and Ukraine and indeed between Canada and Ukraine.

We are all shocked and horrified to see the images of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine by the forces of Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation in what constitutes the largest act of military aggression in Europe since 1945, the scale and consequences of which are unthinkable: the loss of human life, the deprivation of security and basic freedoms, the dislocation potentially of millions of peaceful civilians in what can only be described as a brutal and horrific war crime.

Mr. Speaker, this did not begin yesterday. Vladimir Putin's aggression against Ukraine began eight years ago with his invasion of Crimea and his de facto invasion, through Russian separatist forces, of the Donbas region in the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk. Canada proudly has played a role in supporting Ukraine and its military in better responding to these challenges to its sovereignty. As Minister of National Defence I was proud to deploy Her Majesty's Canadian Forces to Ukraine in Operation Unifier, which for the past seven years has trained over 60,000 Ukrainian troops, modernizing them and improving their tactics to prepare for, sadly, this inevitable day.

But the story of Russian aggression against Ukraine did not begin eight years ago. Indeed, for centuries there have been efforts to obliterate Ukrainian nationality, language, and its distinctive culture, an effort that reached its apogee during the Holodomor famine genocide of 1932 and '33, when some 10 million Ukrainians were victims of a genocide planned and executed by Vladimir Putin's predecessor in Moscow, Joseph Stalin.

When we as Albertans stand to remember the victims of the Holodomor, what we are doing is remembering a lesson of history about the underlying aggression that has long existed with Muscovite expansionism and Russian imperialism, which today is wreaking havoc on the streets of Ukraine.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, we express our most profound solidarity with the women and men and children of Ukraine at this moment of great adversity. But we also express confidence in the Ukrainian spirit to overcome this violent effort to obliterate the Ukrainian nation by Vladimir Putin, who for too long has been allowed to develop the wealth, the military strength, the policy of aggression, not only in Ukraine but elsewhere. His participation in the Syrian civil war was simply one part of the path to this day of horrific aggression.

I believe I speak on behalf of all hon. members when I call on the government of Canada and indeed the entire civilized world to stand together in unity and strength and solidarity with the people of Ukraine. To do otherwise is to invite further aggression. I am encouraged to see that article 4 consultations amongst the NATO member states have begun today. We are encouraged to see the provision of humanitarian equipment to Ukrainian civil society by

the government of Canada, to which the government of Alberta is making a contribution.

Mr. Speaker, more must be done. The world must impose a hard and immediate sanction on all Russian energy imports. It is an unpardonable scandal that Russia should be able to continue to fill its treasury to finance this act of mass violence through its global energy sales. That must end immediately with the hardest possible and broadest economic sanctions on Russia, that must be co-ordinated by all peace-loving countries around the world. We call on the government of Canada to lead the way in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, I further call on the government of Canada and our allies around the world to be relentless in freezing the assets of and making life impossible for the billionaire plutocrats of Putin's Russia, his enablers, who have assets here in Canada and all around the world, who have profited from two decades of corruption and aggression. We must make it clear that Vladimir Putin and his gang of thugs are personae non grata throughout the democratic world.

Mr. Speaker, let me close by saying that we are all moved by the scenes that are emanating from Ukraine, but I have been to Ukrainian military bases. I have seen our Canadian troops equipping them with world-class knowledge and skills. I, for one, have confidence that the people of Ukraine will valiantly defend the promise of their freedom and independence that has been so hard fought and hard won.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Ukraine are also people of a profound faith, so I join with so many others in praying for the intercession of the Theotokos for the protection of Ukraine and her people. [Remarks in Ukrainian] [Standing ovation]

The Speaker: I believe the hon. the Premier has a special request for unanimous consent.

Mr. Kenney: At this time I wish to ask for unanimous consent to waive Standing Order 39 in order to provide notice of a government motion in support of Ukraine.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I now rise to ask for unanimous consent to waive Standing Order 7 in order to proceed immediately to consideration of Government Motion 11.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Government Motions

Russian Actions in Ukraine

11. Mr. Kenney moved:
Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly
- (a) condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an unprovoked and illegal act of aggression;
 - (b) affirm the solidarity of Alberta with the people of Ukraine and Albertans' support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine;
 - (c) call on the government of Canada to impose the strongest possible sanctions on the Russian Federation and to provide with the greatest urgency generous humanitarian support to Ukraine.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Government Motion 11 is debatable. Is there anyone wishing to join in the debate?

Seeing and hearing none, I am prepared to call the question.

[Government Motion 11 carried unanimously]

Ministerial Statements

Ukraine (continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview to respond to the ministerial statement on behalf of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Bilous: [Remarks in Ukrainian] As our eyes and hearts are fixed on Ukraine, it is vital that we come together in support of those impacted by the atrocious actions of Vladimir Putin, condemning in the strongest possible way these brazen attacks on a sovereign, democratic nation. Alongside the 245,000 in our province, I am also an Albertan of Ukrainian descent. For so many of us, this invasion has a deeply personal impact.

Alberta has the largest population of those with Ukrainian heritage in our country. We have brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends and loved ones who are now living through horror I cannot imagine. I'm reminded of our parents and grandparents who came to Canada, in many cases, to escape these types of horrors who may be looking back at their own histories, reminded again of the harm caused by tyranny and egregious, unprovoked attacks. My heart goes out to each and every one of you.

Ukraine has been explicit in their desire for peace and harmony with their neighbours. The NDP caucus stands proudly with those supporting Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. By choosing to instigate a catastrophic, unprovoked, and unjustified attack, the Russian Federation is infringing upon the rights and freedoms of a democratic nation, violating international law and bringing on catastrophic loss of life and human suffering. We must all come together in our province, in our country, and across the globe to support Ukraine and its people's rights to determine their own future, protecting the democratic institutions and values we hold dear.

Now more than ever the world needs to respond swiftly and firmly, holding the Russian Federation accountable in a united and decisive way. We must show solidarity with the people of Ukraine and provide whatever help we can as individuals and as institutions. We must show compassion to those who are living in fear for their lives or the lives of their loved ones who are experiencing loss and devastation on an overwhelming scale.

I alongside my colleagues unequivocally condemn Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine and their blatant violations of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination. [Remarks in Ukrainian] [Standing ovation]

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview has the call.

Ukraine

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, I, like so many Albertans, have been horrified to see the violent actions of the Russian Federation President, Vladimir Putin. I feel for the many, many Ukrainians living here in Alberta who are watching with horror and worried about the safety of their loved ones. I do know the government provided \$1 million in humanitarian aid yesterday for the Ukrainian community, and I want to thank the Premier for that. Can the Premier tell the House what else is being done by the government of Alberta today to assist Ukrainians in our province, and what support has he committed to the federal government to aid in this humanitarian crisis?

1:50

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his eloquent statement and his thoughtful question. Last night I hosted a round-table meeting including His Excellency the consul general of Ukraine in Alberta, former Premier Stelmach, and leaders of the Ukrainian-Canadian community to seek their input on exactly that question. At that meeting we announced a million dollars of monetary support for the Canada-Ukraine Foundation to provide humanitarian relief to Ukrainian civil society, and I've indicated that we would like to receive input on what additional practical support the government of Alberta could provide.

Mr. Bilous: Through you, Mr. Speaker, thank you for that answer. Alberta's NDP reaffirms our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and we believe diplomacy, not conflict, is the best way forward. Still, the situation before us is largely out of the control of this Legislature. What we can control is how we support those struggling to locate loved ones in Ukraine. Will the Premier begin establishing specific supports to help Albertans with family in Ukraine reconnect with their loved ones in the country?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the member is right to be concerned about this. In fact, there is a member of my office, the Premier's office staff, who was speaking to his mother in Kharkiv last night as bombs were falling, audible on the telephone. Our hearts go out to all of those Albertans who have loved ones who are being so directly affected by this. The question that the member asks is the responsibility of the consular section of the Department of Global Affairs, but we will provide any necessary assistance to connect Albertans seeking Canadians or relatives to ascertain their well-being.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Premier. Our government was so pleased to celebrate the opening of Alberta's Ukrainian consulate and to declare Ukrainian-Canadian Heritage Day on September 7 – each year we mark this important occasion – but while those decisions were important and I was proud to play a role in them, they provide little comfort to those seeking some reassurance, some hope in these dark days. People need that comfort here and now. Through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier, I'll be attending and speaking at a rally outside of the Legislature this evening in support of Ukrainians here, across Canada, and back home. Will the Premier join in a show of solidarity and unified support of this House at tonight's gathering?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, I commend the member for that, and I encourage all members, as I did with the government caucus earlier today, to attend events such as that, which likely will be happening all across the province. As I mentioned, I hosted the event last night, and if I'm able to, I will certainly be present at the function here. I expect that in the days to come, we can see Albertans of Ukrainian origin, but I hope this is a moment for solidarity outside of the Ukrainian community. I hope that all people of goodwill in this province will find a way to express their voice of revulsion at the military aggression of Vladimir Putin, because if it can happen in Europe today, it can happen anywhere.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has the call.

Private Health Care Services

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For two long years Alberta's public health care workers have worked tirelessly, heroically to shield their communities from the COVID-19 pandemic. Sadly, at every turn they've been failed by a UCP government that's more interested in protecting its own political interests than the health of Albertans and their families. Now, instead of taking responsibility for their failures, the UCP is bent on dismantling the public health care system that served us so well. Every dollar spent on profit and shareholding dividends is a dollar not spent on maintaining or staffing public hospitals across Alberta. Why is this Premier doubling down on his plan to funnel health care dollars into the pockets of the UCP's wealthy friends?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, that is just completely ridiculous. Under the NDP 15 per cent of surgeries insured by Alberta Health were performed in privately operated chartered surgical facilities. We are simply proposing to increase the percentage in order to perform more surgeries. The NDP's preference, I guess, now that they're not in government, is to create a complete monopoly for surgeries only to be performed in government hospitals, which would only have the effect of lengthening the surgical wait times, forcing people to live in pain as their physical condition deteriorates. That is not compassionate.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, Mr. Speaker, speaking of lengthening wait times and people waiting in pain, the Premier likes to tout Saskatchewan as his model for private delivery, and that example is actually very instructive because surgical wait times in Saskatchewan are longer today than they've ever been. They poured tax dollars into a scheme that definitely made a few people very rich but completely failed patients and families in Saskatchewan. Why won't the Premier tell Albertans the whole story about this failed experiment with for-profit health care that he's determined to force on patients and families in Alberta?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, under the current NDP government in British Columbia there is significantly greater private provision of surgery and other care than is the case here in Alberta. In Saskatchewan the Saskatchewan NDP has said that they will not reverse the Saskatchewan strategic surgical initiative because it has been successful, and here in Alberta, under the NDP government, they approved 42 private chartered surgical facilities, adding 40,000 private surgeries to Alberta's capacity, 15 per cent of the total. Why was it okay under the NDP, but innovation is bad under a Conservative government?

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, data from the Saskatchewan health authority, published in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* today, shows that more than 35,000 people are currently waiting for surgery, almost three times as many as were waiting in 2015. Saskatchewan is the third-worst province in Canada for getting knee replacements done on time, the second-worst for hip replacements. They trail Alberta badly on every measure, so why is this Premier so obsessed with imitating this expensive, failed experiment in for-profit health care and imposing higher costs and longer wait times on Alberta patients and families?

Mr. Kenney: I appreciate the question from an expert on surgical wait times, because while he was in office, Mr. Speaker, open-heart surgery wait times increased by 50 per cent in Alberta. Cataract surgery wait times increased by nearly 30 per cent. Hip replacement wait times increased by nearly 30 per cent. Knee replacement wait times increased by 23 per cent. The percentage of patients from the

emergency department treated and admitted to hospital within hours had declined from 46 to 44 per cent. We will not accept the NDP's failed record of longer surgical wait times. We're taking action to get the problem under control.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View is next.

Utility Costs

Ms Ganley: Despite the rosy tweets and videos this government has been sharing, Albertans have been struggling to make ends meet because of skyrocketing utility prices. Yesterday the MLA for Lethbridge-West and I illustrated the choices facing many families, like whether to buy food or keep the electricity on. The Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity dismissed the struggles of these families and blamed them for not seeking price protection. Will the Premier today commit to standing up for these families, or does he share the views of his associate minister?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, that coming from a member, first of all, whose government spent \$4 billion on new transmission infrastructure, forcing up electricity rates, that shut down in a rush the lowest source of electricity in Alberta, our baseload thermal coal plants, that brought in a massive carbon tax and wedded it to Justin Trudeau's \$170 carbon tax plan, that completely screwed up the Balancing Pool, costing Albertans over a billion dollars. If there is problem with electricity prices in Alberta right now, those are the culprits.

Ms Ganley: Since this Premier took office, electricity prices have nearly tripled, and the Premier ruled out any sort of supports for those who are now scaling back on food in order to keep the lights on during an Alberta winter. There are multiple options to help struggling families, but the UCP won't consider any of them. Combined with the UCP's increases to income taxes, park fees, tuition, property taxes, and more, it's making life unaffordable for Albertans. Is the Premier really fine with making families choose between paying their electricity bills or buying diapers for their babies?

Mr. Kenney: No, absolutely not, Mr. Speaker, and that's why Bill 1, passed by this government, was the carbon tax repeal act. That's why we told the power companies that if they wanted to continue to generate power with coal until 2030, they could, unlike the NDP's plan that forced them off the grid. That's why we have stopped new transmission infrastructure, which the NDP overbuilt, that has forced up power prices. If they want to know who's responsible for unreasonably high electricity prices, to coin a phrase, the NDP, well, they should look in the mirror.

Ms Ganley: Last session, when asked about supporting these families, the associate minister proudly bragged to this House that their plan was to do nothing – nothing – as Calgarians are seeing bills increase by up to \$460 over last year and nearly half of Albertans report they're having difficulty feeding their families due to these rising costs. Alberta families should never have to choose between putting food on the table and keeping the lights on. Premier, one last time: what are these families supposed to do? Eat in the dark?

2:00

Mr. Kenney: First of all, Mr. Speaker, the minister said no such thing. Secondly, will the member rise and admit – admit – that the NDP ideology supports higher electricity prices, higher power prices, higher gas prices, higher heating prices? That's the whole darn point behind their carbon tax. They are trying to make energy

less affordable so that people then – what did they say? – take the bus to work. Their carbon tax, their Trudeau carbon tax is what's punishing people. Will the NDP join us in fighting it? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Coutts Border Crossing Blockade

Ms Sweet: Forty-four million dollars per day; \$864 million in total. That's how much the illegal Coutts blockade cost the Alberta economy. This blockade hurt all economic sectors in Alberta but hit agriculture the hardest. Delays at the border meant cattle had to wait to be transported. JBS and Cargill, which process two-thirds of the nation's beef, had to cut shifts and delay payments, causing a decrease in auction prices. What will the Premier do to support farmers who've experienced economic loss as a result of this illegal blockade? Will he be providing compensation?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Coutts blockade was an illegal action that was a violation of the rule of law, which is why the RCMP enforced the rule of law. However, while there was great inconvenience, particularly for livestock exporters, the truth is that we worked around the clock to keep the five other ports of entry between Alberta and Montana open and operating with extended hours, with U.S. livestock safety checks. We got the job done to continue with traffic for exports.

Ms Sweet: The UCP should have taken action to stop the illegal blockade, yet instead of acting quickly, and fanning the flames, they didn't. Multiple members of the UCP supported the illegal blockade online, and the Member for Taber-Warner even went to the front lines of this illegal blockade and claimed to be inspired. The supply chain was disrupted greatly over the past few years, and this blockade made those challenges so much worse. Why did the minister of agriculture stay silent while members of his caucus supported illegal blockades which hurt the law-abiding farmers trying to transport their goods? The Premier needs to remove both MLAs out of his caucus and do it today.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, no member of the government caucus supported illegality. A member visited his constituents because that's a member's job. You know one thing that has disturbed supply chains in Canada and in North America? It is Justin Trudeau's ridiculous vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers, that is supported by the NDP, just like his arbitrary use of extraordinary police powers in the Emergencies Act. Why is it that instead of standing up for Albertans, the NDP always stands up for Justin Trudeau?

Ms Sweet: Mr. Speaker, the Coutts border crossing is our only 24-hour border crossing, and a single day of it being closed is too long. There are many actions the government could have taken: seeking a court injunction, suspending commercial operator licences of people blocking the border. But, of course, the minister of agriculture did not want to support those ideas because he never once expressed condemnation of the illegal protest. What were the priorities of this government and the minister of agriculture? Was he concerned with the financial hardships of the agriculture industry, or did he just give up?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, we've made very clear our expectation that the law had to be enforced. But while the NDP was screaming, demanding imprudent law enforcement, the government was in the possession of sensitive intelligence from the RCMP about a group of individuals who could lead to potential violence. The NDP would have

pushed the RCMP into a provocation that could have led to a violent situation. Thank goodness they were not in office. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-South is the only one with the call.

Red Deer Regional Hospital Expansion

Mr. Stephan: Yesterday the Premier, joined by ministers, including of Education and the Member for Red Deer-North, announced a monumental expansion of the Red Deer regional hospital. The Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and I were also very happy to attend what my mayor called a “monumental day.” To the Premier: could you please share details about this monumental investment and how it will bless families and individuals throughout central Alberta? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you to the Member for Red Deer-South, Mr. Speaker, for his question but, more importantly, for his diligent work on behalf of his constituents, together with the Member for Red Deer-North and all members from central Alberta, who have fought for years together with the community for this critical renewal and expansion of hospital capacity in central Alberta. Yesterday: the single largest capital investment in the history of central Alberta, the single largest hospital expansion in the history of Alberta health care, \$1.8 billion investment, that will increase by 54 per cent the number of beds in the Red Deer hospital.

Mr. Stephan: Given that the NDP did jack squat, given that we know that an expanded hospital is only as good as the services it provides and the health professionals serving in it and given that there are perpetual, chronic shortage issues for health professionals at the hospital and in other locations, can the Premier share how this government plans to address the ongoing AHS shortages of health professionals required to provide health services at the hospital? [interjection]

The Speaker: Order. Order. My only guess is that “jack squat” is very close to the edge of parliamentary language.

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can inform the hon. member that there are more nurses and doctors working in our health care system today than ever before, and the member will be pleased with additional investments to expand our health care workforce and capacity.

But in 1997 the NDP received a report saying that the Red Deer regional hospital was under massive pressure and needed urgently an expansion, and do you know what their response was? The square root of nothing. Not a dollar. Not a dime, Mr. Speaker. Why did the NDP abandon the people of central Alberta?

Mr. Stephan: Given that the NDP occupies seats doing nothing, given that for too long residents of central Alberta have experienced reduced service, even diversions, because of AHS, the NDP, and growing demand and population at the hospital, can the Premier tell the Legislature why he thinks it took AHS so long to get to this day and why this government decided to make this a priority?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I share the hon. member’s frustration at how long these projects take, but we must avoid – we must avoid – a repeat of the Grande Prairie hospital situation that

took several years and went twice over budget. I’m just saying that he sympathizes, not that he’s responsible. I know that the hon. the Finance minister is very focused on making sure that we do this right, and the Minister of Infrastructure will work with the Member for Red Deer-South to make sure that it’s done on time and on budget.

The Speaker: I know that the Premier would never bring a member of the public in to the debate here on the floor of the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Member for Edmonton-South West

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans were rightly concerned when they learned that the former Minister of Justice, now the Member for Edmonton-South West, called the chief of police after receiving a distracted driving ticket. Actions like this are completely unacceptable and violate the rule of law that all Albertans follow on a daily basis. While a report into this serious matter has been completed, it has been hidden from the public, who deserve to see it. Will the Premier, while leaving, commit to releasing the full report today? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you. I know, Mr. Speaker, that you know it’s a point of order to mention whether a member is in the House or not or anything about that, which just happened.

But the hon. member also knows – and he’s only right about one thing – the report has been received, and in due course, which won’t be too long, there will be a report coming back to this House, and that would be the orderly way to resolve this issue, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: My hesitation was that I thought that perhaps someone was referring – I just didn’t hear it quite correctly, and that would be a point of order if he was referring to the presence or absence of a member. I’m sure he won’t be doing it again.

2:10

Mr. Sabir: Given that during the week of lawlessness we saw at the Coutts border crossing, Alberta had a part-time Justice minister and given that Albertans didn’t see any action from this government except that members of their caucus were encouraging law enforcement to break the law and others in the government caucus were actually breaking the law themselves by joining in the blockade, would the minister without title, the Minister for Nothing perhaps you might call him, have done anything different to end the illegal blockade?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy and the Acting Minister of Justice.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Despite that barrage of insults against me, I’d like to affirm to the room that our government took action with respect to the Coutts blockade. It became very apparent partway through the border blockade that there was a very dangerous system and a very dangerous element of people down there. While the NDP was tweeting about getting an injunction, we were cautious. We let the police do the work. It wasn’t escalated. There was no violence. There was no violence, and the border was cleared.

Mr. Sabir: Given that the Member for Edmonton-South West, the Minister of Nothing, is still a member of Executive Council and given that Albertans who are working longer and harder to deal with a government that has made life harder and more expensive for

families have a right to know what a member of this cabinet is doing to support them, can the minister without a responsibility from Edmonton-South West explain what exactly he is doing these days in Executive Council? Be specific, Minister of Nothing.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:11.
The Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The way that question was asked was below the hon. member, really based on attempts to make personal insults, which I suppose is the NDP way of doing things. This issue will be resolved in due course. As the hon. members have noted, there's a report forthcoming. It will come to this House shortly, and that is the proper way to deal with this, not through personal insults, which seem to be what the other side is up to today.

Coal Policy Committee Report

Mr. Schmidt: Speaking of reports that we're waiting to see, Mr. Speaker, it's been 57 days since this minister has had the coal report dropped on her desk for review. Fifty-seven days is a long time. In 57 days you can sow and harvest a crop of carrots. In 57 days you can study and train to get a pilot's licence. In 57 days you can, arguably, sail around the entire globe, but for some reason this minister has not been able to review and release the coal report presented to her 57 days ago. My question to the minister is simple. What's the holdup?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. We'll be releasing the coal report in the next couple of weeks along with our answers to their very, very thoughtful recommendations. We'll be taking action to ensure that the eastern slopes are protected.

Mr. Schmidt: Given that this coal committee spent months putting together their findings for the minister to review and given that multiple other reports have been completed on coal mining in the eastern slopes in that time, including a wide-ranging analysis from the University of Calgary concluding that the net economic benefit of coal mining in these areas is minimal, and given that even in the initial survey from the coal committee the very first step concluded that this government must immediately stop coal exploration in the Rockies, why is the minister dragging her feet to review the hard work of this committee and answer Albertans? Does she simply not agree with their findings?

Mrs. Savage: Mr. Speaker, I share the member's concerns and his love of the eastern slopes. Every place in Alberta is beautiful, but the beauty in the eastern slopes is unparalleled, and that's why we will be releasing the coal report with a series of measures to ensure that the eastern slopes are protected now and for future generations.

Mr. Schmidt: Given that in an update to the High River town council earlier this year the mayor described the Premier as, quote, a full-on, unapologetic supporter of coal mining, end quote, and given that this minister's backpedalling after rescinding the 1976 Lougheed coal policy made it very clear that this report was to look for ways to responsibly mine coal in the Rockies even after Albertans have made it clear that they want zero coal mining activity, when is the minister going to finally listen to Albertans and

stop this government's attempts to mine coal in the eastern slopes? Just say that you'll ban it.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The coal committee heard from Albertans over a period of about five months. They've made some very thoughtful recommendations, which I'm looking forward to implementing. We'll be releasing the results from the Coal Policy Committee in the next couple of weeks, with steps to ensure that we will be protecting the eastern slopes. That is something that you'll be hearing from more in the future. There's nothing more beautiful than our eastern slopes, and our government will protect them.

Government Policies and Cost of Living

Mr. Barnes: The theme of this week's Speech from the Throne was self-congratulatory rhetoric, proving once again this government couldn't be any more tone deaf. With unemployment above the national average and runaway inflation destroying savings, Alberta families are worse off today. A speech claiming that "our economy is strong, and our quality of life is second to none" doesn't change the harsh reality Alberta families are facing. At 2,500 words the throne speech didn't mention inflation once. To the Premier: exactly how detached from reality is your government?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member is right. Our economy is strong, and our quality of life is second to none. Our very skilled, talented, and hard-working Finance minister will rise in this House this afternoon to lay out our plan going forward, which will be in the interest of all Albertans, will strengthen the economy, will strengthen the quality of life, will strengthen the investment in Alberta, will strengthen the health care system, and will strengthen the way that Albertans will want to be here forever, because that's the great job he does.

Mr. Barnes: Given that in the Speech from the Throne the government is trying to claim, as he did, that Alberta is in great economic shape and given that the government is also doubling down on corporate welfare in some misguided scheme to fix the economy and given that far too many Albertans are struggling to make ends meet while inflation destroys their savings, again to the Premier: if you truly believe Alberta families are better off under your leadership, why are you doubling down on Liberal-style corporate welfare and NDP-style tax-and-spend schemes?

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, the Finance minister is going to be making his presentation here momentarily to highlight the improvement to the fiscal situation here in the province of Alberta, and I'm excited to hear what he has to bring to this Chamber. On top of that, 130,000 jobs created last year alone in this province, recovering all the jobs lost during the pandemic. Alberta is going to continue to lead the entire country in growth, more diversified than ever.

Mr. Barnes: Given that it is obvious by the throne speech that this government has become completely disconnected from the realities facing Alberta families and given that in December Albertans paid 4.8 per cent more for goods and services and given that meat prices are up 13 per cent, electricity prices are up 34 per cent, gasoline prices 37 per cent and given that prices continue to rise – some restaurants now are writing their prices in temporary marker – my

question to the Finance minister: how much does a jug of milk cost Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry the hon. member is so offended by 130,000 new jobs. I'm sorry the hon. member is offended by the investment, the job creation, the things that'll actually allow Albertans to afford that jug of milk, the things that'll allow Albertans to support their families, the things that'll allow Albertans to pay their mortgages. I know the hon. member is offended by the success of this Finance minister and this government in helping Alberta's economy come back. We're guilty of that good work.

Children and Youth in Care

Ms Pancholi: Mr. Speaker, every year the office of the Child and Youth Advocate reports progress made by ministries that serve youth and children on implementing the advocate's recommendations. These recommendations come mainly from mandatory death reviews, which identify the circumstances that led to the death of a child or former child in care, and have their roots in policy and procedure, yet the UCP government allowed 21 recommendations to close last year due to lack of progress. Can the Minister of Children's Services explain to this Assembly what work has been done on improving child intervention under her watch? Clearly, that work did not address the recommendations of the advocate.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do actually appreciate the question from the member opposite. We are absolutely committed to continuously improving our child intervention services and the programs that we offer children and youth in care. The Child and Youth Advocate is a valued and respected partner in this work and adviser, and I do want to thank him, as I know his retirement is upcoming, for the very important work that he does and the relationship that we've built over the last two years. We do review all recommendations that come out of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate to determine whether or not changes to current policies or practices are needed to help improve safety for children. We will continue to do that.

2:20

Ms Pancholi: It's a lot of talk and no action. Given that the 2018 Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention recommended enhanced accountability for youth-serving ministries, reviewing the annual report of the Child and Youth Advocate is part of that and given that all those reviews have taken place under this government and that each time the UCP has used their majority to refuse the advocate's calls to hear from relevant ministries on the work that they've done to address these recommendations, to the same minister. This is a pattern of dodging accountability. Are UCP committee members acting to protect the government because there are no answers, or is it because no work is being done by this government?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What I can tell you – and I've committed to this a number of times in this House – is that unlike the members opposite, part of the reason why members on our side of the House called for an all-party panel on child intervention was because there was absolutely no transparency and no accountability under their government. That is not the case. In

fact, every time we receive recommendations from the office of the Child and Youth Advocate, we do look at those recommendations, we respond, and those responses are in fact posted publicly online. We can send the link if she needs it.

Ms Pancholi: Well, here's the minister's chance to prove she's committed to accountability. Given that when the Legislative Offices Committee met in January to review the Child and Youth Advocate's annual report, the Member for Calgary-Currie said that that committee wasn't the right forum for the government to answer questions about its work, if any, to protect children and youth in care and given that last week I wrote to the chair of the Standing Committee on Families and Communities asking her to call a meeting to hear from all ministries with outstanding recommendations from the Child and Youth Advocate, will the Minister of Children's Services commit today to supporting this call for public accountability to ensure improved outcomes for children and youth in care?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the member opposite would know, I can't speak to what had gone on at committee, but what I can tell you is this: we are absolutely committed to looking at every single recommendation that comes to not only Children's Services, but I do know that my colleagues in other ministries, whether that be Justice, Health, Community and Social Services, mental health and addictions, take those recommendations seriously, and we will absolutely respond with changes, whether they be to legislation, to regulations, or to policy and practice, where they're needed.

Seniors' Benefit Program

Ms Sigurdson: Cost of living is increasing for all Albertans, and seniors are feeling the hit. Insurance has skyrocketed, and utility prices are out of control because of this UCP government. As inflation continues to increase, it's harder for seniors to afford their basic needs. As minister I was proud to index the seniors' benefit to the rate of inflation for the thousands of seniors who require it so that when the cost of living increases, so does their support. Will the Minister of Seniors and Housing commit to tying the seniors' benefit to increases in inflation so seniors are supported?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Seniors and Housing.

Ms Pon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, of course, we always protect seniors, and we provide a number of programs, services to seniors and make sure they stay healthy and connected in the community. It's just wonderful, your record. Every year the Minister of Health and myself and other ministries provide \$8.6 billion in service and support for investing in seniors. We will continue to look after our seniors.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that many seniors are desperately in need of affordable housing – in fact, over 45 per cent of seniors spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing – and given that as the cost of living continues to increase, seniors are worried if they'll be able to remain in their own homes, for seniors in need of affordable housing the seniors' benefit is crucial. Will the minister explain why she thought cutting the seniors' benefit was a good idea, and will she commit to reversing this cruel decision?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Seniors and Housing.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, in fact, we have been building up to 15,000 units so far in two and a half years, way more than the NDP built in the last four years. We will continue to build more affordable housing for seniors, for the most vulnerable, who need housing the most.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that seniors have been disrespected by this government as they were neglected throughout the pandemic, as their pensions have been attacked, and as those on the seniors' benefit are forced to make ends meet amid skyrocketing costs and no government support and given that if the seniors' benefit was reindexed to inflation, a couple would have \$350 more to help them – I know for many who have been reaching out to me, that would make a real difference in their lives – can the minister explain why the UCP is so committed to ensuring that seniors have less? Why is she forcing many to live in poverty?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Pon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, in Alberta most of our seniors are enjoying the highest benefits across Canada, and we have the lowest poverty for the seniors, so we will continue to do that. But I remind you that I don't understand that the NDP in the last four years hasn't done much for the seniors, and now they question this government. But I remind you to wait till you hear the budget for later on this year, and then you'll know how much we support our seniors in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Digital Economy Program and Rural Internet Service

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. COVID-19 has created numerous challenges for small businesses. As people become more reluctant to shop in person, the digital marketplace is increasingly important. Many small and medium-sized businesses do not have a business website, mainly because of the lack of technical expertise or high costs. In order to help these businesses overcome these hurdles, our government provided funding to ShopHERE, powered by Google. Can the Minister of JEI advise this House on the objectives of this program and its eligibility criteria?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to that member for the question. Small businesses during the pandemic were disrupted, and more and more activity was happening online, so we want to help small businesses across Alberta digitize and get on there so they can access their customers through the web. So we have partnered with ShopHERE, powered by Google, as well as a digital service squad to have those free services to Alberta-based businesses with 50 or fewer employees to help them get online and serve their customers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that it's become increasingly important for small and medium-sized businesses to take advantage of digital marketplaces to get their goods in front of customers and given that this program is an important tool to help business owners set up and manage their online store, can the Minister of JEI update this House on how many small and medium-sized businesses have applied for this funding and what the application deadline is?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again to that member for the question. Over 1,000 small businesses from across Alberta have taken advantage of this program to get online or improve their online presence. Applications remain open. Go to Digital Main Street. Just google Digital Main Street. You'll be able to get there in order to access those programs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the importance of a larger digital presence for small businesses for their growth and recovery and given that many small businesses in rural communities, like those in my constituency, do not have reliable connectivity and given that that digital divide can make it difficult for small-business owners to access services of the digital economy program, to the Minister of Service Alberta: can you please tell us what the government is doing to eliminate the digital divide so that small-business owners in rural Alberta can take full advantage of these programs?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta.

Mr. Glubish: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and it's a great question. You know, there are so many reasons why access to reliable connectivity, reliable high-speed Internet, is so important to help Albertans and Alberta businesses reach their fullest potential. That is why I am so excited that our government was able to announce last summer a \$150 million commitment to building high-speed connectivity infrastructure in rural Alberta. Furthermore, I was even more excited to be able to announce that we had negotiated with the federal government to convince them to match our \$150 million. That's \$300 million, and now we're working with the telcos to get that number even higher. We'll be announcing many projects in the very near future.

Coutts Border Crossing Blockade (continued)

Mr. Dach: I've heard many tragic stories from Alberta's trucking industry about companies impacted by the criminal blockade at Coutts. I've heard of truckers stranded for days with no access to food, water, or even washrooms. These truckers lost work, money, and in some cases entire shipments were spoiled and had to be thrown away, real impacts hitting working people hard. But the UCP has done nothing to compensate them for these hardships. Can the Minister of Transportation please tell this House what specifically she did to support these workers, or was she joining her caucus colleagues in cheerleading for those who held the border hostage?

2:30

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you to the member for that question. Mr. Speaker, I had heard those same stories as well. In fact, I have a number of truckers in my constituency. One of the things that we did was that we made sure that we had extended hours at other border entries across the border to ensure that alternate routes were available for truckers. There were a number of other measures that were undertaken, but ultimately clearing that blockade, that illegal blockade, was within the purview and realm of the RCMP.

Mr. Dach: Given that the blockade in Coutts lasted more than two weeks and cost the Alberta economy at least \$864 million and given that the MLA who in theory represents Coutts could care less about

the harm caused and given that he said that the illegal blockaders were, quote, inspiring nations, given that statement, will the minister rise in this House and tell him and others in the caucus that supported this illegal blockade that they were wrong? Will she then join me in calling for them to be removed from the government caucus?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I had gone on my social media and clearly articulated that the blockade was illegal, and I had called for law enforcement to do their very best to ensure that the border was cleared. In terms of what we did as government, we supported the RCMP and law enforcement to the best of our ability, but ultimately it was within their purview to take care of the situation.

Mr. Dach: Given that independent truckers were especially hard hit by this illegal and intolerable blockade and given that one company owner reported that he missed out on nearly two weeks of work because of the blockade and given that this same employer reported that the blockade was having a trickle-down effect on the pay of warehouse workers and delivery drivers – the inaction and lack of support from this government for the people who work to keep our supply chain open is shameful notwithstanding the comments of the minister – does the minister regret not standing up against her colleagues who supported the blockade? What will she do to make amends for this failure? Again, tell the Premier to kick these MLAs out of . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I have no regrets around the efforts that the government of Alberta undertook to help clear that blockade. Ultimately, it was within the realm of law enforcement to take care of it. I have been in touch with truckers who have been impacted, and we have had many conversations. Yes, the supply chain was disrupted, but we mitigated it by making sure that we had other border entries that were open with extended hours.

Rogers Communications

Member Ceci: In the last election the Premier promised his corporate tax cut would fill the office towers in downtown Calgary. A year later the Premier accelerated the tax cut and told companies that they would be irresponsible for not moving to Calgary. Since then the number of head offices went from 117 to 102. Now the downtown office vacancy rate sits at record-high levels, with a third of the office space sitting empty. Now another head office is about to leave as the Shaw-Rogers deal goes through the regulatory process. What is the government doing to ensure this deal won't hurt Calgary's downtown even further?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, it's a great question even if the hon. member is ill informed, who ought to know because it's been explained to him and others in this House numerous times. There are head offices moving to Calgary on a regular basis. The economy is being diversified at a rate higher than ever before in Alberta. Investment is at record levels. That's how you fill up the towers. That's how you get the head offices in here. Those folks raised the corporate taxes, collected less. We dropped them, and now businesses are coming back.

Member Ceci: The numbers are the numbers, Mr. Speaker.

Given that before the pandemic investment dropped, our economy shrank, 50,000 full-time jobs were lost, and companies packed up and left and given that Calgary already had the highest unemployment rate in the country among major cities and given

that Rogers has promised to maintain the jobs in Alberta but has gone through a transition at the top, what guarantees does the government have from Rogers that the promise to maintain jobs hasn't changed with the new leadership at the company?

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, it's time to give a little bit of a legacy tour again on the NDP. Their Energy minister literally told Albertans to go to B.C. to get a job. In 2021 a hundred thousand jobs were created in Alberta. Venture capital records: under the NDP just a nugget of \$100 million in venture capital; five times that in 2021 in Alberta. We're more diversified than ever, and we're going to come out of this pandemic stronger than ever. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Member Ceci: Given that Rogers initially promised to create a fund to connect rural, remote, and Indigenous communities to high-speed Internet and given that combining these two companies has led to concerns about decreased competition that would lead to higher cellphone and Internet bills at a time when Albertans are already struggling to make ends meet due to the rising costs under the UCP and, once again, given that Rogers has gone through a leadership change, what guarantees does the government have that the promises of increased access to broadband and affordability will be maintained? Please be specific.

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, Rogers is dedicated to establishing a western headquarters in the city of Calgary and, in addition to that, creating a 500-person engineering hub as well on top of that. We'll make sure we continue to work with them to make sure that that commitment is fulfilled. They're also promising to invest billions of dollars into the province of Alberta, creating thousands of jobs. We're going to make sure we hold them accountable to those commitments. On top of that, we're creating the best possible investment environment, period. Rogers wants to be here because of the talent that we have and the jobs that can be created.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Alberta Health Services

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The past two years have brought to light the need for accountability in health. The Department of Health and Alberta Health Services, a government-funded organization, have ultimately been the source of information from which Executive Council received recommendations on responding to COVID-19. Can the Minister of Health tell the House about the process for receiving information from AHS and Alberta's Department of Health which was used to determine the types of public health measures implemented here in the province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged governments world-wide. Alberta's government continues to rely on Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health to share information, as we have throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic, including data, trends, and information related to the pandemic's impact on the health care system. In addition, the AHS Scientific Advisory Group provides research and evidence-based advice to Alberta's government on a number of pandemic-related issues, concerns, and trends. This is in addition to the public updates by AHS leadership, Alberta's chief medical officer of health as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta Health Services' vaccine mandate led to rural Alberta losing access to health care to the point that our government had to intervene and given that those who returned to work didn't feel welcome as a result of their earlier vaccine mandates, that placed hundreds of nurses and doctors on unpaid leave, can the hon. Minister of Health tell Albertans why the United Conservative government felt the need to step in on this workplace vaccine mandate?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again to the hon. member for the question. I can tell this House that I heard directly from the hon. member and many others regarding the challenges created by the AHS workplace vaccine policy and the impact that it could have on providing health care services during the fifth wave, particularly in rural Alberta. That's why Alberta's government took steps to ensure that Alberta Health Services employees would have the option to submit a negative test every three days so that they could continue to work and provide services to Albertans during the fifth wave.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the minister. Given that our government had to put in restrictions to protect the health care capacity and given that these restrictions have led to negative impacts on Albertans' lives and livelihoods and given that AHS is responsible for ensuring that the system has sufficient capacity, to the Minister of Health: what is the government doing to ensure that we have capacity in the future and that there will be an assessment of AHS's response, including leadership, to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our health care system?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are continually reviewing AHS's programs and processes, and that will always be a part of our effort to improve the health care delivery system here in Alberta. The audit completed by Ernst & Young in 2019 informed that initiative, augmented by the lessons we have learned throughout the pandemic. As we have committed, we will review the whole-of-government approach to COVID-19, which includes AHS, and as affirmed in the Speech from the Throne and as we'll hear later in this budget, our government is committed to increasing our hospital capacity, lowering surgical wait times, and ensuring the continued care of Albertans no matter where they are in the province.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. There will be no break between now and when we move to Members' Statements as we will have a recess at 3 o'clock, where members can prepare themselves for the Budget Address.

2:40

Members' Statements

Calgary Downtown Revitalization

Member Ceci: Mr. Speaker, like more than 30 per cent of Albertans, I'm proud to call Calgary home. Calgary is a wonderful place to live, full of ambitious, forward-looking people, but there is no denying that our city has faced tough times in recent years. From the oil price crash to the pandemic, we have been hit by one crisis

after another. Calgarians know we need new ideas and bold leadership to come out of this time stronger. That's why I was shocked that in the entire throne speech, a speech in which a government outlines its core priorities, Calgary was mentioned just once.

Mr. Speaker, let's be honest. Calgary has never been this Premier's priority. He promised to fill Calgary's office towers, but the latest CBRE figures show the vacancy rate at 33.2 per cent, the highest ever recorded for a major Canadian city. When it was finally announced, after years of UCP obstruction, that the green line would go ahead, the Premier didn't even bother to show up to the announcement. The truth is that this Premier won't be looking an inch south of Red Deer until after his leadership review in April.

Well, I'm glad to say that the Alberta NDP caucus is picking up the slack. We have been undertaking consultations with Calgarians, elected officials, and industry experts, and we have formed a plan that will bring new energy into Calgary's downtown. Our plan includes the creation of an innovation district in downtown Calgary, encouraging collaboration among postsecondary students, entrepreneurs, start-ups, and business incubators, all located within blocks of each other. It includes establishing new postsecondary campuses and supporting the city of Calgary's downtown office conversion plan. We are proposing storefront revitalization grants, the reinstatement of Alberta's investor tax credit, and the creation of a new venture fund for Albertans to help them invest directly in early-stage companies, start-ups, and scale-ups. We will be releasing our plan in the coming weeks, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. I'd just remind members during Members' Statements to keep all of their private conversation as quiet as possible or discreetly move it to your respective lounges.

The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville has a statement to make.

Ukraine

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night I was humbled to participate in a round-table with the Premier and key representatives from Alberta's Ukrainian community. I'm a descendant of the first Ukrainian settlers to Canada, and I'm proud to be part of the 350,000 Albertans of Ukrainian descent. Ukrainians have made untold contributions to our province and to our country. Our beautiful culture stands in stark contrast to the horrific roads we've walked. The unbridled evil we are witnessing in eastern Europe is all too familiar to Ukrainian people.

My maternal grandfather, Mike Huley, left Ukraine in the early 20th century due to the famine inflicted by the evil Communist regime of Joseph Stalin. He came to Canada with his brother at the age of 17, never to return to his homeland again. There would be nothing to come home to as his father and brother were killed by the Russians and his mother and sisters were forced off the farm. Later in life a priest gave him a picture of an elderly woman begging on the street. It was his mother. He would send her money, only to have it seized. He sent her babushkas, which she sold on the streets to survive, and this is how she spent her final years.

Last night many Ukrainians lost their lives at the blood-soaked hands of Vladimir Putin, and this is just the beginning. Just as I did when I wrote the Prime Minister on January 21, I am again calling for the Canadian government and democratic governments across the world to impose the strongest sanctions possible on Vladimir Putin and his regime. History will not be kind to Vladimir Putin, and it will not be kind to those who fought against energy security for the free world. But there will be a time and a place for those conversations. Right now my thoughts are with the people of

Ukraine. A humanitarian crisis is unfolding, and democratic nations must stand together and unite to protect the innocent, peaceful, and beautiful Ukraine.

God bless Ukraine.

Economic Diversification

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to diversifying Alberta's economy as we work to create jobs, opportunity, and prosperity for all, and it's working. In 2021 it was a record-breaking year for Alberta's exports, and we saw significant investments in tech, film and television, energy, and record investments in venture capital.

Alberta is now home to more than 3,000 technology companies. To support this growing momentum and strengthen our workforce, we've introduced the accelerated immigration pathway for the tech sector. This initiative aims to attract highly skilled tech professionals and will help tech employers grow their businesses while bolstering the skills of the wider Alberta workforce.

We're also diversifying and growing through Alberta's booming film and television industry. In 2021 alone we had nearly \$1 billion in production costs. *The Last of Us*, which HBO shot right here in Alberta, was Canada's largest ever film production. With high-budget, high-profile projects putting Alberta on the map, we hope to attract even larger projects moving forward.

At the same time, this government is dedicated to investing in clean, renewable energies. We have developed strategies to capitalize on opportunities in hydrogen and essential and rare-earth minerals, which are critical to supporting a low-carbon economy. As a result, Alberta is already among global leaders in emissions-reducing technology. At our current pace we are set to fully transition from coal-powered electricity by the end of 2023, six years ahead of the federal target and despite the pandemic.

Furthermore, in 2020 we broke an all-time record for venture capital investments, closing \$455 million in deals. As of September 2021 we had surpassed that record by 5.5 per cent, and just this past month the Alberta Enterprise Corporation announced \$31 million to help Alberta technology and health innovation companies grow.

Mr. Speaker, against all odds Alberta's economy is growing and diversifying. I'm excited to see the new and diverse opportunities for my constituents from Calgary-South East and for all Albertans.

Thank you.

Government Policies and Cost of Living

Mr. Carson: This UCP government is hammering household budgets for Alberta families every single month. Thanks to the UCP, Albertans are paying more income tax, more property tax, more school fees, more tuition, more interest on student debt, more for camping, more for car insurance, and more for utilities. We can all see what's happening at the grocery store as well. The same basket of groceries is getting more and more expensive every month.

In a recent Angus Reid poll 47 per cent of respondents in Alberta said that it was difficult or very difficult to afford enough food for their family. Now, when in government, the NDP put a cap on auto insurance rate increases. The UCP, of course, removed that cap to pander to insurance lobbyists, and now Albertans are reaching out to me with bills that have spiked by 40 per cent or more when they are barely even driving their vehicles. We've heard from Albertans who've had to abandon their car they used to go to work because they can't afford the insurance.

The UCP dismantled the price protections that the NDP built into the electricity system, and now Alberta families are paying hundreds

of dollars more every month. Yesterday my colleagues showed what that means in real terms. A shopping cart stacked full of food and diapers: that's being taken away by these soaring costs. Young Albertans are being hit with massive hikes to postsecondary tuition and have had to pay higher interest on the debt they're piling up to pay them.

Seniors and vulnerable Albertans can afford less and less food every month because the UCP uncoupled their benefits from inflation, something they specifically promised they wouldn't do. Even the child and family benefit buys less and less every month, making it harder and harder to raise a family in Alberta.

Instead of fixing these mistakes, the UCP wants to press ahead with more expensive vanity projects that Albertans don't want and gamble away their pension savings. This UCP government, simply put, is incompetent, Mr. Speaker, and they are completely out of touch with the punishing monthly costs they are forcing on Alberta families.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Utility Costs

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently Albertans have seen significant increases in their utility bills, and some of my constituents have written to me asking: what can be done? A few repeat the opposition canard that the removal of the NDP price cap is entirely to blame. By using the Alberta consumer advocate comparison tool, I have demonstrated to several constituents that the cap removal is virtually an irrelevance. It is also important to recognize that all this price cap does is mask the true cost and move the burden from ratepayers to taxpayers, who are often the same people.

I also pointed out that while distracting consumers with their price cap, the NDP simultaneously gouged them with an unnecessary carbon tax. We made it our first order of business to remove this tax. I have spoken previously in the House regarding the incomprehensible ideology that believes a carbon tax will save the planet. These taxes disproportionately harm the poorest in society, a group the NDP claims to champion. The true cause of the price increases is threefold: increases in distribution and transmission charges due to infrastructure development and maintenance, a steep increase in the federal carbon tax, and global market conditions.

2:50

Not to mention that the NDP made matters worse by prematurely closing coal-fired power stations. They celebrated this phase-out without ever mentioning to Albertans that moving away from that reliable and affordable power source would inevitably mean that bills would increase. They didn't warn Albertans. They didn't have a plan to mitigate the negative effects of their policy. The closest thing that came to a plan was hiding behind a rate cap, which they also did not share the true cost of.

Mr. Speaker, among the many thankful announcements in the throne speech, I was delighted to see the government give notice to introduce a natural gas consumer protection program. While this is good news, it is incumbent upon this House to seek to remove carbon taxes on personal utility bills and find more sustainable ways to fund vital energy infrastructure.

Law Enforcement and Public Safety

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, I want to express my deepest condolences to the family and the community of Latjor Tuel. Last week Latjor

Tuel was shot in a confrontation with Calgary Police Service. His death is a reminder that the use of force must always be the last resort and is not a substitute for trauma-informed care and mental health support. Racialized communities deserve better care and compassion from institutions, including the police.

I stand before you today to advocate for those who see themselves, their family, and their communities reflected in Latjor. As elected officials it is our moral responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of the people we represent. As part of that responsibility, the NDP caucus consulted with hundreds of Albertans on the issue of public safety. The communities we have met want to take an approach to public safety that extends beyond policing. Participants told us that they want better and deeper consideration for how social determinants of health impact public safety, more wraparound services, and community-centred approaches to law enforcement.

That is why I am calling on this House, this Legislature, to take action to strengthen citizen oversight processes and bodies to address and investigate complaints against law enforcement; to ensure ongoing antiracism, cultural knowledge, sensitivity education, and trauma-informed training for law enforcement; creating cultural and diversity liaison positions to integrate better the needs of communities in policing; building and supporting trauma-informed mental health supports for vulnerable populations; and, lastly, I am calling for a special antiracism panel to be involved in a review of the Police Act that would specifically bring a report with recommendations on improving policing and the broader justice system.

As we navigate through the challenges of this modern world, I hope this Assembly can work together to make Alberta better for all.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon has a statement.

Ukraine

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As this House meets today, Ukraine is being attacked from the air, sea, and land, from the north, south, and the east by the Russian superpower in a blatant act of imperial aggression. The armed forces and the people in Ukraine are resisting the invader. It is clear to this MLA that it is time for this Legislature to place this issue before God. I would like to read the 23rd Psalm and ask the Legislature to use the remaining time of this member's statement in silent prayer for the people of Ukraine.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul, and He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil, and my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Mr. Stephan: Amen.

Red Deer Regional Hospital Expansion

Mr. Stephan: Mr. Speaker, the Red Deer regional hospital serves about 400,000 throughout central Alberta. In 2017, in response to negligence by AHS, NDP governments, citizens formed the Society for Hospital Expansion in Central Alberta, or SHECA. SHECA forced, through FOIP, AHS data showing that the central zone was ignored and neglected over the past decade, receiving only about one-tenth of health funding compared to the rest of the province. In

the result, residents of central Alberta were forced to Edmonton and Calgary for services that should have been available locally. Sometimes they died in the process of doing so such as from heart attacks.

Mr. Speaker, the NDP were aware of this unfairness, but what did the socialists do about it? They did nothing. They were too busy forcing an NDP drug site on Red Deer, but we should remember that throughout this unfairness one variable remained the same: AHS. AHS needs to be dismantled and built back better.

Nevertheless, yesterday marked a transformative day for the hospital and for central Alberta with a \$1.8 billion expansion. I am happy for community leaders like SHECA, who advocated for fairness based on merit and need. Thank you. But, most important, I am happy for families and individuals in central Alberta, who will be blessed by this monumental investment with better health services and outcomes as they live and work in our communities.

Speech from the Throne and Red Tape Reduction

Mr. Nielsen: This week we heard this government's throne speech, and for those Albertans watching, it's clear that the speech was more about saving this Premier's leadership than putting forward a vision for Albertans. The plan for our largest city: not present. A plan for agriculture: nowhere to be seen. A plan to make life more affordable for Albertans: not this government's priority, apparently.

Instead, Albertans heard the same thing they've been hearing since this government took office, including promises of more red tape reduction, which, sadly, is the closest thing this government has to an economic plan. Their trophy: a pair of golden scissors. But the pain experienced by Albertans: that's what really cuts deep. While the Premier spends \$10 million to \$12 million on this ministry, Albertans are left wondering: what exactly are they getting for this? Some of the, quote, red tape that the UCP cut includes a corporate handout that went towards creating jobs in Newfoundland, Wisconsin, and others but not in Alberta; firing the Election Commissioner, who was investigating the UCP leadership race; cancelling environmental monitoring during the pandemic; lifting the Loughheed policy designed to protect the eastern slopes from being torn down for coal mining; selling parks; trying to steal the pensions of teachers; raising income taxes; slashing supports for the most vulnerable; cutting education funding; and more.

As they've hinted at, I'm sure Albertans can expect to see the next great red tape initiative from this government to be a headlong drive to privatize our health care system.

After nearly three years of this UCP government, Albertans deserve a real plan, a plan not based on dated buzzwords and the Premier's failed priorities but one that reflects the priorities of Albertans and builds the future. Even though Albertans didn't get that in this plan in this throne speech – and many doubt that they will see that in today's budget – rest assured that in 2023 they will have a plan and a leader to build Alberta in the future.

The Speaker: Unfortunately, the daily Routine has not been extended, and now that it is 3 o'clock, it concludes the daily Routine.

We will take a 15-minute recess as the Minister of Finance, budget officials, media, and others prepare for the Budget Address. The House will reconvene at 3:15.

[The Assembly adjourned from 2:59 p.m. to 3:15 p.m.]

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

The Speaker: Members, prior to moving to the Budget Address, I'd just like to invite members of the Assembly. Immediately following adjournment, for those that would like to join the Speaker here around the dais, we will be taking a picture as members of the Assembly in support of the people of Ukraine. Completely optional. I know that many people have many responsibilities immediately following the address, but you would be welcome to join me. We will be prepared to do that immediately following the address.

Transmittal of Estimates

The Speaker: The hon. the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've received certain messages from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! All rise.

The Speaker: The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required by the offices of the Legislative Assembly for the service of the province of Alberta for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required by the government of Alberta for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023, and recommends the same to the Assembly.

Please be seated.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, I wish to table the 2022-23 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates and the 2022-23 government estimates. In addition, I also wish to table the 2022 to '25 government of Alberta strategic plan and the Budget 2022 ministry business plans.

Government Motions

(continued)

Budget Address

4. Mr. Toews moved:
Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, I now wish to table the government's 2022-25 fiscal plan and move Government Motion 4.

Mr. Speaker, it is truly an honour to rise in the Assembly today to present Budget 2022. This is the fourth budget I've presented on behalf of Albertans, and although each one was unique in context and at times extraordinary, the overarching themes in all have remained steadfastly unchanged. We remain relentless in our focus to position our province for not just economic recovery but long-term exceptional economic growth. We're unwavering in our support for health care, with record-high investment to support key system capacity, and we're committed to responsible and sustainable fiscal management, tethered by three key fiscal anchors.

I want to pause, Mr. Speaker, and begin to unpack these tenets. Why does any of this matter? Do we discuss fiscal anchors or economic growth and job creation to pat ourselves on the back or to tick a box in our list of goals? Is this just a procedural exercise and the shuffling of numbers on a ledger? The fact is that behind

every number I present and every principle I set forth is the life of an Albertan.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, behind every job created is dignity and independence for an Albertan. Behind every thriving small business is the opportunity to impact a family, a community, our province. Behind every dollar that we don't add to our deficit stand our grandchildren, free from carrying the burden of a debt they did not incur. It is the real-time, everyday impact in the life of Alberta families, both now and in the generations to come, that makes these numbers matter.

It is with this in mind that I begin with our fiscal progress. Our government was elected on a platform committed to responsible fiscal management. To that end, we established three fiscal anchors to inform policy and guide decision-making. The first anchor was getting our per capita spending in line with comparator provinces. In 2019, when we took office, as per the MacKinnon report we inherited a government that on a per capita basis spent \$10 billion more per year than similar provinces. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, the previous government's operating spending was increasing by 4 per cent per year. Had we stayed on this trajectory, many of the programs and services essential to Albertans would have simply become unsustainable and out of reach.

Over the last three years I'm pleased to announce that we have brought that 4 per cent annual operating spending increase down to less than half a per cent per year, and if we exclude health spending increases of nearly 2 per cent per year, our operating spending has essentially remained flat over the term. Winston Churchill once stated, "In finance everything that is agreeable is unsound and everything that is sound is disagreeable." Mr. Speaker, yes, we've made some difficult but, I believe, necessary choices, and by doing so, we've kept our promise to be accountable to Albertans. The commitment to ensure that we receive the best possible value for our tax dollars has been honoured.

In Budget 2022 I'm pleased to report that we have arrived. As a province we have done the heavy lifting. Our costs to deliver government services are now within the range of those comparator provinces. We're no longer an expensive outlier, and that is tremendous news for our province and the sustainability of the programs and services we provide to all Albertans.

The government also established an anchor committing to keep Alberta's net debt-to-GDP ratio below 30 per cent. Abiding by this principle preserves our net financial position; in other words, ensures a strong balance sheet. Our projections for the net debt-to-GDP ratio have continually improved over this last year. In Budget 2021 the ratio was estimated to be 24.5 per cent but with an improving fiscal picture is now forecast to be 18.3 per cent at the end of this fiscal year. Alberta has one of the lowest net debt-to-GDP ratios in the nation, and a responsible fiscal management will maintain that strong position. With increased economic and fiscal capacity and by maintaining discipline in our spending decisions, our fiscal future as a province is vastly improved, the positive effect of which is significant and tangible for Albertans today and is of exponential value for the Alberta of tomorrow.

It is no exaggeration, Mr. Speaker, to say that our government has been unrelenting in its focus on investment attraction, economic growth, diversification, and job creation. Our broad-based economic recovery plan creates sustainable economic diversification. When I say broad-based, I mean fostering a competitive, predictable business environment where market signals and the essential tension between sector competitiveness is maintained and where capital deployment decisions are not distorted.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture in our history we have the benefit of observing two recent very distinct economic approaches taken

when dealing with an economic shock or downturn. The previous government took the approach of increased spending, increased taxes, and increased regulation. In spite of fiscal challenges they increased government spending well in excess of population growth and inflation. They increased personal taxes, corporate taxes, and introduced a carbon tax, making life more expensive for all Albertans. What followed was an exodus of investment, economic decline, massive job loss, and perpetual deficits.

Mr. Speaker, when faced with an historic economic challenge, our government took the opposite approach. We doubled down on investment attraction, economic growth, and job creation. We relentlessly pursued red tape reduction and regulatory modernization, and we significantly reduced our business tax rate. While we ensured Health had all the resources needed to battle the pandemic and we increased capital spending in a targeted, countercyclical manner, we continued to be disciplined in operational spending, ensuring we were not building in permanent entitlements.

In less than a decade we have two case studies on how to respond to an economic crisis, and the results speak for themselves. Investment is pouring into this province across regions and sectors, and more jobs have been created than lost in the downturn. Moreover, economic growth is creating expanded fiscal capacity, resulting in additional government revenues. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we will collect \$400 million more in annual corporate tax revenue at an 8 per cent rate than the previous government did at 12 per cent, which speaks to the incredible investment climate we've restored in the last three years. Disciplined operational spending is reducing our need to take on additional debt, and all of this is putting the province on a more sustainable fiscal trajectory.

I visited with business leaders, small-business owners, and entrepreneurs. There's an overwhelming agreement that a nimble, predictable, outcome-based regulatory environment is critical to business competitiveness, economic growth, and diversification. Mr. Speaker, it is for this reason, led by the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction, we have intentionally and persistently worked to modernize our regulatory environment from the first day we took office. While this work will be ongoing, I'm pleased to report on our progress. We have materially improved Alberta's regulatory environment, eliminating more than 20 per cent of the government's requirements and saving Albertans, business, and government more than \$1.2 billion. Many initiatives directly address recommendations from industry and the public, and we've seen our efforts pay off.

In 2021 Canfor moved substantial capacity from B.C. to Alberta by purchasing three Alberta mills while shutting down four in B.C., explicitly stating that their decision was due to our province's business-friendly regulatory environment.

Another key part of our recovery plan was a strategic and countercyclical approach to infrastructure investment, as reflected in our capital plan. Our focus included projects that would improve our competitiveness and productivity, projects that would position the province for job-creating investment attraction. This includes a \$390 million investment in rural broadband, leveraging an additional \$600 million of federal and industry funds, ensuring all Albertans have essential digital connectivity.

Mr. Speaker, these carefully constructed government policies are working. There's a great deal of global capital finding a safe home in Alberta because we've created, by a wide margin, the best environment for investment in the nation. In fact, the Conference Board of Canada, Desjardins, and TD all have Alberta leading the nation in economic growth in 2022. Last year Alberta broke its venture capital record for the third year in a row. Billions of dollars of private investment are pouring into our province in the agriculture and agrifood industry, the petrochemical and hydrogen

economy, as well as the technology and aviation sectors, to name a few.

Amazon Web Services has announced a \$4.3 billion investment in Alberta with the creation of a new computing hub near Calgary. Infosys and Mphasis are adding thousands of tech jobs in this province. RBC is creating a tech hub in Calgary with 300 seats. EY chose Calgary for its Canadian Finance Centre of Excellence, creating 200 positions. We had a record year in film and television. Lynx Air, Canada's newest low-cost airline, will join Flair and WestJet as Alberta-based airlines. Dow Chemical has announced the world's first net zero ethylene cracker to be built in Edmonton's Industrial Heartland. There have been five hydrogen project announcements, including Northern Petrochemical's \$2.5 billion project in the MD of Greenview. Bunge is working to build a \$650 million canola-crushing plant near Lamont, and Fortune Minerals is investing \$200 million for a refinery near Edmonton, citing the province's corporate tax rate as a key reason for choosing Alberta.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, I could go on and on. It would take literally hours for me to list all of the new business investments and expansions that are under way or have been announced in this province.

Meanwhile in January, while Canada lost 200,000 jobs, Alberta's economy gained over 7,000. This is in addition to the more than 130,000 jobs gained in 2021. In fact, we've not only fully recovered all the jobs lost since the pandemic, but we've added an additional 33,000 jobs as of January, and in 2022 employment is expected to grow by a further 4 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, we're seeing broad-based investment and economic diversification at rates I may not have seen in my lifetime. Over the next few years this increased investment will create job and career opportunities in a host of occupations and professions. This matters for every Albertan who is unemployed or underemployed, and this matters to the next generation, offering them greater freedom as they pursue their career aspirations.

Now, Mr. Speaker, as we work to increase diversity in our economy, I also want to celebrate the strengths of our foundational sectors, and key among them is our energy industry. For our government the energy industry is not about binary choice. It is not either/or. It is not either energy or diversification. It is both. It is not either the protection of the environment or the development of natural resources. It is both. Alberta is a global leader in emerging energy and emissions reduction technologies. This is evidenced by our ongoing investment in carbon capture and storage and a \$40 million investment in a clean hydrogen centre of excellence.

But even as we lead in energy transition, global oil demand is expected to exceed prepandemic levels in 2022, and many expect it will continue to increase for the next several decades. Alberta is the ethical choice to satisfy that demand. We are a world leader in sustainable and responsible resource development, with the highest ESG performance among oil-producing countries world-wide.

Mr. Speaker, a lack of pipeline capacity has limited our energy industry, at times resulting in crippling Alberta price discounts. However, I'm pleased today to say that there's significant progress on that front. The Enbridge line 3 replacement was completed in 2021, adding 380,000 barrels per day of increased capacity. In spite of the fires and floods in B.C., the Trans Mountain and Coastal GasLink pipelines continue in their progress. Within the province the NOVA Gas Transmission line, the Pembina Peace pipeline expansion, and the Keyera liquids line are all moving forward. When completed, these projects will eliminate the bottleneck of Alberta energy and provide essential additional capacity to export markets. The much-improved, very narrow discount currently applied to Alberta heavy oil reflects the increased pipeline capacity

already achieved. All of this is very good news for the future of the Alberta energy industry.

Now, while some are operating under the belief that hasty divestment of oil-producing assets is a positive move, they're mistaken. Premature divestment is contributing to a global energy crisis that will have very real consequences environmentally and for the most vulnerable globally. Given the increased demand for oil and the geopolitical events we see unfolding in Europe today, we have an opportunity and, Mr. Speaker, indeed a responsibility to maximize production from Alberta. The most principled, productive, and innovative energy investments are right here in our own backyard, and we remain committed to support initiatives that ensure the ethical supply and export of Alberta energy for decades to come.

Mr. Speaker, increasing energy prices and commodity prices generally, combined with excessive federal stimulus and supply chain disruptions, have resulted in inflation rates not seen in decades. This is pushing up costs for Albertans, and it's elevated concerns over the costs of utilities. To alleviate the fear of spiralling utility costs and to allow Albertans to benefit from an owned resource, Budget 2022 implements a consumer price protection mechanism similar to the measure Ralph Klein put in place in 2003. If natural gas prices exceed \$6.50 a gigajoule, a consumer price measure will be triggered. This means that Albertans needn't fear a run-up in natural gas prices of the variety currently experienced in Europe and Asia.

While Alberta is not immune from the effects of inflation, we offer a more affordable province to live than virtually any other Canadian jurisdiction. Albertans earn more than Canadians in any other province, and this is true in both the energy and nonenergy sectors. Albertans have some of the lowest home prices and rents among Canadian urban centres. In fact, Albertans are able to purchase at least two homes for every one home purchased in Toronto or Vancouver. Our gasoline and diesel prices are the lowest in Canada, owing in part to low fuel tax rates and no provincial sales tax.

Advantageous tax rates are not just for corporations. Albertans continue to pay less in overall taxes than any other province, with low personal income tax and no provincial sales tax, payroll tax, or health care premiums. We also have the highest basic personal exemption amount among provinces, allowing individuals to earn more before they have to pay any provincial income tax. In fact, Mr. Speaker, 40 per cent of Albertans do not pay any provincial income tax at all. That, combined with our status as the highest earners, means that the after-tax incomes of Albertans are the highest in Canada. Canadians are taking notice and voting with their feet. In the third quarter of 2021 Alberta led all provinces in interprovincial in-migration, attracted to abundant opportunities and a lower cost of living. During times of inflation the most beneficial and durable government response is to spend less, borrow less, and tax less.

Mr. Speaker, as our economy grows and jobs are created, there's a new challenge on the horizon. In fact, in many ways the challenge is already upon us. It is a labour and skills shortage. It is difficult to understand that in an economy with an unemployment rate of over 7 per cent we could experience a labour shortage, but this is indeed the situation we find ourselves in, and our government is working hard to address this complex and unique challenge.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's workforce is facing a unique pressure on a number of fronts. The unprecedented challenges presented by COVID-19, a global recession, and energy price collapse overlaying a job market still struggling from the 2016 investment exodus resulted in extraordinary job loss. The very real challenges of getting back to work after being out of the market for a sustained period of time are legitimately overwhelming for some.

I want to tell you the story of Larry. Larry has been a pipefitter for over 30 years. He has always enjoyed working, being able to provide for himself and his family, connecting with colleagues, the rhythm of 10 days on and five off. In early 2020 he, along with many others, lost his job due to the economic downturn. He accessed the financial supports available to him, but he was only surviving, not thriving. Family and friends expressed concern over his social isolation and declining mental health. He considered retraining in a different field – he just wanted to get back to work – but he felt quite paralyzed as he thought about learning something new. Was he even capable of retraining? Who would hire him at his age?

I think Larry's story resonates with many people right across our province. Mr. Speaker, our core needs, to be independent, competent, productive, and socially connected, are often met through our work. Extensive research has shown that periods of unemployment can have detrimental impacts on both personal health and socioeconomic outcomes as well as broader family and community impacts.

3:40

Beyond personal well-being, Albertans contribute to the well-being of this province with every paycheque. They help pay for health care and education. They pay for the many programs that exist in Alberta to help the most vulnerable. They contribute to salaries, pensions, and benefits for our public-sector workers, and they give generously to a wide array of community and not-for-profit organizations. So, Mr. Speaker, our focus now must be to ensure that every Albertan has the opportunity to secure adequate and meaningful employment.

For those Albertans who need a hand up in order to get onto that path, this budget provides new and additional funding with the goal of eliminating barriers to work. For those who want to upgrade their skills and improve on their current work situation, we're designing a new program of bursaries for low-income workers. For those re-entering the job market but unable to meet all the job qualifications, we're providing targeted supports, from work equipment to training to microcredentialing.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize the need to create pathways to success for all Albertans regardless of where they are on their career path. Budget 2022 provides over \$600 million in incremental funding over three years to help create those pathways. We've developed the Alberta 2030 initiative, a 10-year strategy to develop a highly skilled and competitive workforce within an already world-class postsecondary system, one that enhances connections between programs and the needs of employers, is highly responsive to labour market needs, and contributes to an innovative and prosperous Alberta.

I'm pleased to announce that we're providing \$170 million over the fiscal plan to expand enrolment in areas with skills shortages. Approximately 7,000 seats will be created in areas such as high technology, finance, agriculture sciences, health, and aviation. We're also making a generational investment at the University of Calgary to expand the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. This \$59 million investment will address a critical emerging shortage of large-animal veterinarians in rural Alberta. Budget 2022 designates \$30 million for enhancing apprenticeship programs and programs that enable students to acquire skills linked to emerging technology sectors.

This budget also reflects Alberta's agreement with the federal government to support the expansion of the accessible child care that gives families the choice they need.

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it significant challenges for all Albertans in every aspect of daily life,

and nowhere has this been more evident than in health care. Throughout the pandemic and out of necessity Health responded to the fluctuating need for ICU spaces. I would like to thank my colleague the Minister of Health and his predecessor for pushing AHS to find capacity to deal with the pandemic pressures. I would also like to thank the nurses and doctors and front-line health care workers who sacrificially served Albertans over this last year. Your contribution did not go unnoticed, and on behalf of all Albertans: thank you.

The past two years have exposed a systemic lack of margin within our health care system, and while this has at times put considerable strain on our hospitals and front-line workers, it has been exceptionally instructive and brought into sharp focus the areas of deficit, specifically surgical, ICU, and critical care capacity. By identifying and addressing these challenges, we will substantially improve our ability to not only cope with future health care crises but to more effectively address the ongoing basic health needs of all Albertans. Mr. Speaker, the budget I'm presenting today includes a record-high health care investment in response to these identified urgent needs. Budget 2022 will support the implementation of findings from a review of health system capacity, with the goal of creating the ability to better deal with COVID and future inevitable health care challenges.

In January of this year the United Nurses of Alberta membership voted 87 per cent in favour of a new collective agreement that, in the words of UNA President Heather Smith, "will benefit our members and [is] . . . fair to the people of Alberta." This agreement ensures that our nurses remain the highest paid in Canada while reflecting Alberta's fiscal reality. It acknowledges the remarkable contributions of our nurses during the pandemic, and again I want to personally extend my appreciation for their sacrificial service over these past two years.

Along with providing stability to our health care system, this agreement also addresses rural health care challenges. We're allocating \$5 million per year for nursing recruitment and retention strategies in rural and remote areas of the province and another \$2.5 million a year for relocation assistance. AHS continues to pursue international and domestic physician recruitment opportunities, and Alberta continues to be among the highest in overall physician compensation in Canada. Alberta's government is spending \$90 million this year to address rural physician recruitment and retention. The rural education supplement and integrated doctor experience, or RESIDE, provides benefits to new family physicians to practise in rural Alberta communities of need.

Budget 2022 includes \$64 million for EMS to address capacity needs and other pressures within the system and \$20 million over four years to improve access to palliative care and caregiver support for Albertans and their families. Mr. Speaker, the government spends approximately \$1 billion annually on mental health and addictions, and Budget 2022 invests an additional \$20 million to further implement a recovery-oriented system of care that builds on the strengths and resilience of individuals, families, and communities.

A number of significant capital investments in health care capacity are also included in this budget. We're accelerating our work to build a new hospital in Red Deer. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Minister of Education, the MLA for Red Deer-South, and their colleagues, who have been effective advocates for this new hospital. Budget 2022 also provides \$50 million to begin construction on the University of Alberta hospital brain centre neurosciences intensive care unit and \$133 million for the Alberta surgical initiative, expanding surgical capacity right across the province.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's ongoing economic and fiscal contributions to Canada play a vital role in driving and sustaining the national economy as well as in funding the federal programs upon which all Canadians rely. While Alberta's economy is showing real signs of life, the Canadian economy continues to struggle with tepid productivity growth and competitiveness challenges. This is reflected in ongoing weakness in business investment, which remains well below 2014 levels.

When the federal government posted their fiscal update, late last year, it was my hope that Canadians had taken a close look at the fundamentals driving the good news in their revenue forecast. It was us; it was Alberta. When the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board posts their annual results, it is always my hope that Canadians take a close look at the fundamentals that have driven its growth. It will be us; it will be Alberta. As Alberta once again leads the nation in economic growth, I hope all Canadians will be watching to see how our shared standard of living is maintained. It will be us; it will be Alberta. Mr. Speaker, simply put, Canada needs a strong Alberta.

Now, while I've already addressed two of our fiscal anchors, there is a third. We committed to Albertans that as we got through the pandemic and global economic crises and when we had additional economic clarity, we would provide a timeline and path to a balanced budget.

Now, Mr. Speaker, standing here one year ago, presenting Budget 2021 as we were just beginning to recover from the depths of the pandemic-driven economic and energy price crisis, the prospects of a balanced budget seemed so distant, so foreign to the fiscal reality of the day. So it is that context that makes what I am about to say so incredible. We've worked hard across ministries to make responsible fiscal decisions and have relentlessly positioned this province for exceptional economic growth and expanded fiscal capacity, and it gives me great pleasure today to present Budget 2022, a balanced budget. [some applause]

3:50

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Toews: While it is immensely gratifying to have fulfilled such a significant election promise during these extraordinary times, to check another box on our promise made, promise kept list, Budget 2022 is ultimately about making life better for every single Albertan.

No doubt, Mr. Speaker, there will be some who say that the rebound in energy prices is the only reason for the balanced budget I've tabled today. To respond, I would say two things. First, yes, it's true that we're seeing a significant increase in resource revenue projections, and without a doubt it is helping our bottom line. But we're seeing dynamic revenue growth across the entire budget, not just resources, and that is a direct result of this government's relentless pursuit of progrowth open-for-business policies.

Second, balancing the budget requires more than good fortune; it takes discipline and leadership. Mr. Speaker, the previous government increased spending by 4 per cent every year. Even factoring in the energy price projections in Budget 2022, we would be tabling a \$6 billion deficit this year if we had continued on the previous government's rate of spending. This government has made the difficult decisions, decisions that weren't always popular but decisions Albertans sent us to this House to make and decisions that have put us on a much stronger fiscal path for future generations.

Oh, Mr. Speaker, Larry the pipefitter, out of work for almost two years with declining mental health, rusty skills, and lost confidence: well, about four months ago, in his words, he got the call. With an improving economy and employers hiring again, Larry was called

back to work, back to the ability to provide for his family, back to community, and back to a hopeful future. He says that he's never been more excited to go out on a job. Budget 2022 is for Larry and every Albertan that needs a hand up. It is for the entrepreneurs that have a vision not only for their business but for their community. It is for future generations who may never know the choices we made today so that they have greater opportunities tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, it is ultimately Albertans who deserve the credit for this achievement. This belongs to the health care workers, the truckers, the oil field and grocery store workers, and every Albertan who went to work every day serving Albertans in spite of the pandemic. It belongs to the farmers and ranchers, the entrepreneurs, the thousands of Albertans with a vision to see opportunity in hardship. It's the moms and the dads, the pastors, the volunteers, and neighbours who cared for the least of these, bringing a bit of light into dark times.

Budget 2022 and the long-term economic trajectory of our province is not an intellectual or accounting exercise; it is a blueprint for strength, for prosperity, for hope to rise again in the province for years to come. Thank you.

The Speaker: The Deputy Opposition House Leader.

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

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Monday, March 7, 2022.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 3:56 p.m. to Monday, March 7, at 1:30 p.m.]

Bill Status Report for the 30th Legislature - 3rd Session (2022)

Activity to Thursday, February 24, 2022

The Bill sponsor's name is in brackets following the Bill title. If it is a money Bill, (\$) will appear between the title and the sponsor's name. Numbers following each Reading refer to Hansard pages where the text of debates is found; dates for each Reading are in brackets following the page numbers. Bills numbered 1 to 200 are Government Bills. Bills numbered 201 or higher are Private Members' Public Bills. Bills numbered with a "Pr" prefix are Private Bills.

* An asterisk beside a Bill number indicates an amendment was passed to that Bill; the Committee line shows the precise date of the amendment.

The date a Bill comes into force is indicated in square brackets after the date of Royal Assent. If a Bill comes into force "on proclamation," "with exceptions," or "on various dates," please contact Legislative Counsel, Alberta Justice, for details at 780.427.2217. The chapter number assigned to the Bill is entered immediately following the date the Bill comes into force. SA indicates Statutes of Alberta; this is followed by the year in which it is included in the statutes, and its chapter number. Please note, Private Bills are not assigned chapter number until the conclusion of the Fall Sittings.

Bill 1 — Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Recognition Act (\$) (Kenney)

First Reading — 4 (*Feb. 22, 2022 aft., passed*)

Table of Contents

Prayers	53
Statement by the Speaker	
Ukraine	53
Introduction of Visitors	53
Introduction of Guests	53
Ministerial Statements	
Ukraine	53, 54
Government Motions	
Russian Actions in Ukraine	54
Budget Address	65
Oral Question Period	
Ukraine	54
Private Health Care Services	55
Utility Costs	56
Coutts Border Crossing Blockade	56, 60
Red Deer Regional Hospital Expansion	57
Member for Edmonton-South West	57
Coal Policy Committee Report	58
Government Policies and Cost of Living	58
Children and Youth in Care	59
Seniors' Benefit Program	59
Digital Economy Program and Rural Internet Service	60
Rogers Communications	61
Alberta Health Services	61
Members' Statements	
Calgary Downtown Revitalization	62
Ukraine	62
Economic Diversification	63
Government Policies and Cost of Living	63
Utility Costs	63
Law Enforcement and Public Safety	63
Ukraine	64
Red Deer Regional Hospital Expansion	64
Speech from the Throne and Red Tape Reduction	64
Orders of the Day	65
Transmittal of Estimates	65

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