



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, May 13, 2024

Day 50

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
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United Conservative: 28

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, May 13, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our King and his 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. Amen.

Hon. members, it being the first sitting day of the week, we will now be led in the singing of our national anthem by Sebastienne Critchley. I encourage members to participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all of us command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

The Speaker: The Legislative Assembly is grateful to be situated on Treaty 6 territory. This land has been the traditional region of the Métis people of Alberta, the Inuit, and the ancestral territory of the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux, Iroquois, and Nakota Sioux people. The recognition of our history on this land is an act of reconciliation, and we honour those who walk with us. We further acknowledge that the province of Alberta also exists within treaties 4, 7, 8, and 10 territories and the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, today we had the pleasure of being led in the singing of *O Canada* by Sebastienne Critchley. She was born and raised in Ontario and has been singing for as long as she can remember but began public appearances at the age of eight. She has performed in Canada's Parliament as well as for numerous events hosted by both MPs and members of legislative assemblies. She moved to Alberta in 2014 and keeps herself busy as a federal public servant and a mother of three. I ask that you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly we have the immense pleasure and honour of having 128 students from Svend Hansen school in the beautiful community of Laurel in Edmonton-Ellerslie. I ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services has an introduction.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some dear friends of mine for many decades. First, Bill and Ruby Edwards from the crown of the Cowboy Trail, Sundre, Alberta, and with them, Adina McKinnon from Red Deer, Alberta. I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Yub Raj Paudyal, with his family, a Nepalese educator who has become a career professional in mental health therapy in Canada. During the pandemic he made significant contributions to his community and supporting those in need. He is an advocate for inclusion and equity and an active community volunteer. I ask that you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. member for St. Albert-Morinville, the minister of red tape reduction.

Mr. Nally: Close enough, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Chamber some friends and constituents of mine: Brad Huising, Ernie Craft, and Gary Berthier. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: I'll make sure I don't get it close at all next time.
The hon. the Minister of Immigration and Multiculturalism.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and pleasure for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this House my guest, Mr. Francis Aranha, a graduate of hospitality management with over 25 years' experience in the industry and a passionate volunteer. Mr. Aranha has been an integral part of Alberta's community fabric for over a decade, contributing tirelessly to various initiatives from supporting youth, seniors, and newcomers to Canada. I would like to invite Mr. Francis Aranha to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you two guests who always impress me with their engagement as concerned citizens and with their interest in legislative process. Could Sheila Phimester and Jeff Johnson please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Chamber?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly some of my constituents and representatives and friends of the Elder Advocates Society: Ruth, Mary, Nikola, Carrie, Irma, Charlene, Larry, Jim, and Ed. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has a statement to make.

Child and Youth Mental Health Supports

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week our government made a historic announcement of a record-breaking investment in the mental health and well-being of Alberta's children and youth; \$148 million over the next two years will be

dedicated to supporting children with complex mental health needs in the classroom and in dedicated residential treatment facilities.

Mental illness can affect anyone no matter their age, and as a parent I wholeheartedly advocate for ensuring all children receive the support necessary for their well-being during their adolescent years. As each one of us knows, these years can be challenging, and unfortunately they have not gotten any easier. When a child struggles with their mental health, it's not just the child who suffers but the entire family. Parents worry and wonder: how can they help their children?

Our government wants every parent and child to know help is available and recovery is possible. We have partnered with CASA Mental Health to establish in-house mental health classrooms tailored for children dealing with complex mental health issues. Each classroom is equipped with a teacher, mental health therapist aide, and other professionals to provide comprehensive support. Prior to the last election, we promised Albertans that we would triple the number of these classrooms, and we're delivering on that commitment with 60 classrooms set to be established by September 2026. Also included is \$98 million to construct and operate three more live-in mental health treatment facilities for youth in Calgary, Fort McMurray, and southern Alberta.

With 60 classrooms and three new facilities over 2,000 children and youth will receive vital mental health services annually. These initiatives will not only transform the lives of countless families for years to come but also build a culture of recovery that will shape the future of our province. Our children are the future of Alberta, and I'm proud to support our government's investment in their mental health and well-being.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

1:40

Vaisakhi Nagar Kirtan

Member Boparai: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The annual Nagar Kirtan parade in Calgary was held this past Saturday to honour Khalsa Sajna Diwas, the establishment of the Khalsa Panth on the day of Vaisakhi in 1699 by the 10th Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The parade first occurred in Calgary in 1999, and this Saturday marked its 25th anniversary. The second-largest parade in Alberta brought together not only the Sikh community but people from all communities far and wide. Over 150,000 attendees gathered to share, learn, and reflect on the Sikh values of compassion, love, unity, social justice, equity, and service to the community. People connected over delicious foods, with 120 vendors distributing an estimated \$2 million of free food throughout the day.

I was honoured to be joined by so many of my colleagues from the Alberta NDP to celebrate and participate in this hugely momentous event. This incredible gathering would not be possible without the efforts of the Dashmesh Culture Centre management committee and the thousands of sevadaars, volunteers, who put in countless hours over the course of months and days to make Nagar Kirtan successful. On behalf of Alberta's Official Opposition I would like to congratulate the organizer, attendees for a phenomenal event that highlighted the best that Calgary and Alberta have to offer. [Remarks in Punjabi]

The Khalsa, Sikh community, belonging to Waheguru, God, and the victory belonging to Waheguru, God. [As submitted]

Highway Cleanup Campaign

Mr. van Dijken: Mr. Speaker, today I'm happy to commend the remarkable efforts of our community volunteers who participated

in the 48th annual highway cleanup campaign on May 4. This long-standing tradition, which saw volunteers donning orange safety vests and diligently collecting trash along provincial highways, reflects the collective commitment of Albertans to environmental stewardship and community service. Alberta's highways are more than just transportation corridors. They are the arteries that connect our communities and facilitate economic activity. However, with the usage of these roadways comes the need to ensure their cleanliness and upkeep, a need that the Alberta highway cleanup program fulfills.

This program brings together volunteers from all walks of life, community groups, schools, businesses, and others who roll up their sleeves and make a tangible difference in their local environments. Armed with garbage bags, gloves, and a shared commitment to environmental stewardship, these volunteers embark on cleanup efforts along designated stretches of highway, picking up litter, debris, and other unsightly waste. I am gladdened by the active involvement of various youth leadership and development clubs, including 4-H, junior forest wardens, Scouts, Girl Guides, schools, church organizations, Rotary, sports teams, and other nonprofit groups. Their participation not only contributes to the beautification of our highways but also instills a sense of responsibility and civic pride in our younger generations. Their commitment to community service exemplifies the spirit of co-operation that defines our province and sends a powerful message that Alberta is a place where people care deeply about our community.

I want to thank the volunteers who participated in this year's cleanup. As we celebrate the success of this year's highway cleanup, let us reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that Alberta's highways remain clean and safe for all. Together we can continue to make a positive impact in our communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Bill 20

Ms Pancholi: Mr. Speaker, with Bill 20 it appears the Premier would like Albertans to thank her big UCP cabinet for stepping in and saving Albertans from themselves. Just when Alberta's municipal leaders thought they could handle local issues like snow removal, playgrounds, speed limits, and parking metres, the UCP swooped in to save them from having to do their jobs. After all, can you imagine the chaos if the Grande Prairie city council decided what to name their public park without the necessary guidance of, say, the Member for Calgary-North?

Two weeks ago the Minister of Municipal Affairs was zealously preaching about transparency and accountability for local officials. Yet Bill 20, the because-I-said-so act, gives us a master class in what it means to centralize power behind closed cabinet doors and turn local governments into nothing more than puppet shows with the province firmly gripping the strings. Bill 20 is the UCP's latest attempt to show Albertans that no issue is too small for big government intervention. A pothole on main street: better get the Premier on the line. New community programs being offered at the local library in Camrose: better phone the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. Want to make a change to the waste collection schedule in Edmonton? Check in first with the Member for Peace River. The message is clear. Local decision-makers are just too local. Rural municipalities are especially thrilled. I mean, who better to decide how best to handle community rinks and range roads in Cardston county than someone who's office is right down the hall in the heart of Edmonton. Why bother with public health care or public education when the Premier can generously lend her time meddling in municipal politics? Good luck trying to get the

UCP cabinet to do their jobs, Alberta municipal leaders, because they'll be too busy doing yours.

It's time to kill the bill and scrap Bill 20.

Mental Health Awareness

Mr. Hunter: Mr. Speaker, courage has been defined as the ability to do something that frightens one and also as strength in the face of pain or grief. There have been many examples of courage throughout history. Those who served during past world wars showed courage as they fought tyranny and gave their lives so that we might enjoy our liberties and freedoms. Mothers and fathers who have been courageous when they struggle day in and day out to provide for their families and their children have been courageous.

Today I would like to talk about other aspects and acts of courage. I speak of the courage of those suffering from mental health issues. I know an incredible young woman who every day has to bravely fight the very real war going on inside her mind. When others don't seem to recognize the battle that it is for her just to get up out of bed, let alone go to work, she has to move forward courageously. When her boss doesn't understand the great anxiety that this young lady feels yet she still puts forward one foot in front of the other, she shows courage. When every thought going through her mind is telling her to put an end to her life but, using unknown reserves of strength, she says that she will still try to fight another day, that is courage. When she wants desperately to share how she is feeling but no one seems to understand, she is showing courage. When she uses song and poetry to try and help others feel what she is feeling, she is showing courage.

These are the unsung heroes that silently grapple with real pain and grief. If you are struggling, know that you are valued and know that there is help. You can reach out for help by calling 211 for immediate support and connection to local services. With all my heart I want those who are struggling with mental health to know that we see you, we care about you, and we love you, and we will do everything we can to help you get back to recovery.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a translation for statements made by the hon. Member for Calgary-North East has been provided to the table should you choose to avail yourself of that.

Surjit Patar

Member Brar: Mr. Speaker, the beloved son of the Punjabi language said his final goodbye to the world on May 11, 2024. Surjit Patar was born in the village Pattar, Punjab. He is known to be one of the best Punjabi poets of the 20th and 21st centuries. He wrote: [Remarks in Punjabi].

I don't walk on the way; wherever I walk becomes the way. [As submitted] When Punjab was going through the troubling times, he wrote: [Remarks in Punjabi].

Punjab has caught the evil eye. Someone do something to ward off the evil eye. [As submitted]

During the same period, when every day there was news of murders, fake encounters, and front pages were full of pictures of dead bodies of young Punjabis, he wrote: [Remarks in Punjabi].

Turbans soaked with blood and swords have arrived. Go pick them up from the door. The newspaper has arrived. [As submitted]

There are times when society goes through the tough times, where we as its citizens just cannot sit on the sidelines, and it becomes our duty to stand up with the oppressed. These are the times for the testaments of our consciousness and our love for one another. Many people think their voices do not matter, so they

choose to remain silent. For those people, he wrote: [Remarks in Punjabi].

If I say something, these dark times will not tolerate that, and if I remain silent, conscious, awakened minds will not forgive me. If my poetry dies today, so will I, and my friends will not be able to face the death of my consciousness. [As submitted]

Mr. Speaker, he identified himself with the people struggling in their daily lives and who continue to fight for a better world. He wrote: [Remarks in Punjabi].

I don't identify myself with the minority; I identify myself with the vast majority, that vast majority which is sad and unhappy, which is silent, which is thirsty in spite of countless water resources, which lives in darkness in spite of glowing light. [As submitted]

On May 11 the eyes of the entire Punjab were wet. Punjab won't be the same without Surjit Patar, but his writings will remain "Surjit," as his name, which means eternal. All I will say to the beloved son of Punjab is: [Remarks in Punjabi].

When we met, he was a smart human. Now he is gone, and he seems like God to me. [As submitted]

Goodbye, Patar, sir.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition has question 1.

Wildland Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, less than 50 per cent of the wildland firefighters who fought to save Alberta lives and property last year are coming back. They can make over 22 per cent more in B.C. and over 33 per cent more at Parks Canada. They'd also get greater benefits and a pension in either place and more job security in other provinces. To the Premier: will she properly support wildland firefighters to protect Albertans, yes or no? And if yes, why has she refused to make that happen so far?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the member opposite well knows, during wildfire-fighting season we do attract a lot of university students. They do it on a part-time basis, and then when they go back to school, they don't necessarily return the next year. Maybe they've graduated. Maybe they go on to the career that they're trained for. That's just part of the way that we do our wildfire fighting. We do have a permanent group of firefighters that stayed on all through the winter because there were a number of fires that carried over, and then we supplement them with the additional hiring practices that happened over the summer. My minister feels very confident that we have the resources that we need.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the fact is that the turnover has grown considerably, and the fact of the matter is also that the Premier is refusing the firefighters' call for better compensation. To make matters worse, she's still refusing to give them presumptive cancer coverage, pointing instead to her plan to give wildland firefighters' families more after they die. Not helpful. To the Premier. We are competing with the federal government, with Ontario, with B.C.; all of these jurisdictions compensate better and provide presumptive coverage. When will the Premier bring Alberta in line with other provinces?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has risen.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We currently have hired 92 per cent of our seasonal wildland firefighters. We expect to be fully staffed within the next number of days. I think the minister of jobs, economy has answered this question many, many times. He's in regular communication with his counterparts in other provinces, examining the information and examining the details and making a decision on whether or not we should be modifying the direction that we give to Workers' Compensation Board. He's also mentioned that any firefighter has the ability to go through the process right now with workers' comp, and we'll continue to look at the evidence elsewhere.

Ms Notley: Elsewhere there is presumptive coverage; here there is not. It's not that complicated, Mr. Speaker.

Meanwhile the minister has intentionally conflated bureaucratic and office staff with wildland firefighters on the ground. He's also conflated applications with actual staff who've been hired and trained. The minister's confused statements are hardly surprising given the level of turnover. To the Premier: when will the government stop refusing to give a clear, transparent, and unequivocal accounting of the number of wildland firefighters who have been hired and trained as of today?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our Minister of Forestry and Parks is doing an amazing job in managing and overseeing the wildfire fight this season. We're doing things differently than any other jurisdiction, using night-vision helicopters, using drones, doing 24-hour firefighting, doing fighting in the evenings. As a matter of fact, we're continuing to work on building in fireguards. We have the resources that we need. We're working in collaboration with some of the other local firefighting teams, other provinces. I would say that we're in good shape. We're certainly not out of the woods yet, but we're doing well over the next number . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition for her second set of questions.

Ms Notley: Different in that we're paying less, Mr. Speaker.

COVID-19 Vaccines

Ms Notley: Now, real doctors and scientists are concerned about the risk caused by an alarming drop in measles and whooping cough vaccinations, but instead of focusing on this public health issue, the UCP is platforming two Ontario doctors whose licences were suspended because their vaccine conspiracy theories were considered professional malpractice. To the Premier: will she rise today and condemn the comments of those two former physicians and reassure Albertans that our province is still a place where science matters?

Ms Smith: Absolutely, this is a place where science matters. You can see it in the uptake on the measles, mumps, and rubella shot. It has over 72 per cent of parents making that choice for their children. When it comes to the COVID vaccination, it's a far smaller number of parents choosing to make that choice for their children. I suspect what that means is that parents are talking with their doctors and they're making a decision based on what makes sense and what the level of risk is for their family. On this side we support the right of parents and doctors to make those decisions for their kids.

Ms Notley: The decisions are because someone over there is promoting misinformation.

It's the Premier's job to promote public health. Measles and whooping cough are deadly, and those vaccines save lives. The same goes for COVID. The government's own website shows not a single child or grown adult died of the COVID-19 vaccine, but the Premier is still giving a platform to science denial and fearmongering. So to the Premier: when will she stop supporting conspiracy theories her own government officials have declared to be untrue?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The COVID vaccine remains available for anyone from six months of age and older. As well, we recognize it is not mandatory for parents to make the decision to have these vaccinations for their kids. It's up to parents to talk with doctors and make the decision on what's best for their family, and we'll continue to do that. Any question that a parent may have about immunization: they should talk to their primary care provider or call 811, and they can get the information that they need.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, even her former advisers are speaking out against this fearmongering, and no wonder. You know, the Premier's political ambition and its relationship to certain extremists in her party is not worth putting the lives of Alberta children at risk. So again to the Premier: will she condemn the discredited comments by conspiracy theorists, by these two doctors, and support and share her own government's research and direct her party to stop promoting fake facts?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this side of the Chamber we look at international evidence and we make the best decisions based on that international evidence. The international evidence has shown that those who are most at risk are those over age 65, those with pre-existing conditions, and that's what the recommendation is. We recommend that those who have the greatest risk should be talking to their doctor, their family practitioner, about how they can be protected. We also support the right of any individual as well as families to make the decision that makes the most sense for themselves and for their children. I think that's going to be the approach that shows the most balance.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition for her third set of questions.

Gaza Protests at Universities

Ms Notley: Quote: I think it's a beautiful thing, and that would include what's going on at Coutts. End quote. That's the Premier's chief of staff celebrating gun-wielding protesters who threatened police for weeks while also blocking the border and costing the Alberta economy hundreds of millions of dollars. To the Premier: where was that defence of free speech when it came to the militarized response to a just hourslong peaceful protest by unarmed young people on our public university campuses?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been very clear that we have a Critical Infrastructure Defence Act that says that you cannot block critical infrastructure. Whether it's Extinction Rebellion laying down on the street of Walterdale Bridge or whether it's somebody blocking borders, I have said that I do not support either of those things. There is a way to peacefully protest, and you have to protest in compliance with the law. The universities have said no

trespassing and no camping overnight, and that was the reason why they made the decisions that they did. We are going to continue working with universities to make sure peaceful protest continues.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the U of A president made alarmist claims about the public safety risk posed by the students while citing what can only be described as a folk fest survival pack, and meanwhile the Premier cheered on the use of rubber bullets, batons, and tear gas to violently remove those same unarmed students.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Ms Notley: To the Premier: paired with her declared intention to undermine academic independence, how does she expect Albertans to see all of this as anything other than an attack on free speech that doesn't match her specific, individual opinions?

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 1:58.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I support the right of the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary to ensure a safe environment for all of their students. The University of Alberta confirmed that only 25 per cent of the protesters were students. We have watched as protests have gotten out of control at UCLA, at Columbia, where the universities were trashed and vandalized and Jewish students were made to feel unwelcome and fearful. These are the kind of things that they have to make sure that they are on guard for so that it doesn't get out of control.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the contrast of the militarized response on Alberta's two largest university campuses with this government's passive acceptance of a 43-day encampment on the side of the QE II by protesters with whom they agree is deeply troubling. The universities got it wrong, Mr. Speaker. So to the Premier: will she ensure the minister responsible uses the powers under section 99 of the Post-secondary Learning Act to launch a thorough investigation into the decision to violently remove young people and faculty this weekend from the campus? [interjections]

2:00

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My Minister of Advanced Education, Minister of Justice, and minister of public safety had an opportunity to meet with the universities, the students as well as the chiefs of police in Calgary and Edmonton. There were reports raised of potential injury, so my Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services has committed that he will ask ASIRT to do an investigation just to make sure that there wasn't any unreasonable use of force.

Health Care System Capacity

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, Alberta has a health care crisis with too few beds and not enough staff. This government cancelled the south Edmonton hospital, suggested Edmonton patients should go to Red Deer, even discharged patients to a Leduc motel. Now we learn our overcrowded hospitals are leaving seniors abandoned in the hallway. Eighty-one-year-old James Koshman recently spent 17 days in a hallway at the U of A hospital with the lights on 24/7 because there was no other room for him to receive care. Why does the Premier think it's acceptable to leave an 81-year-old senior in a hallway for 17 days?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health has risen.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, we are concerned any time a resident of Alberta, particularly a senior, feels they're not getting the care that they deserve and need. In fact, I have got Alberta Health Services looking into this particular situation, and I will be happy to report more as soon as I hear from Alberta Health Services. But, again, our priority is always to make sure that Albertans get the care that they need in a timely fashion and that they, in fact, bring forward concerns like this. So I welcome these concerns as they come forward.

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, James did not receive the care he needed. He spent 17 days in a hospital hallway. He needed a nurse to escort him into another patient's room just to use the washroom or have a shower. The lights never went off, he couldn't sleep, and his dementia worsened while he waited for further treatment. He was admitted but effectively abandoned. After 17 days and nights left in the hallway, James fell. The injury was so severe that his family worried he'd broken his hip. It took that kind of trauma for James to finally get a bed in a hospital room. Why is the UCP allowing this hallway health care to proliferate in our province?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, again, our priority is to make sure that Albertans get the health care they need in a timely fashion and that if they have concerns like this, they can bring them forward, we will investigate, and we will actually take action. We're doing all of those things. Alberta Health Services is investigating this situation. If more needs to be done, we will take that action.

But, Mr. Speaker, it's the reason why we're doing the refocusing. We need to improve our health care system. It's the reason why we have over \$4 billion of capital infrastructure dollars added this year.

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, James deserved so much better care. No one in Alberta should be abandoned in a hallway because this government has failed to address the overcrowding crisis in our hospitals. The family did all they could to advocate for James. They were repeatedly told there was no appropriate space for him. And after all of that, James fell in the hospital, and only then did he receive proper care. Is that what it takes under the UCP in Alberta, that you have to get injured in our hospitals in order to actually get a room? Why has the Premier let things deteriorate so badly that hallway health care or motel medicine have become the norm?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, that is just not true. We are doing everything we can to make sure that we expand capacity across this province, making sure that we have the facilities as well as the workforce that is required to look after Albertans, particularly when they enter into our acute-care facilities. We will continue to do that. This case is being investigated, and we will have more to say as soon as that investigation is complete. But our priority is always to make sure that every Albertan has the health care that they need as quickly as possible.

Bill 20

Member Kayande: Mr. Speaker, municipalities have the oldest form of democratic government in our society, predating even this House and our parliamentary system. Even here in Alberta municipal democracy predates our history as a province. It's a vital part of our lives and fundamental to the rule of law and the social contract that make up the very fabric of our society. What signal does it send to the people of Alberta that the government is eliminating the most venerable democratic institution in our country and increasing their own centralization of power?

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

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you. I'm glad the NDP has caught on to how important municipalities are. I would agree with that. They have been around for a long time, and I expect they will be around forever, Mr. Speaker, because they do a great job for Albertans. They look after parks, the roads within the municipality, some environmental issues there. There are so many things. We continue to support them. We have the LGFF funding in place, where their funding will grow or shrink with the provincial revenues. A true partnership, one of many partnerships that we'll continue to have.

Member Kayande: Given that there's the letter of the law but there's also a democratic culture that's alive and well here in Alberta and given that folks shouldn't forget that I'm standing here in this House because the Premier chose to undemocratically deny the people of Calgary-Elbow a voice for almost a year, leaving 48,000 Albertans unrepresented, given this clearly shows this government is comfortable with bending the rules while blatantly violating democratic principles – the people of Calgary-Elbow were clearly not big fans of this treatment – why does the Premier think the people of Alberta will accept the UCP's undemocratic actions this time?

Mr. McIver: I'll tell you who else has been around for a long time, longer than this province has, Mr. Speaker: farmers and ranchers. When those folks were in government, they took a long history of farmers and ranchers looking after themselves, looking after their family, looking after their animals and their crops and their kids, and they tried to turn it into a union operation where they actually said that they were going to create – they were going to create – a culture of safety. These people shouldn't be talking about disrespecting old institutions because they did their very best to dismantle Alberta for the whole four years they were in charge. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Member Kayande: Given it's clear that the UCP government decided they need to increase their own powers to do away with mayors, councillors, and reeves who are insufficiently loyal or who choose to advocate for their constituents and given, worryingly, the UCP is comfortable pursuing their own ideological agenda exclusively at the expense of ordinary Albertans and given that not only will this government allow corporate donations to sway voters, bringing big money back into politics, but they'll also deny people their choice if they vote the wrong way, how can this government justify yet another power grab that even their own supporters find disturbing?

Mr. McIver: Wow, Mr. Speaker. Just wow. The legislation those folks passed has led to: nobody knows who gave the money in many cases, where most of the money runs through PACs and third-party advertisers. That's what happened after the NDP made it that way. In fact, in the last election in Calgary \$1.6 million from two unions went to nine candidates for Calgary city council; almost \$400,000 went to one mayoral candidate for Calgary city council. They have led to this lack of transparency. We will correct it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Red Deer Polytechnic Expansion

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Friday was a very good day for Red Deer. Our government was in Red Deer announcing its

transformative CIM-TAC investment at Red Deer Polytechnic. This is very good. There weren't even any NDP frowny faces. Red Deer Polytechnic provides Albertans with great education opportunities to compete and excel in Alberta, this blessed land of freedom and prosperity. To the minister: how are we supporting high-quality education at Red Deer Polytechnic?

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you to the hon. member for that great question. Mr. Speaker, on Friday I was proud to announce that Alberta's government is investing \$12.9 million over three years to expand the centre for innovation in manufacturing technology, or CIM-TAC, at Red Deer Polytechnic. Expanding CIM-TAC means that by 2030 more than 450 students will take part in work-integrated learning. It will also support 2,000 students taking part in workshops and other hands-on learning opportunities. This means an even greater capacity for RDP students to gain experience with industry partners.

2:10

Mr. Stephan: Given that Alberta is the best, a growing economy presenting new opportunities and needs for working Albertans, and given that Alberta businesses need graduates with useful and practical skills and knowledge to grow their business and given the importance of aligning postsecondary investments to support Alberta as the very best place to start and grow a business in Canada, can the minister explain how investing in Red Deer Polytechnic supports Alberta businesses?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you for another excellent question. Mr. Speaker, our \$12.9 million investment in CIM-TAC is an investment in new opportunities for students and job creators. CIM-TAC will provide collaborative space for Red Deer Polytechnic and businesses to create innovative manufacturing solutions. In 2022 RDP attracted over \$2 million in applied research investment. By 2030 CIM-TAC aims to deliver \$25 million in applied research in addition to growing 800 Alberta-based companies and creating 1,000 advanced manufacturing jobs.

Mr. Stephan: Given that Alberta's government is investing in the expansion of apprenticeship programs across Alberta and given that Budget 2024 includes capital funding to support growth in high-demand programming at postsecondary institutions and given that the recent investment at Red Deer Polytechnic builds on its competitive advantages and this government's work to support opportunities for Alberta young adults, what is the Minister of Advanced Education's message to Alberta students?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, my message to students is that Alberta remains a land of opportunity. We're creating 3,200 additional apprenticeship seats across 11 postsecondary institutions, we're establishing historic partnerships with unions to train high-demand apprentices, and we're making targeted capital investments, like CIM-TAC at Red Deer Polytechnic, to grow capacity and programs that lead to jobs. Advanced Education and our partners across government are establishing pathways for students to succeed in the economy of tomorrow.

Renewable Energy Project Approvals

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Speaker, we've known all along that the renewables moratorium was a political decision, and FOIP documents finally confirmed that this ban was not requested by the AESO, like the Premier had claimed. Last week, however, a new

character entered the constantly shifting story, the AESO board chair. The Premier is now telling us that she had a chat with the board chair, who was appointed by the UCP. Will the Premier just confirm what we all know, that the ban on renewables has been her decision all along? Yes or no?

Mr. Neudorf: Mr. Speaker, we instituted the pause on renewables for one reason only, that we needed reliable and consistent electricity throughout our province. We heard from every stakeholder within the sector that we did not have it. The system that was built 25 years ago was not keeping pace with the change of electrical generation. We talked to our regulators. We talked to our board chairs. They did their job, and we did ours by setting forward a pathway to responsible, reliable, and affordable electricity generation that'll serve Albertans today and into the future.

Ms Al-Guneid: Given that the same board chair that the Premier had a chat with put pressure on the AESO CEO and told him to support the minister without reservation and that nothing good will happen if the minister feels that the system operator is not behind the decision, given that the Premier had a chat and the next thing we know is a renewables ban with zero consultation with experts and industry and cancellations of multibillion-dollar projects in Alberta, did the Premier unilaterally decide this ban with her senior adviser? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very happy that we worked with all of our regulators and our board chairs. The pause that was instituted upon the Alberta Utilities Commission was with their full support and request to make sure that we followed other jurisdictions to deal with the same challenges that we're facing here in Alberta: reliability, intermittency, transmission policy. Jurisdictions around the world, from California to Australia to Italy, have all been grappling with the same things. We have provided a plan and a path forward that has allowed for eight renewables projects to be approved this year alone. We are moving ahead in a balanced and orderly way for the responsible governance.

Ms Al-Guneid: Given that the Premier said that she understands, quote, there may have been some concern about the impact it would have on the investment climate, given that that was the system operator's expert opinion, which warned this would drive the industry into a tailspin, and given that Take Back Alberta delegates voted against renewables at the UCP AGM and given that we wouldn't have seen TransAlta's project cancellation if it wasn't for the UCP's political interference, would the Premier share how much municipal revenue the UCP is willing to sacrifice in rural Alberta to boost her standing in the upcoming leadership review?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week I tabled a report from the Alberta systems operator, the Reliability Requirements Roadmap. This was published in March 2023, showing the significant correlation between the increase in renewables and the increased number of incidents for real-time operational challenges. This is the problem that we're trying to fix. This is the recognition from everyone in the industry, that we have a system that is not meant for this number of renewables to come on at pace. We are fixing the problem that the NDP started. That's responsible governance.

Calgary LRT Green Line Funding

Mr. Dach: In 2019 the UCP fought for the ability to terminate its over \$1.5 billion contribution to the Calgary green line with only 90 days' notice and without cause. Then the government put the project through delays while infrastructure costs soared, and now, five years later – surprise; not surprised – the UCP is complaining about the cost and stating that it must meet the standard of a provincial master plan that does not yet even exist. To the minister: why is this government looking for new ways to strangle the Calgary green line?

Mr. Dreeshen: Mr. Speaker, we are committed to the green line. We're committed to the city of Calgary, and that's why we've actually made generational investments in the city of Calgary, \$330 million in infrastructure upgrades to the new Rivers District as well as \$43 million in the Blue Line that'll eventually take that LRT project to the airport. We are also working on the visionary passenger rail master plan, which will actually incorporate the city of Calgary's LRT with a passenger rail plan that will span the entire province. Good plans take good planning, and that's why we're committed to that work, and we're currently under way.

Mr. Dach: Given that the minister recently declared that the UCP's contribution to the green line was contingent on it, quote, fully integrating into the plan the government has not yet made, knowing full well that two-thirds of the green line design is supposed to be completed by the summer, and given that the UCP arrogantly referred to their 2019 threats of a 90-day notice and eliminating funding without cause as, quote, standard government terms and conditions, to the minister: how is this government ensuring that this major infrastructure project is being done responsibly when the UCP can't even tell developers what their specifications and guidelines are for their larger aspirations?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll reiterate what I just said. We are committed to the green line. We have \$1.5 billion that's going to be invested into the green line. We're working with the city of Calgary. The downtown core of Calgary is a pinch point of so many different rail projects, and that's why we want to work with the city of Calgary, with the Green Line Board to make sure that we can plan not just access to the airport but as well as a passenger rail plan across the entire province. We will continue to do that. But, yes, the green line, the future of the green line, and the downtown LRT need to be able to be co-ordinated with the passenger rail plan going forward, and that work will be concluded by next summer.

Mr. Dach: Now, given that the Calgary green line is essential to the growth of one of the world's great cities and that so much time and effort have already been invested into ensuring this happens for the people of Calgary and given that after years of planning and with ground now actually physically broken, we have a Premier saying things like, "You know what? I think the whole tunnel idea is a mistake" or "Who cares if our delays make costs go up? They won't get anything more from us," to the minister: why is this Premier holding massive infrastructure projects hostage to the whims of her government's impulsive agenda?

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:19.

Mr. Dreeshen: Mr. Speaker, we're not monkeying around on this side of the House. Let's talk about the green line delays and where it all started. It actually was Naheed Nenshi when he was leading

city hall in Calgary when the NDP was in government. There's an article from 2016. I'll read it to you: this funding brings us one step closer to beginning construction on the green line project; it's all about preparing the line so we can see construction progress. That was back in 2016. It didn't happen. This is just another example of the epic failure of leadership by Nenshi.

2:20

Red Tape Reduction

Mr. Long: Mr. Speaker, our government has made it easier for Alberta businesses and Albertans when they deal with government. We want to maintain and continue to grow this culture across government. Red tape reduction continues to save time and money for businesses and all Albertans. In fact, this year we received an A on our annual report card from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. As we continue this culture of red tape reduction, can the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction share: how does Bill 16 help improve our red tape reduction efforts?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have reduced red tape by 33 per cent. We've saved job creators \$2.75 billion. People are flooding to this province at unprecedented rates, and the investment is flowing. Well, Bill 16 just continues in that same tradition. It reduces over 200 unnecessary regulations, saves Albertans \$1.5 million. We were elected on a platform of fiscal restraint and efficiency; now we're just delivering on it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister for that answer. Given that cutting red tape can help more than just the economy and also impacts the lives of everyday Albertans and given that cutting red tape can also help vulnerable Albertans seeking suitable places to find shelter and further given that many individuals are living in a family violence shelter, can the same minister tell us how cutting red tape is helping individuals living in these shelters?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of red tape reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Red tape reduction isn't just about investment and jobs; it's about making life better for all Albertans. Now, in this case we are staying true to our core value of being compassionate conservatives. By eliminating separate rules for those in family violence shelters, we are enabling higher core benefits for families that reside in violence shelters. We said that we would take care of our most vulnerable, and that's what we're doing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again through you to the minister. Given that it seems government needs red tape reduction more and more every day, and that's why government recently introduced Bill 16, the Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, given that red tape reduction is such an important policy and it's a foundational policy for this government, further given that so many Albertans rely on the efficiency of government services, can the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction explain to this House why it's so important to pass this bill in this Assembly?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 16 is the eighth red tape reduction bill that we have worked on. It reduces 200 regulatory requirements and saves Albertans \$1.5 million, but it also makes life better for all Albertans. We are taking the principles of red tape reduction and we are enshrining them in regulation so that there will always be a culture of red tape reduction within government. Albertans asked for more efficiency in government, and we're just delivering on that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West is next.

Bill 20 (continued)

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the UCP rolled out their authoritarian Bill 20, it has faced remarkable backlash from Albertans of all political stripes and in all regions of the province. It's a bill that had zero consultation prior to being written and interferes with municipalities to further the political agenda of this UCP government. Why doesn't the minister do the right thing once and for all and shred this ridiculously misguided bill?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the person asking the question knows that's not true. He was here last week when I tabled two consultations that were done in 2023, one on the Local Authorities Election Act and one on the Municipal Government Act, so they know that's not true. We will continue to talk to municipalities and work with them as we bring Bill 20 into law, assuming this House passes that. It's good legislation. It will solve a lot of issues that the NDP caused and will deal with some things that have cropped up since we became government, and all those things need to happen.

Mr. Eggen: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the president of Alberta Municipalities called Bill 20 a power grab and asked for Bill 20 to be scrapped, given that the mayor of Edmonton has referred to it as an attack on local democracy and given that no one asked for Bill 20 and nobody wants it here in Alberta, how much louder do Albertans need to be for this UCP government to hear them and scrap this bill?

Mr. McIver: Well, I'm sure the folks across don't want Bill 20 because the legislation that they passed, that Bill 20 will fix, is the same legislation that provided \$1.6 million from the two unions to nine councillors in Calgary last year, the same legislation that provided \$400,000 through third-party advertisers to one mayor candidate last year. So some of what Bill 20 fixes, Mr. Speaker, are issues rooted in poor legislation, poor policy, and poor decisions by the NDP.

Mr. Eggen: Well, given that Bill 20 has been described as "deeply flawed... full of half-baked changes that do not withstand scrutiny" and given that the bill threatens our democracy and Alberta Municipalities has called for Bill 20 to be pulled because, in their words, they say that it is "blindly ploughing ahead regardless of what many Albertans think, want, and need," will this minister show an ounce of respect to our municipalities and Albertans in general and scrap this disastrous bill immediately?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the bill is blindly plowing ahead in reducing the taxes on affordable housing in municipalities in Alberta. That's the kind of blind plowing ahead this province needs and wants. It's also blindly plowing ahead in providing special ballots for any Albertan that wants them for the first time. So the

other folks across may not care whether disabled people, people with poor mobility, people that can't get to the polls get a chance to vote, but on this side of the House we want every eligible Albertan to vote. Bill 20 makes that possible. They can fight it all they want.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As always, it's a great time in Alberta as we continue to be the province holding this country together in GDP and job growth, all thanks to this government that brings hope, jobs, and futures for Albertans. With the TMX pipeline expansion officially opening and the first tanker shipping Alberta oil and gas leaving B.C. this coming month, given that Alberta will be involved in the operation of the pipeline and the exploration of energy filling the TMX, could the minister of energy provide us some insights on the jobs created during the TMX pipeline expansion?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy and Minerals.

Mr. Jean: Yes. It's true, Mr. Speaker; we're not monkeying around. The world is going bananas for our oil. We're creating 9,500 jobs in British Columbia, 22,000 in Alberta, 8,500 person-years of employment in the rest of Canada, contributing massively to Alberta and Canada's economy, helping hundreds and thousands of Indigenous Albertans, and despite the money management by the madness of the mother ship, we continue to deliver for Albertans. We do the job for Albertans because Alberta oil, Alberta energy is good for the world.

Mr. Dyck: Given that pipelines mean that more energy production is possible and given that when more energy is produced, it means more clean Alberta energy can be shipped across the world, which means more opportunities for jobs, success, careers, and great wages, and given that the opposition drove out jobs and the energy sector because they hate affordability and energy security for Albertans, can the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance explain how the TMX pipeline expansion will benefit Alberta's economy in the next decade? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. The Bank of Canada estimates that TMX will increase Canada's GDP by a quarter point just in the second quarter alone. A recent report from S&P Global says that we will now see oil production grow by 500,000 barrels a day. And with the new pipeline capacity we will be able to export it to the world and see a lower differential. That's not only going to be good for Albertans, good for our economy but good for Canada and the rest of the world.

Mr. Dyck: Given that the TMX pipeline expansion will allow our international trading partners to access our world-class Albertan energy in larger quantities than ever before and given that international demand for oil and gas is expected to rise over the next five years, which means better prices for energy providers and greater royalties for Alberta, which can help Albertans against the pork and beans affordability policies that the federal NDP alliance have forced upon us all, could the minister of energy please explain how the TMX expansion will bring Alberta front and centre in the global oil and gas market, supporting our economy?

Mr. Jean: Well, it's true, Mr. Speaker; this is a great step towards ending energy poverty throughout the world. More Alberta energy to the world means a better quality of life for all people. You wonder sometimes why the NDP-Singh alliance in Ottawa, the masters of the mother ship, continue to oppose great Alberta energy getting to the world. We will continue to fight that. We will continue to build Alberta energy and Alberta jobs because more Alberta jobs, more Alberta energy is not just great for Albertans, but it's fantastic for the world. [interjections]

2:30

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ethics Commissioner Appointment

Ms Gray: The UCP seem prepared to appoint Shawn McLeod as Ethics Commissioner. He's a former deputy minister who donated to the UCP and sought a UCP election nomination. At committee it seems only UCP members supported his appointment. Opposition members objected in their dissenting minority report, which all MLAs should read. This appointment breaks a 30-year tradition and appoints someone with strong ties to the governing party instead of a nonpartisan. Mr. McLeod's partisan history includes donations to right-wing political groups, including the UCP and even Maxime Bernier. To the minister: are you aware of the full extent of his past partisan activities, and do you understand . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, once again, the NDP know full well that Mr. McLeod was chosen through an exhaustive selection process, independent third-party verification processes, an all-party committee which debated the candidates and landed on one individual. Mr. McLeod is exemplary in his character. He has worked for the public service. He's worked for the private sector. He has decades of experience, and I have no doubt in my mind that he's going to do a wonderful job. It's a shame that the NDP is tarnishing his character before he even starts.

Ms Gray: Given that only the UCP majority supported him, given that the Ethics Commissioner can be called on to investigate the Premier and members of cabinet, given Shawn McLeod's history of political donations to the government and seeking a nomination to run for the UCP – the opposition and Albertans can have no confidence that ethics investigations will be conducted in good faith going forward – given that appointing a partisan ensures no reasonable Albertan will believe the Ethics Commissioner's findings going forward, to the minister: knowing about Mr. McLeod's past partisan activities and the ways in which that could cloud his judgment and decisions, will you do the right thing?

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, once again, Mr. McLeod is an eminently qualified candidate. He's got years of relevant experience. He is an experienced lawyer who knows how to interpret . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, this government has a history of supporting individuals, qualified people for the job regardless of what political stripe they wear. Bob Hawkesworth, Marg McCuaig-Boyd, Greg Clark, Stephen Mandel: all of these names come to mind as people that have had key roles in this government. It has nothing to do with politics. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Gray: Given that the Ethics Commissioner needs to be independent and trusted, given that all MLAs and their spouses need to submit finances to the Ethics Commissioner for review, given that this disclosure of deeply personal and private information is something that all MLAs should be able to do with confidence, trusting their information will be assessed fairly and impartially, won't be used for naked partisan gains, to the minister and all of caucus: the precedent you're setting is dangerous. Will you be prepared to share your financial information with, say, Ethics Commissioner Notley in 2028?

The Speaker: I think the use of a proper name inside the Assembly would be wildly inappropriate.

The hon. the minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact of the matter is that – I think I speak on behalf of all my colleagues – we would be prepared to share our details with any qualified individual who serves in this role. The fact of the matter is that the NDP has made a great deal about disparaging somebody's character without actually knowing who that individual is, but one thing is... [interjections]

An Hon. Member: That's your MO.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, one thing is painfully obvious here, and that is that unlike the NDP, who spent their time in government hiring people like Tzepeorah Berman...

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Mr. Amery: ... to important government roles, Mr. McLeod will serve Albertans with integrity, and I'm incredibly proud to welcome him to that role.

Thank you. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for St. Albert has a question.

Ombudsman's Reports on AISH and PDD Programs

Ms Renaud: Merci, M. le Président. For years Evan Zenari qualified for early intervention disability supports or FSCD, family support for children with disabilities, but when he turned 18, this government refused to further fund him, saying that a standardized assessment put him slightly over a flawed IQ requirement of 70. The persons with developmental disabilities legislation was never meant to deny people solely based on IQ. The courts clearly spelled this out 10 years ago. Why won't the UCP reconsider Evan's application as requested and recommended by the Ombudsman?

The Speaker: Prior to calling the minister, a point of order was noted at 2:34, immediately prior to the hon. Member for St. Albert's question.

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, we take disability services very serious in this province. It's why we invest almost 3 and a half billion dollars across all of our disability programs in Alberta, including PDD. We are confident in our PDD requirements, but I want to make clear that those who do not meet those requirements are also eligible for many other programs, including AISH and other disability programs. We're going to continue to operate those programs and fund them. We've increased the funding to all disability programs,

and further to that, it's in my mandate letter to work on bridging youth to adult programs to make sure it's seamless.

Ms Renaud: Given that in 2022 the Alberta Ombudsman clearly outlined barriers Albertans face when they use the appeal process for social benefits like AISH, given the appeal process is laced with barriers for disabled Albertans such as a lack of process to request an accommodation, lack of ASL support, lack of legal support and preparation, plain-language translation – I could go on and on. The assistive technology sucks, too. Will the minister please tell disabled Albertans why the UCP government is ignoring the Ombudsman recommendations from two reports?

Mr. Nixon: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, the Ombudsman is entitled to his opinion. We've looked at his report. The Ombudsman is not in charge of policy; the government is. We are confident in our policy. It's a policy that is used similarly across this country in many different provinces. Not only is IQ considered; there are others that are looked at. We're going to make sure that the integrity of the PDD program remains, that it is well funded. It's being funded this year to about \$1.2 billion. We're also going to invest in other programs, like AISH, which the person that she's referring to is part of right now.

Ms Renaud: Given that this UCP government does not seem to be willing to work with independent officers, like the Ombudsman, or advice-giving bodies, like the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, even the disability advocate, and we've repeatedly watched how this government makes decisions without consulting, given we've continued to hear that disability supports are being transformed but experts like independent officers and the broad community have not been included, who is driving these changes in the social service ministry? Is the UCP listening to contractors like Deloitte and not Albertans and not experts? Why?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, this year I had round-tables all across the province with parents of people that are disabled, with the disabled, the providers of PDD services all across the province, and not one of them brought up the issue that the hon. member is bringing up. The Ombudsman is entitled to his opinion. He's not in charge of policy. We disagree with his position. We are confident in our program. We are confident in our PDD program, and we are going to continue with the policies that we have in place, and we are going to continue to invest billions of dollars helping Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East has a question.

Economic Indicators

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta remains the economic engine of Canada, and we owe our stature to the business-friendly conditions we maintain across the province. The government of Alberta has committed to economic diversification by maintaining one of the world's lowest corporate tax rates and reducing red tape to attract new high-impact investments. To the Minister of Finance: has Alberta's increasing GDP kept pace with the province's budgetary requirements throughout the time?

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Both Scotiabank and BMO are predicting that Alberta will lead the country in economic growth this year, after leading the nation in the two years previous. We've seen our GDP continue to grow on a net-GDP and per capita basis.

Coinciding with that has been an increase in wages for Albertans, which remain the highest in Canada, and 89,100 more Albertans are employed in the first quarter of this year alone.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that we expect to see an increase in GDP growth from 2.5 per cent in 2023 to 2.9 per cent this year and considering that 18.4 per cent of Alberta's GDP comes from our mining, quarrying, and oil and gas sectors and given that a growing economy allows our government to continue providing these services and support that Albertans need, to the minister: what strategy does the government have in place to guarantee that Alberta's GDP growth remains consistent with our budget necessities in the coming years?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance has the call.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again for the question. Recent reporting in the *Globe and Mail* and analysis from the Business Council of Alberta show that our province is responsible for 90 per cent of the private-sector job growth in Canada over the last six months and the only province in Canada to create more private-sector jobs than public sector while being at the national average for the latter. That should be the goal of every government, and it's the only way to run a sustainable government.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given that Alberta remains an extremely competitive and attractive investment destination and given that there are growth opportunities across multiple industries and considering that this growth will help sustain jobs, schools, hospitals, and other needs of Albertans, to the same minister: what is the government's plan to further strengthen and grow smaller and emerging industries that currently contribute less than 5 per cent in GDP?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. The answer is simple: the same way we support the others. Our economy is diversified like never before, and Scotiabank recently said that we continue to diversify our business investment. We'll do that by keeping taxes low, cutting red tape, and working with our businesses and investors to ensure they know Alberta is the best place for them to invest and hire workers.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we'll continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide oral notice of Bill 22, Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, sponsored by the Minister of Health.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite five copies of an article in the *Edmonton Journal* from May 11, City Gets Housing Task Force, whereby the mayor of the city of Edmonton has created a task force to look for solutions to unlock the knowledge in the community about the housing deficiencies.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I have a tabling that says Bill Suggests Rest of Canada Have a Say on Pensions, which is an article about a bill presented in the House of Commons by Edmonton Strathcona MP Heather McPherson. Bill C-387, An Act to Amend the Canada Pension Plan, suggests that the Canada Pension Plan act require any province leaving the CPP to secure the approval of governments of two-thirds of the provinces, excluding Quebec.

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

Member Hoyle: Edmonton-South.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a petition with signatures from Albertans in skilled trades across the province calling for the government to support craft union training centres with the same funding as provincial polytechnic schools.

The Speaker: Apologies to the member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: I'd like to table five copies of an *Edmonton Journal* article entitled Alberta Premier 'Glad' Gaza Protest in Calgary Ended as Encampments Escalate, and I would urge all members to read it.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, that brings us to points of order. At 1:58 the hon. the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I rise to give this point of order, I would just say that the second point of order I'll withdraw at the moment, so only one remaining after this.

I rise on 23(h), (i), and (j). At the time noted, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition said in her question to the Premier that the Premier cheered on the use of rubber bullets, batons, and tear gas to violently remove those same unarmed students. To the Premier: paired with her declared intention to undermine academic independence . . .

That is also false, imputing false motives.

. . . how does she expect Albertans to see all of this as anything other than an attack on free speech . . .

Another point of order.

. . . that doesn't match her specific, individual opinions?

The issue I have mostly with these lines is: "the Premier cheered on the use of rubber bullets, batons, tear gas," et cetera. There is absolutely no evidence, Mr. Speaker, that the Premier cheered on violent removal from campus, and to suggest that they are unarmed students – according to police records the police did find axes, hammers, and screwdrivers as well as a box of needles.

I think it's a bit frustrating that this kind of language is being used in this Chamber to suggest the Premier would be cheering on these actions. This is certainly unparliamentary. I believe it would be a point of order, and I'll leave it in your hands.

The Speaker: The hon. the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is a matter of debate, and the Government House Leader is incorrect; there is evidence. The MLA for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood today

tabled an *Edmonton Journal* article titled Alberta Premier ‘Glad’ Gaza Protest in Calgary Ended as Encampments Escalate. That article goes on to say:

[The Premier] says she’s pleased the University of Calgary moved to have police dismantle an on-campus pro-Palestinian protest and hopes the University of Alberta will take note.

[The Premier’s] comment comes as the head of the University of Calgary said the dismantling of the encampment Thursday night derailed into a clash with police because of counter-protesters.

The Premier’s direct quote found inside this article, Mr. Speaker, is: “I’m glad that the University of Calgary made the decision that they did.” We can debate whether the Premier being “pleased” or “glad” versus “cheered on” is substantially different, but rather than engage in a grade 9 English writing debate, the point remains that the Premier has telegraphed that she’s absolutely fine with the excessive use of force that we saw at both university campuses. Alberta students being hit by batons might appease the Premier’s far-right base, but the other 4.7 million Albertans find it abhorrent and unnecessary. There was surely a better path to resolving these protests than a quick resort to state-sponsored violence. A better Premier would have demanded a better resolution. This is a matter of debate important in this Chamber.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there other submissions?

Seeing none, I do have the benefit of the Blues, and I am prepared to rule. Hon. members, the statements that the hon. Government House Leader has made with respect to the comments that were made by the Leader of the Official Opposition are accurate when she said, “Meanwhile the Premier cheered on the use of rubber bullets, batons, and tear gas to violently remove those same unarmed students,” and a point of order was called.

Hon. members, I do have some concern with respect to the hon. Opposition House Leader attributing something to the Premier that may or may not be true as it may imply that she had false or unavowed motives. Having said that – and I provided comments on a similar sort of point of order last week with respect to language that is perhaps unhelpful – I do think that on this occasion this is a matter of debate. As I said last week, though, that doesn’t provide full licence to the Leader of the Opposition or members of the opposition to imply what the Premier’s actions are or are not. This is not a point of order. It’s a matter of debate, and I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

The second point of order has been withdrawn, and I appreciate so.

At approximately 2:34 the hon. the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Schow: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I rise under 23(h), (i), and (j). At the time noted, the hon. Minister of Justice and keeper of the Great Seal was answering a question. It became very raucous when he said, based on the best recollection that I have, that disparaging someone’s character would be inappropriate. At the time, you stood up, Mr. Speaker, to bring the House to order, and at that time the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie said, “That’s your MO,” clearly suggesting the Minister of Justice would be someone who would like to disparage someone’s character. I think that’s inappropriate for this Chamber, and I believe that would be a point of order under 23(h), (i), and (j).

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Justice and keeper of the Great Seal essentially accused this side of the House of engaging in character assassination. That was the language that I heard, speaking of us as a collective. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie was, in return, in a heckle, speaking of the UCP in a collective, not as an individual member but as the government’s MO of engaging in character assassination. Now, I will not continue debate, which is against the practices of this place, but I can certainly think of many, many examples. In this case, it certainly was not intended as a personal insult in any way, shape, or form but, rather, speaking in the collective about the government and the UCP.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others?

Seeing none, I do have the benefit of the Blues, and I am prepared to rule. Hon. members, pursuant to *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, page 624, if the official record is not clear nor does the Speaker hear unparliamentary language, it is difficult for the Speaker to make such a declaration. In this case, I’m not entirely sure if it raises to the level of a point of order no matter the circumstances. I do not believe this is a point of order. I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

Hon. members, prior to calling Orders of the Day, it’s my great pleasure to bring to the attention of members of the Assembly the hon. the minister of fisheries and tourism from the great province of P.E.I. Mr. Cory Deagle has joined us in the Speaker’s gallery. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Hon. members, we are at Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 207

Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education (Valuing Skilled Workers) Amendment Act, 2024

[Debate adjourned May 6: Mr. Dyck speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie has 10 minutes remaining should he choose to use it, and I see him on his feet now.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the opportunity to come back . . .

The Speaker: Correction. The hon. member has four minutes remaining.

Mr. Dyck: Praise the Lord, Mr. Speaker. I was really having to talk slow on this one.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Well, Madam Speaker, as the representative of Grande Prairie I am very happy to talk about this Bill 207 and just the economic impact that this bill will have upon my region as we are heavily reliant upon skilled trades. Many residents in Grande Prairie rely upon, in their livelihoods, the opportunity to work in their skilled trade. There are many sectors at work. Energy has many sectors; agriculture has many sectors; forestry does as well.

When we’re looking at the employment opportunities in these sectors, this bill actually creates a big hindrance for my constituents to be able to get to work quickly and efficiently. Over the last two weeks I’ve met with some stakeholders, and their big concern as employers, Madam Speaker, is the amount of red tape that’s

currently in. They're talking about reducing red tape, not adding more red tape. They're creative in it. They want to train very well their apprentices. They want to train in incredible ways, creative ways, giving them the skills and also the jobs in order to make a great living and also have a great opportunity in the future.

To me, Madam Speaker, this bill, Bill 207, is about adding extra red tape. That's not what my constituents want. We have a great, rigorous academic higher ed here in Alberta, and we want to be able to make sure that we are continuing down the path of streamlining that for people as they pursue employment and their career advancement. So it is very, very important that we don't vote in favour of this.

As I said, my region is the hub for the area and plays a critical role in driving economic growth and innovation within the province. Many of my constituents have businesses that have started in Grande Prairie and have also bridged across the province, some interprovincial, some international, all utilizing the trades. For us to add extra red tape and requirements on top of what we already have – we have an excellent reputation across the world for the trades. Let's keep it and continue adding people there. Any legislation that impedes this progress that we have already on this side of the House really undermines our local economy and jeopardizes Alberta's overall prosperity.

Also in my area, we have the world's third-largest gas plays in the Montney and the Duvernay. This is really important, Madam Speaker, because as we continue to move forward in developing those, the energy is super important for our province. Our energy industry deeply desires to work with trades, build the trades, continue to see the trades expand, and they're looking forward to putting people to work and being able to build the opportunities and advancement for the future of those that work for these companies.

Madam Speaker, let's not put barriers in front of our employers and in front of our apprentices. This bill, Bill 207, only puts those barriers in place. To be frank, we need to prioritize policies that remove red tape, keep high-quality workers in the field, and be able to get them to work quickly and efficiently as well.

This is what our government is committed to. We are committed to supporting skilled workers and reducing that red tape right across. As I said, Bill 207 would undermine these priorities of our government, on this side. As well, Alberta has positioned ourselves for the . . . [Mr. Dyck's speaking time expired] I was just getting started, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others that wish to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I understand that the members on the other side – you know, it's difficult. A lot of the times members on the other side: while they're saying that they're supporting workers, they're actually not. This bill clearly, without a shadow of a doubt, is here to make sure not only that we as a province support workers but actually give the investment necessary, the tools necessary so that the whole workforce, as we grow as a province, becomes better and better and better. That is what the members on the other side are calling red tape.

This is about Albertans and the trades being respected for the work that they do, and let me focus on that first, Madam Speaker. You know, I've had the privilege of working in so many different fields after graduating from the University of Alberta and even before graduating from the University of Alberta. One of those jobs that I had was working at a chemical plant called Celanese Canada. Now, that plant happened to shut down, but Celanese Canada and the union that represented the majority of the workers that worked inside the plant was the chemical and paperworkers union.

Those union members inside of that plant were always focused on doing the best job that they could possibly do when it came to meeting the objectives of that plant. Now, that chemical plant produced formaldehyde. It also produced cellulose acetate, which was then crimped and was being sent abroad. It was a plant that was actually adding value to the resources that were being taken from here in Alberta, and they were being commercialized and then exported to other places in the world.

At that time – and I'm talking the 1990s – they were just getting started on hydrogen. You know, I'm so happy that I had the experience of working with union tradespeople in this province and seeing the amount of pride that they take in their work. Now, like every good Albertan, union workers love to joke around, but when it's time to work, it's time to work. I'm so proud to have worked beside them and to learn from them and learn about the tricks of the trades that these gentlemen had and some women as well.

3:00

It's so important that here in the province of Alberta, where we tend to be – you know, I've heard it said many a time, and I'm sure you may have heard it, too, Madam Speaker, that we're kind of like jacks of all trades. We know a little bit about many things, and as union workers we do our best to just figure out: okay; what's the problem that we're trying to solve here as union workers? And we go and we attempt, by all the knowledge that we have through the trades that we've managed to garner throughout our life, to try to address the problem, solve the problem, and do it to the best of our ability.

Madam Speaker, we can continuously improve upon that knowledge, and that's what this bill is about. It's about the dignity of those workers and the amount of effort and time and dedication that they have to their field, to their industry and saying: "You know what? We want Alberta to be a leader when it comes to this particular industry, and we want to give our union workers, the people who are on the front line of trying to solve the everyday problems that come about in that industry and in those fields and say that we need to invest money into having support centres or training centres so that as more union workers are coming up, they're getting the training that they need from people who have already gone through it."

Now, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that I used to work as a finishing carpenter. Not a lot of people know that about me, but I was actually a finishing carpenter, and on the job I actually learned so many tricks of the trade from older finishing carpenters. They taught me how to do crown moulding, how to install fireplaces, making things look so incredibly beautiful. I will never forget when I first started because when you first start as a finishing carpenter, you're putting in baseboards. You're putting in baseboards, and you know what? Putting in baseboards is pretty easy, but then when you actually get into finishing doors, for example, and you've got to frame up a door and you've got to make sure that it's level, there are all these little tricks. Only people who have been in the trade for a while and pass those tricks on to you are going to make your job easier.

It's in that same light that this here bill that has been introduced by the Member for Edmonton-South – that's the spirit behind this bill. It's: let's have these training centres, where people who have actually gained through years, decades, I would say, Madam Speaker – decades – of experience can train the new people who are coming into that particular trade as they continue to come up. What will that do? It will make sure that those people, those workers, those individuals, are going to be rewarded for the work that they put into helping build Alberta.

Madam Speaker, I'm proud to have been a union member. There are so many times that on the other side of this House they try to mischaracterize us union people as somehow being bad, that somehow, you know, we're the ones to blame for Alberta being the place that it is when things are going wrong, but nothing could be further from the truth. I'm proud to be a union member, proud to have been one and not only to actually have paid my dues and be a union member and contribute to the work that the union was trying to do, protecting the rights of workers inside of this province, making sure that we were standing in solidarity with other unions when they were going through collective bargaining or there were some kind of workers' rights that were being trampled at that time, standing in solidarity with them on a picket line to make sure that their rights were being respected.

You know, the same way that these individuals on the other side of this House, when it comes to freedom and they want these freedom rights respected: well, that's all we're asking for but for workers. That's all we're asking for, one, that when a worker goes in to work, he comes home at the end of the day safe and sound to his family or her family. For that, you need proper training. There are lots of union workers that will happily go into a dangerous situation but as long as it's controlled in a proper way and they can get their job done without putting their life at risk.

It's these kinds of training centres that will actually provide that kind of training to make sure that, yeah, when you're going into a dubious situation, in a situation where there could be some factors that are uncontrollable, at the same time you can get that job done, but you're making sure that you're doing it in the most safe way possible. That's the kind of training that these training centres will provide and members who have had decades of experience will be passing on. When we stand in solidarity with one another as workers, we just want to make sure that those workers are being respected.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others who would like to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As my colleague said, that's the track record of the government, the UCP government, that they don't like to discuss, to meet with the stakeholders to make any policies to the bills. With this one the UCP continues to refuse to sit down with the Albertans whom they were elected to represent, and it's resulting in legislation that undermines our workers and our everyday Albertans until this government, which left trade workers out of the meaningful discussions related to their industries while implementing policies that undermine their safety and world-renowned craft, heard my colleague from Edmonton-South was working on the legislation.

This bill, Bill 207, will correct this by mandating a consultation process within the existing skilled trades network. On one side, the government is saying that they are working for Albertans, but in reality they're working totally opposite. This bill ensures that any changes to trade activities or scope require consultation with a six-member committee equally representing both trade employees as well as employers. Currently changes can be made to a trade worker's scope of work without any consultations, so it's like saying that people from different fields are guiding the specialists, which is unacceptable.

Trade workers are the experts in their fields, and they do deserve a voice in decisions that affect the scope or nature of their work. They deserve to have a seat at the table to ensure that all the work done in Alberta is under the strictest standards of safety. To get more people entering the skilled trades, we need to ensure that we're using every resource available.

3:10

So much of the initial and continual training for skilled trade workers is done in union training centres, and they do incredible work. So does my colleague from Edmonton-South. My colleague has spoken with dozens of industry experts who deliver training programs. They were clear that the designation of union training centres as specific delivery entities within postsecondary would allow them to bring in more apprentices. These experts told her that such a move could double the apprenticeship output annually in Alberta, but, no, the government is not ready to listen. They don't like to hear the concerns. They don't like to talk to people. They are just dictating their decisions on Albertans while Bill 207 shows that union training centres are included in this legislation as specific delivery entities of skilled training centres.

During our provincial election the Alberta NDP promised to provide training funding for union training centres starting with \$4 million per year, and we will implement this in 2027, when some of the unlucky members on the other side – a few of them will be sitting on this side. We'll be on that side, and we will implement our promises we make. This bill, Bill 207, builds on our election promise.

When people are looking for a career in the trades, union training centres are there to get them the education and skills they need. Union training centres are a vital piece of the apprenticeship system in Alberta, yet under the UCP they do not receive any support, unlike other institutions. Ensuring that these centres are included in the act is the first step towards ensuring they receive the funding they deserve. This bill, Bill 207, is a huge step in the right direction to supporting Alberta's skilled trades.

As mentioned, the urgency for such initiatives is highlighted per projections from BuildForce Canada, which indicate that by 2031 approximately 21 per cent of Alberta's construction workforce will retire. Even now most of the companies have to cancel their projects due to the lack of workforce. Especially in the trades, people can't find the workforce, which is a huge loss to our economy. We are losing people to other provinces. This significant turnover needs proactive measures to prepare the next generation of workers who will uphold and advance our construction industry, our oil and gas, and so many other industries.

Madam Speaker, we know that the skilled trades are at risk under this government. We can see that with the decreasing apprenticeship and enrolment numbers. This bill, Bill 207, is a significant step towards providing tangible and necessary solutions for workers, employers, our education system, and, ultimately, our economy. This bill, Bill 207, will secure Albertans better paying jobs by ensuring proper certification for skilled workers. This bill will protect trade workers from competing with unqualified workers, creating higher wages and providing job security.

The compulsory trades help ensure that workers have the necessary training and knowledge to perform their jobs safely and effectively. Trade workers deserve a voice in decisions that affect the scope or nature of their work. This Bill 207 would require trades employees and employers to be consulted when making changes to trades activities or scope and their livelihoods.

As we know, skilled trades are under risk under this current UCP government, Madam Speaker, which also shows decreasing apprenticeship numbers and enrolments under the current UCP government. So I urge the Minister of Advanced Education to have a look at this, to work on this. Myself and my colleagues are here to help. I am in support of this bill and would like to pass on my time to the next member.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak against Bill 207, the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education (Valuing Skilled Workers) Amendment Act, 2024. In representation of my constituency of Drayton Valley-Devon I must rise in this Assembly to voice my constituents' concerns with this bill. The proposed amendments in Bill 207 reflect previous legislation that create an administrative burden and reduce our government's ability to respond to industry needs. This existing version of the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education Act promotes teamwork between industry, employers, trade unions, postsecondary institutions, and government entities to meet the needs of our province. This bill, if passed, would create restrictions and red tape for skilled journeymen and apprentices.

Albertans are worried about the potential impact of Bill 207 for multiple reasons, Madam Speaker. For starters, we already have a skilled worker shortage. Our province needs skilled workers to drive growth and prosperity. The changes proposed in Bill 207 would introduce more red tape for workers and employers, making it even more difficult to address the worker shortage in our province. If passed, Bill 207 could prevent many hard-working Albertans from finding a fulfilling job within their fields. This includes newcomers with pending certification applications, people with red seal certifications from other authorities, and those working in factory production, assembly operations, and processing of natural resources.

Since I represent the people of Drayton Valley-Devon, I can confidently tell you that making it more difficult to work in Alberta is completely unacceptable. My constituency is home to many hard-working skilled tradespeople, and I must voice the concerns many of my constituents have brought to me.

Furthermore, this bill seeks to make certain amendments concerning the role of trade unions. Currently the delivery of certain programs by trade unions is recognized by the registrar for credit towards an apprenticeship education program.

3:20

Proposing this amendment is unnecessary since a pathway already exists for the trade union programs' delivery. Any time an issue involves adding more hassle and red tape for skilled workers, you can count on me to stand in their way. Bill 207 would add more bureaucracy and regulations, which will slow down the process we have now. Bill 207 would make our skilled worker shortage much worse in every single sector of the economy while also making it harder to address employment shortages in the future. I would absolutely hate to see hard-working, enthusiastic Albertans excluded from working in the fields of their choice due to these unnecessary regulations.

Our government supports our skilled workers, and it is working hard to promote economic growth rather than adding more restrictions and inconvenience to workers, as this bill would do. Our government is on a mission to cut red tape and support skilled workers. I ask you to join me in opposition to Bill 207 out of respect and support for skilled workers of Alberta. By voting against this bill, we would be honouring our commitment to removing barriers for skilled workers and contributing to an environment that promotes job creation and innovation.

Instead of restricting trade workers, our government will support them. We have 61,000 registered apprentices, and it's nearly 28 per cent more than last year – and I would like to repeat this part: it's 28 per cent more than last year – so clearly our track record speaks for itself. Our 2024 budget demonstrates our commitment to trades through the investment of \$24 million per year for the next three

years to create even more seats in apprenticeship classes in the province. I expect this investment to make training more accessible and ensure Alberta stays competitive in key sectors.

On the other hand, Bill 207, if passed, poses a risk to the progress that our government has made. It would create challenges for our skilled workers and economic instability. If we want to protect our economic stability and our workers, we must oppose Bill 207, Madam Speaker. I fully support skilled workers, which is why I will not support Bill 207, and I invite all members to join me in voting against this bill.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, I was sort of amused and horrified by the previous speaker at the same time because, of course, Bill 207 is in fact helping to build the capacity that we need for skilled trades and using all of the resources that we have available to us, including people that actually are participating in the various skilled trade industries. So I compliment my fellow MLA for bringing forward this bill, and it's exactly what we need to grow the skilled trades sector here in the province of Alberta.

I know that the hon. member has done lots of consultation with all of the different skilled trades, and it's exactly what they said, that we can contribute, through our various skills that we have in the plumbers and the pipefitters and the electricians and the carpenters and everybody, to help train the next generation of skilled trades here in the province of Alberta. So the notion that this is anything but a benefit to grow our capacity is simply, you know, either not analyzing this bill properly, or it's another example, Madam Speaker, of this anything everywhere all the time sort of control that this UCP government wants to impose not just on postsecondary, not just on skilled trades but just on this whole province in general. Again, it's a symptom of a sickness that exists over there in the UCP land, which is that they want to control everything everywhere all the time, and anything that doesn't conform to that, they simply plow right through it.

Bill 207: I would strongly suggest that we all vote for this. It's helping to create that situation that we had before, to nurture it, to make it bigger, and to help build our skilled trades sector here in the province of Alberta.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members for 22 seconds?

Ms Lovely: Madam Speaker, our government is committed to keeping Alberta as the best place to live, start a business, buy a home, and raise a family. The skilled trades are an essential part of that goal. Trades workers are involved in building the homes Albertans live in. Skilled trades jobs give so many people the opportunity to earn a good wage for themselves and their families. Beyond that, many of the small businesses in our province were started by the skilled tradespeople and generate employment and prosperity for communities across Alberta.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt. We have up to five minutes for the mover of the motion to close debate on Bill 207.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Member Hoyle: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Bill 207 is a product of over a year of hard work by our Alberta NDP caucus to listen to the needs and concerns of skilled trades workers. It is the product of dozens of meetings, tours, consultations with those working in

the field on what they need to feel supported in their work. I want to thank a few of those folks sitting here today in the gallery in support of Bill 207: Kevin Donaghey from Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers local 1, Aidan Theroux and Erin Goldie from Teamsters local 362, Steve Stirrat from Cement Masons local 222, Martin Smith and Emir Besic from Carpenters' local 1325, and Nick Dobson from the Boilermakers Lodge 146.

Every day skilled trades workers who live in Edmonton-South and across our province do incredibly hard work to ensure that our homes, businesses, public spaces are all safe, functional, and well maintained. These folks keep the wheels of our communities turning, and I want to make sure to take a moment to thank skilled trades workers across Alberta for laying the foundation for a better future for all of us. Bill 207 is for them, to keep them safe, to ensure they have fair and livable wages and to ensure that they have a voice in changes being made to their craft.

Despite a significant population growth in Alberta in the last year close to 80 per cent of employers are reporting job vacancies in skilled trades. It is disheartening and disappointing but not surprising to see the government turn its back on workers and industry experts with what we've heard them say about this bill. By doing so, they're not only disregarding the needs of skilled trades workers but also jeopardizing the future of our province's workforce.

The minister claims that Bill 207 will increase red tape, but that couldn't be further from the truth. By removing compulsory certification for trades, this UCP government is exposing certified workers to unfair competition, devaluing their work, and lowering wages. Worst of all, by allowing uncertified workers to practise skilled trades, they are putting the health and safety of hundreds of workers at risk. In all of my meetings with workers, union representatives, employers in skilled trades I have heard a common theme that the work they do must be rooted in safety. For many of these folks the work they're doing can cost them their lives. There's no doubt that we have a massive labour shortage in Alberta, and we need more apprentices and workers. But at no point should it be even remotely acceptable to open up more positions at the sacrifice of maintaining rigid standards of health and safety.

Bill 207 is about standing up for everyday workers who are doing everything they can to support themselves and their families. We know that under the UCP wage growth in Alberta has been slower than any other province. The decisions this government is making are making it harder for families to keep a roof over their heads, put food on the tables, and keep the lights on. And it's clear that if they vote down this bill, the UCP has no interest in standing up for skilled trades in Alberta. Skilled trades are the backbone of our economy, and we must do everything in our power to support and protect them. Despite this government's gross oversight my colleagues and I remain committed to advocating for the rights and interests of skilled trade workers in Alberta. On this side of the aisle they can trust that we will continue to push for policies that prioritize their well-being and ensure a prosperous future for our province.

3:30

We won't just do it when it's politically beneficial; we will do it every day. We know the value of the work they do, and we know that they are being left behind by this government. We know that when it no longer fits the UCP's political agenda, they'll turn their backs on workers because they continue to turn their backs on Albertans. Like so many Albertans, workers deserve better than what they're getting from this government.

I urge the members opposite to think hard about the economic future of our province in the long term. I encourage them to vote in favour of Bill 207 for every single tradesperson in Alberta.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:31 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Boparai	Goehring	Pancholi
Chapman	Hayter	Phillips
Dach	Hoyle	Renaud
Deol	Ip	Sabir
Eggen	Irwin	Schmidt
Ellingson	Kasawski	Wright, P.
Elmeligi	Loyola	

Against the motion:

Amery	Jean	Petrovic
Armstrong-Homeniuk	Johnson	Rowswell
Boitchenko	Jones	Sawhney
Bouchard	LaGrange	Schow
Cyr	Loewen	Sigurdson, R.J.
de Jonge	Long	Sinclair
Dreeshen	Lovely	Singh
Dyck	Lunty	Stephan
Ellis	McDougall	van Dijken
Fir	McIver	Wiebe
Getson	Nally	Williams
Glubish	Neudorf	Wright, J.
Guthrie	Nicolaides	Yao
Horner	Nixon	Yaseen
Hunter		

Totals: For – 20 Against – 43

[Motion for second reading of Bill 207 lost]

Bill 208

Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act

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

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am so excited today to rise in this House and share one of my passions and share with members of the House Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act.

When people ask me why I decided to run as an MLA, our kids' education is my first answer. When pressed further and asked what I would fix, this is one of the many things, and it would have a great impact on all of our children's lives. While researching and reading the data for my bill, I discovered that 1 in 5 Albertans are impacted by a combined effect of learning disability and ADHD. It is highly likely that one of us or someone we know has a learning disability, ADHD, or both. It is equally likely you may not even know that you or they have a disability and that there are supports available.

3:50

It saddens me that people are unaware, undiagnosed, and untreated. The impact across the lifespan is devastating and causes impairment in all aspects of life, from personal well-being to community engagements and economic prosperity. I realize, as I stand here and I talk about learning disabilities and ADHD, some may not be aware of how this impacts an individual. A learning disability may affect how an individual learns, organizes, remembers, understands information, and the use of verbal or

nonverbal information. But, to be clear, it is not just related to their intelligence, because they learn differently. That's what it is: they just learn differently. But they learn differently enough that typically an educational or workplace environment can be problematic.

And then there is ADHD. The brain's ability to self-regulate and engage in critical, executive functioning capabilities is compromised. ADHD impacts executive functions, their organizing, their planning, their prioritizing, their decision-making, task initiation and completion, and emotional regulation. ADHD is also independent of intelligence. Some folks are not necessarily even deficit in attention though they might have difficulties regulating it. Individuals may also be over- or hyperfocused, maintaining focus on a singular task for an unusual length of time, having difficulties transitioning their focus from one task to another. When we are talking about hyperactivity, there is a broader set of behavioural characteristics, including impulsivity in boys and internalizing behaviours in girls.

Far too many kids are falling behind in their classes simply because they are not receiving a psycho-ed assessment at an appropriate time, if they get it at all. A psycho-ed is typically requested by a teacher or a parent who is noticing that a child is struggling at school, whether it be behaviourally or intellectually. The assessment entails a series of one-on-one sessions with a psychologist and helps identify how a child learns best. It can lead to certain diagnosis, which helps teachers and parents create a plan that will help the young student to be successful at school but also at home.

These assessments can cost \$3,000 to \$5,000 per student if done privately. If a family is even lucky enough to be able to get extended health benefits, they may not be covered. For the thousands of students in our schools, they must rely on assessments provided by the schools. Unfortunately, there aren't enough psychologists in the system to meet the demand, and as a result not every student is going to get one who needs one.

Before I was an MLA, I was an educational assistant, and I remember sitting in a school staff room. The principal was getting ready for what I now want to call the *Hunger Games* of psycho-eds. A teacher came in, and she flagged four kids. Another teacher entered and informed the principal that she'd also flagged a different group of children. A few more teachers came in and a few more flags. The principal then had to go to a meeting with other principals in the area to discuss which of these children in the area might actually get the psycho-ed. How do we pick one child? How do we triage many, many more? We need to be funding for what our children need.

A recent survey of teachers revealed that 53 per cent of teachers have requested at least one assessment in the past year, and half of those don't expect that the child in question will even get it this school term. Parents who have been able to access private assessments typically wait six weeks while those who are in the queue in the school could be waiting for up to two years, and some may not even get one at all.

If a student struggles for two years, they begin to lose their passion for learning, and we need to protect that. When a child doesn't feel like they are capable, they begin to avoid: avoid subjects, tasks that are difficult. They start to avoid friends and family or avoid school altogether. Far too often those children find the acceptance they crave in situations that are troublesome. The down-the-road consequences are cumulative and costly to both individuals and society: poor mental health outcomes, increased stress, substance-use disorders, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Did you know that more than half of the individuals with a learning disability report having been involved with the criminal

justice system? A Canadian survey of disabilities found that of those with learning disabilities 33 per cent reported not completing high school, with a much higher drop rate than those without any disability. Sadly, after a recent review of those who do graduate, few attend postsecondary training, with less than 21 per cent of individuals with a learning disability pursuing a four-year degree and having a lower rate of completion. Consequently, individuals with learning disabilities are twice as likely to remain unemployed compared to the general population.

Then there's the untreated ADHD: 44 per cent of children and 80 per cent of adults with ADHD have at least one associated mental health problem. Most common are anxiety, mood disorders, and substance-use disorders. An important fact, though: ADHD is the most treatable psychiatric disorder that there is, and without a proper diagnosis and treatment it can lead to crushing life pressures, resulting in unnecessary suffering, debilitation, and even death, simultaneously costing billions of dollars in education, health care, and the justice system.

Children and adolescents are at risk for educational underachievement, difficulties with socializing, accidental and traumatic injuries, and premature death. Adolescents can be impacted with early onset substance use, delinquency, risky sexual behaviour, teen pregnancy, and suicide. Many undiagnosed adults show an increased risk for failing to meet their potential; substance-use disorders; accidental injuries, including car accidents; unemployment, precarious employment; divorce; gambling; low quality of life; incarceration; and a range of health issues that include obesity, asthma, allergies, diabetes, hypertension, sleep problems, epilepsy, sexually transmitted infections, abnormalities of the eye, immune disorders, metabolic disorders, premature death, and suicide.

But these outcomes are not inevitable. This bill would be the first step in addressing the barriers students and families face in accessing vital psycho-educational assessments in Alberta. It would also examine the funding structures at the classroom level, which are critical to ensure that students have access to the support that they need on an ongoing basis to accommodate their personal learning needs.

Practically, the bill would create a school psychological service committee, whose task it would be to first of all review legislation and policies surrounding psycho-educational assessments for students. They would then look at barriers students currently face in accessing psycho-eds, financial barriers to accessing these assessments, and bias in identifying the students who need psycho-eds. Finally, they would consider the financial support that goes towards complex classrooms. Within a year the committee would produce a report with recommendations to the Minister of Education. The minister would then have one year to introduce legislation that addresses the recommendations of the committee.

As we developed this bill, we consulted with a wide variety of parents and experts who gave us very important insight. One of them was Melanie Reader, who is a registered psychologist at Foothills Academy Society and president of the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta. This is what she had to say about Bill 208.

There is a lack of school-based psychologists available to support the number of assessments required. While some families may have financial resources to access a private assessment, many do not. Making psycho-educational assessments accessible for students in Alberta is an investment in the future and will ultimately enhance the lives of many Albertans.

Madam Speaker, our children are valuable, and we have the responsibility to ensure that they have every resource that we have available to help them thrive. Studies have shown that for every dollar invested in our children's education, it turns into a \$6

contribution to our economy down the road, and that doesn't include the savings that are realized from mental health care and other costs associated with kids who have dropped out of the system. A psycho-educational assessment is only the first step, but it can be life changing for an individual who can now get support. I encourage every member to reach out to a teacher. It's a simple way to consult: ask a teacher if they feel that this is important.

The benefits of Bill 208, the psycho-educational assessment act, are clear, and it is my true hope that it'll be supported by all the MLAs in this Legislature.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for bringing forward this bill and for the conversation this afternoon. I've had an opportunity to go through the bill and look at the merits and, of course, the pieces that the bill is proposing, and there are a number of areas where I have some significant concern.

You know, there's no question – I agree with the member opposite – that we have to make sure we get the fundamentals right. We have to make sure that our youngest students have those early intervention support services and pieces in place to be able to identify any concerns with respect to learning disabilities or delays to help ensure that they are operating at grade level as quickly as possible. That is absolutely essential, and I'm exceptionally proud of the government's record in this regard.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, Alberta was one of the first if not the first jurisdiction in the entire country to mandate literacy and numeracy screening for every child in grades 1, 2, and 3, so much so that Alberta is being looked at and is being talked about by so many different provinces and jurisdictions. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago British Columbia effectively implemented or, if I could suggest, copied what Alberta is doing with respect to early literacy and numeracy screening. The screening program that we have in place is incredibly powerful and incredibly effective. The research is quite clear and demonstrates significant effectiveness. The screening tools that we have in place are able to accurately identify students that may not be reading or writing or have their numeracy skills at grade level very effectively.

Most importantly of all, we have also developed incredibly effective intervention support programs. Based on the student's level of ability, as identified through the screening, an intervention program is available and supplied by the government of Alberta to all school divisions at no additional or extra cost. These intervention programs can be implemented whereby – oftentimes what might happen, if I can give you an example, Madam Speaker, if a student or group of students at a particular school are identified to be lacking in their reading ability or their writing ability at a particular grade level, those students from varying different grades will be pulled aside at different opportunities throughout the course of the day and the weeks and the months, and these intervention programs will be administered. The science and the results of these intervention programs are overwhelming. Students are able to get back to grade level at incredibly quick paces.

We are currently conducting an assessment of all of these services and programs. It's incredibly important to me and to the government that we get it right when it comes to early intervention. We've spent the last few months, and I hope to be able to report to the Assembly in the months to come. We've been having some in-depth conversations about what screening and assessment looks like in our early years.

We have a number of different mechanisms. I mentioned the literacy and numeracy screening. We have optional grade 3 SLAs. We have other types of measurements and assessments that are done, and we're looking at all of these years. We're looking at kindergarten. We're looking at grade 1, grade 2, grade 3, grade 4, grade 5 to get a better understanding of how we can have the right screening and assessment mechanisms in place to identify students who need additional intervention and provide that intervention. Oftentimes, as the member mentioned, indeed, there are students that have learning disabilities that require additional support.

The government has been on top of this going back to COVID, of course. One of the concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic was, of course, the loss of instructional time, and there was a significant concern that students would fall behind due to this loss of instructional time. A significant amount of money was invested by the government to conduct the screening that I mentioned earlier so that we could evaluate how many students are really behind, how much additional support and services we need. It was so effective. That's why we made it mandatory in grades 1 to 3, because it was so effective at helping kids catch up from COVID learning loss. In addition to that, there still continues to be money allocated in the budget to help provide services with respect to literacy and numeracy screening, as I've mentioned.

Also, to the member's point regarding psych-ed assessments, the government has provided funding in the past to help school boards administer assessments, especially for families and children who require psych-ed assessments. I'm very familiar with a lot of the dynamics that the member has mentioned, including ADHD, including psych-ed assessments. It's something that my family has gone through, with my oldest daughter having a diagnosis of ADHD and having conducted a psych-ed assessment.

They can be very effective and useful tools to help teachers and administrators and other educational staff understand the challenges or complexities associated with a specific learner. They can be very powerful, indeed. Oftentimes, as the member mentioned, teachers will request them, and government has provided a range of different funding through some of the measures that I mentioned earlier but also through the classroom complexity grant for school divisions to hire the necessary staff and services that they need to conduct these assessments.

Budget '23 provided \$126 million in the classroom complexity grant, which includes \$44 million this year alone, and this funding goes specifically to hire psychologists, speech-language pathologists, educational assistants, and others. Of course, psychologists are the primary individuals who will conduct assessments, but the member also noted that there are some issues with respect to not enough psychologists and not enough people that have the specialized training to be able to conduct this assessment. Of course, when there aren't that many individuals and we have the record level of growth that we're seeing, it can cause some delays, which we acknowledge, which is why some of that specialized funding is on the table, as I mentioned, \$44 million this year alone so that our school divisions can work to hire additional psychologists to be able to conduct these assessments.

You know, when I look at the bill – I'm not sure exactly how much time I have left, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Three minutes.

Mr. Nicolaides: Three minutes. Okay. That's my cue to wrap up.

You know, in looking at the bill, one of my significant concerns is that we're going to strike a committee to basically develop an understanding of the things that we already know. We know that some families face some challenges. We're already providing

targeted investment to help school boards hire additional psychologists. The minister is then required after a year to bring legislation forward, so the current timeline within the bill only sees additional action taking place after two years.

We recognize these challenges are occurring. We're investing at record levels. Our government is happy to take steps immediately, which we are through the classroom complexity grant and additional funding to our school divisions. So I struggle to really see what additional value the committee would bring to the table.

The member talked about analyzing some of the policies and legislation. You know, doing this type of jurisdictional scan is something that the ministry does quite frequently. We do look very carefully at what other provinces are doing with respect to their policies and legislation in the area of psych-ed assessments and in the area of mental health services more broadly, so I'm not sure what additional concrete measures the bill really proposes to help move the needle in providing greater access and support to our students.

We're committed to taking these steps by continuing to provide the classroom complexity grant, which, again, I just want to note, can specifically go to school divisions to hire additional psychologists to conduct these assessments, and, furthermore, additional funding from other programs and initiatives, as I mentioned.

Just to close by coming back to where we started, Madam Speaker, with the early literacy and numeracy screening and assessments that are already in place, that are very effective at helping identify students that perhaps are not operating at grade level when it comes to reading, writing, and numeracy, those programs are incredibly effective. Government is already providing significant funding for those assessments to occur.

Unfortunately, I don't see the additional value that the bill will provide and would encourage members to again explore the bill in their own detail, but as Minister of Education I don't see the additional value that the bill would add and would have to decline to be able to support the bill at this time.

Thank you.

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

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 208, Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act. I'll just start off by looking at: what does this bill do? It's a really straightforward, really easy ask that we're making of the government on this bill. As a refresher, I had a mom in my office the other day who's going through the process of finding a psycho-ed assessment for her boys, and she knew about this bill, and we talked about it. She asked me: Member for Calgary-Beddington, why . . .

Member Irwin: She said that?

Ms Chapman: Yeah, she said that.

Ms Renaud: It was awkward, but it was great.

4:10

Ms Chapman: It was awkward, but it was parliamentary appropriate. "Member for Calgary-Beddington," she said, "how is this bill going to help me? What is this bill going to do to help? I don't see here where you're asking the government for more money, right?" So I had to go through this process of: what is a private member's bill? What can we do in a private member's bill? We know that we are limited. We know that we're not able to ask the government to spend more money even when we know that, in fact, what the

government needs to do to address this issue is to spend more money providing public psycho-ed assessments.

So we do what we can with this bill, which is to ask for the creation of a committee, the school psychology services committee, and when we're looking at the mandate of this committee, it's to do that jurisdictional scan. Let's look at what's working in other provinces. Is it working well in other jurisdictions? How can we bring that here to Alberta, looking at things like training and support that could be provided to teachers to address classroom complexity?

We know that this government is choosing to fund students at the lowest level in the country. If you talk to teachers, what you will hear from them – well, what I hear from them, anyways, even more than what I hear about class size, is about classroom complexity because what's happening in classrooms right now is really getting to be too much for any one teacher to manage.

You know, you've got kids that run the entire spectrum. You've got English language learners. You've got kids who are managing their autism spectrum disorder, their ADHD. You've got kids who are gifted. These kids are all in the same classroom, and a teacher is trying to manage this. Honestly, it's too much for teachers is the point that we're getting to now, so we're asking for this committee to look at, to study, and then to come back to the minister and table a report in the Legislature so that we can see what's going on.

I did want to mention briefly because – again, when I've been talking to folks who aren't in the know, their first question to me was: what the heck is a psycho-educational assessment? It's a fair question because it's more than – what the minister just spoke about were some specific types of screenings, so literacy and numeracy screenings. Well, a psycho-ed assessment is much more than assessing for that narrow range of academic performance.

A psycho-ed is that, basically, you've got a psychologist, and they're going to collect information about a student's functioning from a variety of sources. So, yes, they're going to review school records. You're also going to have a really long and detailed conversation with the parents of the child. There is a part of it that is standardized tests and observing, but it's about so much more than how children perform on those standardized tests. A big part of psycho-ed assessments is about assessing the process that a child goes through in the course of that standardized test. How do they solve problems? How do they approach things like puzzles? Where are they getting hung up on things? What things do they complete easily? What things are causing challenges for them?

It's really more, and it goes beyond that, too, because it's your academic, but it's looking at your behavioural communication abilities, social emotional communicative abilities, adaptive functioning. It's a lot more than just assessing a child's ability to perform on a reading test or on something like simple addition, subtraction. It's much, much more than that because a psycho-ed assessment is looking to identify, really, one of three things.

It's looking to identify an intellectual disability. Now, that's an intellectual disability as defined by the DSM. When we're looking at intellectual disabilities, you have to be presenting some challenges with reasoning, problem solving, abstract thinking, planning. Then it goes on, too, to look at: how can those challenges can affect daily living abilities, right? So that's things like your ability to communicate. How do you do self-care? Is there a capacity to manage money? Basically, are you going to be able to function independently in the community? This is something that a lot of us take for granted. It's looking for intellectual disabilities. It's looking for diagnoses. This is where we find diagnoses for autism spectrum disorder, ADHD. General anxiety disorder would fall in there, too. The third thing that it can test for is giftedness.

Now, why do parents want a psycho-ed assessment? Why is the literacy and numeracy screening not enough? It's because in order

to have your child's unique learning needs met, you need something called an IPP. An IPP is an individualized program plan. It is a learning plan specific to the learner. There are a lot of things that you can't get in a school if you don't have an IPP. You have to go through this psycho-ed process to get the IPP so that there is a mandate for the school to address the learning needs of your child.

The minister had commented that his family went through this. My family went through this process, too, the psycho-ed assessment. My oldest was just a bright and beautiful girl at home: lively, quick mind, just a real delight to be around. She was coming home from school at the end of the day every day just, like, emotionally distraught. She was not having good days at school. But what happened to her is what happens to a lot of especially female children. What was happening is that she wasn't acting it out, okay? At school she was buttoning it all up inside of her. She was being the good girl, she was being the good student, but we knew that she was horribly unhappy. Her social skills weren't that great. That was the crux of a lot of the issues with her.

We went through this psycho-ed process. I will say thank goodness for my partner's good public-sector job. We were a single-income family at the time, and the cost of this test was mind boggling to us. We went to the school. We identified that there was an issue. The school let us know that this was the process, this psycho-ed assessment, and then they let us know that there were 12 kids on the list at our school and they would likely get one – one – testing done that year. Now, I know my community really well. I know that a lot of people at the school have a lot more need than my family. Like I mentioned, we only had one income, but it was that good public-sector income, good benefits. We were able to take my daughter and have her go through the process. We were able to have it covered by our benefits. There's no way we could have afforded to pay for it out of pocket.

But it's a good thing we did go and have it done because the testing did turn up as giftedness. We were able to move her into a specialized program within the public system. Now she comes home every day, and she's that bright and beautiful girl because her needs are being met at school, right? That's what the psycho-ed assessment is about. It's about meeting those needs at school.

I had a mom, I think I mentioned at the start, who was in my office this week. She's got two boys, twins – bless; I can't imagine – and both of them have autism spectrum disorder and also severe global delays. She is a single mom, and the lowest cost provider that she is able to find is \$3,000 for this assessment. She can't afford it. She's had to go to her family to ask them to do this, and she needs to do it because even though her kids are at a school that has a program . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate? We're going to go this way first. The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Mr. Wiebe: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak about the important issue, ensuring that all students in Alberta have equitable access to psycho-educational assessments. The legislation before us today is Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act, which aims to establish a school psychology services committee to review legislation surrounding psycho-educational assessment and consider financial support.

4:20

Madam Speaker, Bill 208 is redundant and inefficient and, if passed, would simply duplicate the work that has already been done by the Ministry of Education. All students deserve to feel supported in our schools. It's a fundamental right that we as a government are

deeply committed to upholding. That's why our government is making historic investments in education, aiming to create safe, caring, and healthy learning environments conducive to student learning and success.

Before I fully dive into the initiatives of our government, I want to address that while the intention behind Bill 208 is commendable, upon closer examination it becomes apparent that the proposed legislation lacks any concrete initiatives to address the mental health needs of students. Mental health is a critical aspect of overall well-being, and any legislation aimed at improving access to educational assessments should comprehensively address this aspect. However, the proposed Bill 208 falls short of providing specific measures or resources to support students' mental health needs.

Moreover, the work outlined in Bill 208 would overlap with existing efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Education. The establishment of a committee outlined in the proposed legislation would result in duplicative efforts and inefficient allocation of resources. The Ministry of Education works with education partners and decade-long relationships to provide the most up-to-date information on current issues facing school authorities and students. It provides creative policy solutions to advise the minister on how to deal with issues facing students and the broader education system. Creating additional bureaucratic structures through Bill 208 may not only be redundant but also ineffective in achieving its intended goals.

As I said, it's important to recognize that the proposed Bill 208 is not necessary given the remarkable strides our government has already made in addressing the needs of Alberta students. Budget 2024 stands as a testament to our commitment, allocating more than \$1.5 billion to support specialized learning needs and groups of students who may require additional support through learning support funding grants. Madam Speaker, \$44 million is allocated to school authorities to address the diverse needs of students, including efforts to improve access to educational assistants and address classroom complexities. This substantial investment underscores the dedication to ensuring that every student in Alberta receives the support that they need to succeed. Over the last three years our government has steadily increased education funding, specifically targeting areas such as learning supports, complex classrooms, psycho-educational assessments, mental health, and other programs and services tailored to meet the unique needs of Alberta's diverse student population.

During the '23-24 school year we also invested \$10 million through the enhanced specialized assessment grant to help reduce the backlog of students who may not have had access to specialized assessment during the pandemic. This investment resulted in over 2,700 students receiving specialized student assessments and qualified professionals, including psychologists.

While the objectives of Bill 208 are notable, its implementation may not be the most prudent course of action at this time. Instead of creating a mechanism of government to duplicate existing decision-making, we should continue to provide the Ministry of Education the autonomy it needs to create concrete policy solutions and impactful actions on policy issues that it faces. Budget 2024 has allocated more than \$1.5 billion to support specialized learning needs, and, as I touched on before, \$44 million has specifically been earmarked to help school authorities address classroom complexities and improve access to educational assistants. By bolstering classroom support staff, school authorities will be better equipped to help students catch up from the pandemic-related learning disruptions as well as provide support for those with specialized needs, including newcomers.

Over the last three years our government has consistently been increasing education funding for learning supports, complex classrooms, psycho-educational assessments, mental health, and other programs and services to meet the unique needs of Alberta's diverse student population. Madam Speaker, we allocated \$10 million through the enhanced specialized assessment grant to help reduce the backlog of students who may not have had access to specialized assessment during the pandemic. As I said, this investment resulted in over 2,700 students receiving specialized student assessments by qualified professionals, including psychologists. That's 2,700 students who have gotten the help and the resources they needed.

I know we discuss this often in this House, but these stats aren't just numbers; these are Alberta students, these 2,700 young Albertans who have been able to get the support they need. Madam Speaker, moving forward, we remain steadfast in our commitment to collaboration. We are dedicated to working hand in hand with school authorities, trustees, and other educational stakeholders to ensure that all Alberta students have access to the supports they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond. The allocation of \$44 million to school authorities is a significant step forward. This funding will empower school authorities to hire more educational assistants, provide additional training opportunities for staff, hire specialists such as counsellors and psychologists, hire additional teachers, and increase the number of educational assistant graduates through a provincial education assistance training program.

Furthermore, learning support grants encompass a wide range of areas, including the classroom complexity grant; English as an additional language; francophone; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit grants; geographical grant; program unit funding; refugee student grant; the school nutrition grant; socioeconomic status grant; and specialized learning support grant. These grants are all designed to address various needs and ensure that no student is left behind. Madam Speaker, as I've said and as I've shown, our government remains unwavering in its commitment to inclusive accessibility to education for all. We are taking concrete steps to ensure that every student in Alberta has the opportunity to succeed.

I look forward to the continuation of excellent work that's being done by the Ministry of Education, and I believe that the bill before us, if passed, would only duplicate that work and add additional red tape. For these reasons, I will vote against Bill 208, and I encourage all members of the Assembly to do so.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 208, the excellent bill brought forward by my colleague the Member for Calgary-Edgemont, and I thank her deeply for bringing this forward. I know it personally means a lot to her, given her work as an EA, but I can also tell you that this bill means a lot to Alberta students and to parents and to teachers and to EAs and to myself as an MLA because I certainly have heard, as I expect every single one of the members of this Assembly have, from constituents about the challenges Alberta students are facing in getting access to the supports they need to succeed in school.

So I want to begin by saying thank you to the Member for Calgary-Beddington for doing an excellent job describing what I think is a very important distinction between what this bill is targeted at, which is the psycho-educational assessments and what that process looks like, as compared to what we heard the minister speak about, which was numeracy and literacy, because this bill is about providing the information and gathering the information so that we can provide better access to Alberta students, to children, for access to the supports they need to succeed.

Now, psycho-educational assessments are usually the barrier or the gateway before any child receives any supports. I want to take a moment to acknowledge that in my past role as the critic for children's services I was very disappointed to see that this introduction of assessments before supports could be provided was actually brought in by this government as an additional barrier for even children to access supports before they enter the school system. We heard the minister speak about how important early intervention is. Well, Madam Speaker, we know, actually, that early intervention is very important before a child even gets to school.

4:30

Actually, the ages between zero and six are when a child's brain is developing the most and where intervention and supports provided at that time can be the most impactful and meaningful and have longer term benefits than at any other point in a child's life, but this government actually brought in, as part of their inclusive child care programming, the requirement that parents had to go get an assessment and go through FSCD, family supports for children with disabilities, before they could even access supports in child care.

When we talk about the record of this government when it comes to providing early intervention, they actually made it more difficult for young children to be able to get supports in child care, Madam Speaker, because they had to get this assessment before they could get FSCD. As we know, FSCD is a system that is rife with all kinds of challenges and problems, but really when we're saying that a two-year-old or a three-year-old can't get access to supports because they haven't yet got an assessment, we've got a problem.

Now, Madam Speaker, it's also very important to talk about why these assessments are important not only for the student to get access to early intervention and supports but also to make sure that there's the appropriate staff, including EAs and trained EAs and teachers, in the classroom to provide that. I was very disappointed to hear the minister talk about that he was very proud of his record on early intervention and his government's record. This is the quote: proud of his government's record in this regard.

Well, Madam Speaker, let's look at what this government's record has been when it has come to providing supports for children with disabilities and students with disabilities. This is the government that cut PUF funding to kindergarten-aged kids significantly, by 40 per cent. Again, these are kindergarten-aged children, who get fewer supports under this government by design to save some money, but of course we also know that it's going to cost a lot more to the system in terms of the longer term supports that that child will require, but also, of course, it costs a lot more to that parent and to that student in the long run.

Let's talk about this government's record when it comes to providing co-ordinated supports for children who have disabilities. One of the things that I brought up, Madam Speaker, and I'll continue to bring up is that this government cut the RSCD program, which was a really critical program called regional service collaborative delivery, which actually combined the work of school boards and Alberta Health Services and child and family services authorities so that they could co-ordinate to provide supports and services for children who had learning needs and other kinds of disabilities.

This is actually a groundbreaking way to continue to make sure that the kids had the support they need, including having assessments, but again, Madam Speaker, this is a program that this government cut. This is also a government that cut, laid off, did the largest public-sector layoff in Alberta history as the employer when it laid off 20,000 EAs by tweet during the pandemic. This is not a government that has a good record when it comes to early

intervention, and it's certainly not something that the minister should be proud of.

Now, as the Member for Calgary-Beddington mentioned, psycho-ed assessments are very different than numeracy and literacy. I'm willing to give a wide swath of, you know, generosity to some ministers when they first get into their portfolios, as they start to learn what they need to learn. I met with the current Minister of Education almost a year ago now, Madam Speaker, and at that time his focus was very much on the assessments they were doing for numeracy and literacy.

At that time, Madam Speaker, I highlighted that assessing children for numeracy and literacy only goes so far if you're not going to provide the supports they need if there are challenges when it comes to those children being at grade level. Again, it's disappointing, I have to say, that the minister is still obsessed with assessment for numeracy and literacy and not actually providing the supports that are necessary to make sure that those children actually succeed.

Now, I will also mention that, again, this is not what this bill is about. Bill 208 is not about numeracy and literacy. It's actually about making sure that children who have a variety of learning needs, who may have ADHD, who may be on the autism spectrum, who may have a variety – gifted and talented. That's not about numeracy and literacy, Madam Speaker. You would think the Minister of Education would know the difference in that.

I think it's very important that he does because we're talking about a system. This bill is designed to actually just gather information. The minister has said that striking a committee is not necessary to do the things we already know, but this is the challenge, Madam Speaker, because while the minister might know some of this information, Albertans do not. Alberta school boards do not. Alberta parents do not. Alberta students do not.

So if the minister is confident that he already has this information that a committee, that this bill contemplates – I would ask that the minister provide that information to the Assembly, provide that information to school boards, because some of the questions that could be addressed by this committee are things that we need to know the answers to, things like: how many students have currently been referred for psycho-ed assessments who have not yet received them? How long are these students waiting for an assessment? What's the wait-list like? How many more would be referred if school staff had confidence that the resources and professionals were available? How many more would be referred if schools were not triaging, as we're hearing that they're having to do because they know they're only going to get approved for one assessment in a school year? How many psychologists have been hired by school boards?

The minister talks about the millions of dollars that they've provided to hire those staff. How successful has that been? How many have been hired? How many psycho-ed assessments have actually been delivered by school boards as opposed to those parents having to go privately? How many other mental health supports workers, how many OTs have they hired? How many SLPs have they hired? How many parents are paying out of pocket for psych-ed assessments, and how long are they waiting for those private assessments, and where are they going to get them?

This is what the point of this bill is about. This bill is designed to gather that information. What we hear repeatedly from the minister and also from the members across – when they talk about education, they love to talk about the big global numbers. They say: oh, we're spending 8 point whatever billion dollars in education; we've given \$44 million. The reason they do that is because it sounds like a big number, but what we're not hearing is how that money is actually being spent and how effective it's being. There continues to be a

large disconnect from the rhetoric that we're hearing from the government about the big dollars they're spending. If they spent any time listening to their constituents, listening to parents, listening to teachers about their experiences in the schools, they'll see that those numbers are meaningless.

Teachers are getting burned out. EAs are getting exhausted. They are underpaid, they're overworked, they're undertrained, they're often in conditions that are not safe for them, and students are not getting the support they need to succeed. It is meaningless to us, Madam Speaker, to be told once again this grant and that grant and \$44 million – we don't know what impact that is having. I can tell you that, from what I hear from my constituents and from parents and students in my constituency, it is not going very far. In fact, the government knows that, because their current funding, just even overall, for education fails to fund – I believe it's 8,000 students in our system right now. And that's just in Edmonton and Calgary, I believe.

An Hon. Member: CBE.

Ms Pancholi: It's CBE. Sorry. My apologies. That's just in CBE. So we are falling far short.

Even if there's \$44 million that's being given for this specialized grant, it's not going to hire psychologists if they're even available, if they can even find them. And let me just mention, Madam Speaker, that in rural communities and those smaller school boards they have an even more difficult time finding the resources and the experts they need to be able to deliver a psycho-ed assessment. Those numbers don't mean anything because on the ground Albertans know the truth. They know that their kids are not getting access to the supports that they need. They know they can't even get the assessment, the tests that they need to be able to determine what supports.

I just want to end, Madam Speaker, by talking about – I'm going to run out of time, but I've heard this story directly from constituents in my riding: parents in tears because they can't get the assessment or the supports they need. This is not a system that we should be proud of, it's not a record that this government should be proud of, and they should support Bill 208 because it's at least a start to provide transparency and accountability to Albertans.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Today is a good day, and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak. Today I rise to voice my opposition to Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act. This is a mouthful. That's one of the reasons why I'm against it; can't even pronounce it. Okay. This bill aims to establish a school psychological services committee, tasked with reviewing legislation surrounding psycho-educational assessments and considering its financial support. While the intention behind the bill may seem quite noble at first glance, the reality is that it falls short in many tangible initiatives to address the real needs of our students in a timely fashion.

The main issue that this is falling short in is that it lacks any tangible initiatives to address the needs of our students. The work proposed by this committee is duplicative to what our ministry is already doing, what the educational ministry is already undertaking under the leadership of our fantastic Minister of Education. Not to extol his virtues too far, but he is a great educational minister. He is doing a great job. We can be proud of that. Just in the back, just a few moments ago, we were talking about history, and I'm impressed by his deep understanding of the historical context of the Middle East. I just want to thank him for the lessons on very correct history.

4:40

One of the other areas that the educational ministry also has: they have a big track record of adapting and responding to the evolving needs of our educational system. Currently under our government's leadership our ministers have done a great job continuing to adapt and also seeing the ministry be on a great track. Since we've taken over, education has gotten stronger in this province. We understand that resources and personnel are part of this ministry, who are deeply committed to ensuring the well-being of our students, so thank you to the minister for leading that charge.

I just want to talk for a couple of minutes as well about how we are succeeding in Alberta, Madam Speaker. We have some really amazing things to be proud of here in Alberta, and I do believe that Albertans should be looking around and saying that not only do we have some of the best education in Canada but also in the world. Here are a few things for you here right now. Recently the PISA results: we became top in Canada in a couple of categories, both reading and science. Alberta is number 1. I think this is a big deal that many Albertans don't realize, that we have top-quality Canadian education. Then we also came in at number 2 in Canada in math, so we have top-quality education right here. Not only that; we landed top marks as well internationally. What we are doing here in Alberta really matters. What we are training our students to do really matters. I think that's worth highlighting and also celebrating, what our government has done.

A couple of other things that we are doing really well is our schools of choice. On this side of the House we believe in the options; we believe in the opportunity and the parents being able to send and lead their family unit but also being able to send their kids to where they think they should go. I think that's something that we strongly – I strongly believe in. We also see the results of those high-quality education components coming from some of those schools of choice.

We also have the recent charter schools, the autonomy of that, also the creation of the charter school hub. Just an amazing, amazing, amazing opportunity. So thankful for . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Not only that; we've also revamped the social studies curriculum. It's piloting soon. It's got rave reviews. This is something that I'm really super excited about. One, we are focused on critical thinking. This is a key part of our educational component, having students leave school and being able to think critically for themselves, being able to go out into the workforce and being able to solve problems. This is what Alberta is about. This is what the Alberta advantage is about as well, being able to go out and solve problems right across this province.

And: empowering them to be engaged citizens. Also, social studies is about engaging them, keeping them engaged, and also making sure that they are able to see and lead the future. On this side of the House we want engaged students. We want educated students to have a full idea of what that looks like in their social studies. We also want them to be able to join the workforce and have the skills and the competency to be able to leave school and be able to do that. I think that's something worth celebrating.

Madam Speaker, something else that's amazing. I was just talking to one of my fine compadres on this side of the House, and we have many people in the trades right now in high school in the north. They're doing great work. We have some schools bringing in some fantastic dual-credit programs and being able to train nurses, being able to train various other skill sets as well while in high school. This is an incredible opportunity that this side of the

House does believe in, and I am looking forward to continue seeing that grow.

Not only that; last week we had the skills competition here in Edmonton. We had 12,000 students come and be able to see trades, 45 different trades, here in Edmonton, be able to try them out and also to view and be able to see and experience something that many kids never get to experience in their lives. We are focused on the trades, and we're also seeing some success there, too.

Just as we continue, we also have Budget '24, which demonstrates our government's dedication to supporting choice in education with an increase of 4.4 per cent totalling almost \$9.3 billion in 2024-25. This is a significant investment in our young people, in our youth, and being able to see them continue to become citizens, also being able to see them expand their education. Part of this as well is funding new schools, so on this side of the House we get schools built. I'm proud of that, and I'm really looking forward to continuing to see that develop here in the future as well because we want students to have high-quality education and also have diverse learning environments right across Alberta.

We're also investing \$2.1 billion over three years, like I said, building and modernizing schools, because these need to be safe, and they need to be conducive learning spaces. Additionally, we have \$123 million in capital funding over three years to collegiate school programs, which I mentioned just a moment ago. These are important programs that are running across the province to make sure that we can enhance school facilities and resources. We are committed to modernizing the educational system and making sure that students have success through curriculum development. I believe in this, and I see that this is going forward.

I bring those things up, Madam Speaker, because Albertans should be proud of the success that we have had in education here, right across Alberta. It is important what we're doing, it is key what we're doing, and the direction that we're going is showcased across the world. We are having an impact that is deep. We are having an impact that is continuing to be shown and seen across the world, and I think that that's worth noting for Albertans here in this Chamber.

Back to this bill, upon some closer examination, it is clearly evident that the creation of such a committee is not only redundant but also unnecessary, and here is why. While they would seek to improve access to psycho-educational assessments, we're already making historic investments in education to address classroom complexity, promoting safe, caring, and healthy learning environments which facilitate student learning and success. We've seen significant budget allocations that have been dedicated to initiatives like the classroom complexity grant and exemplified by the substantial funding earmarked over multiple years in Budget 2024. While this committee tries to reflect the government's expansion of those programs, we're already doing it. The ministry is already flexible. We've brought in many other supports already, and these funds which we have currently allocated are enabling the hiring of additional staff such as counsellors, psychologists, interpreters, teachers, and these people are offering comprehensive support to students with diverse needs.

As well, this committee would seek to address financial barriers to psycho-educational assessment. However, the ministry has already created grant and funding frameworks such as, like I mentioned, the classroom complexity grant to provide and increase the necessary supports to students with complex needs such as the psychosocial evaluations. Once again, Madam Speaker, our Ministry of Education is already doing many of these things; we don't need a committee to tell us what the ministry is already doing. That's redundant. This is one of the reasons why I believe our minister is also doing such a great job and our side is doing such a

great job. The Minister of Education is also mandated to collaborate with educational partners to identify and rectify inadequacies in the educational system.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I take this opportunity to remind all members that there are many places outside of this Chamber to have conversations with your colleagues. I would suggest you do that so that we can honour the time that the members have while speaking in the House, and that member right now is the hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Madam Speaker. This bill is about kids and families. It's about ensuring that every child can succeed. Frankly, as articulated by both sides of the House, we know that Alberta's classrooms are getting more complex than ever before. We know that there are challenges with larger class sizes and with the lack of supports. So the question is: what is this government doing about it? Simply, the answer is: not enough. In fact, they're being short-sighted. They're taking a short-sighted approach by opposing this bill.

Before I get into perhaps some of the arguments on why this bill is so important, just consider this. When kids fall through the cracks and don't receive the supports that they need, it will not only have a long-lasting impact on their academic careers; it will in fact have a long-lasting impact, overreaching implications not only for their lives across their lifespan but also for society. We don't often think of these same students, these same vulnerable kids once they leave the school system, but falling through the cracks will follow students throughout their entire lives.

4:50

Consider this. According to an Edmonton Social Planning Council report in the last decade, 4 out of 10 Albertans are within the low literacy level range, and more specifically 40 per cent of adults in Alberta between the ages of 16 to 65 lack the basic literacy and essential skills to function effectively in our society. Fifteen per cent of adult Albertans scored at or below the lowest literacy level, and 26 per cent of adult Albertans can only deal with simple material and have difficulty reading safety manuals or hazardous material warnings found in the workplace. All of these Albertans would at some point have come through our education system, and I can't help but feel that many of these now adults were once young students who fell through the cracks. Some of them might have had undiagnosed learning disabilities or didn't receive the needed interventions as a child.

As a society I think all members of this House will agree that we must do better. We must ensure that every child, every Albertan is supported to succeed across the continuum of supports. As one of my colleagues mentioned, students who are gifted and learn differently also need to be supported along with students who may be experiencing developmental delays.

The truth is that the continuum of supports is required for every single student. But the reality is that this government's rhetoric does not match their actions, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud and others today have articulated that very well. What's particularly troubling is that what we're seeing from this government is part of a larger pattern, and as I've said many times in this House, patterns tell a story, Madam Speaker. What we see when we connect the dots is that there is a pattern of systematically dismantling publicly funded education, of eroding supports for education. I'm going to repeat some of those pieces that my colleagues have articulated so well.

With the introduction of the weighted moving average and changing of the funding formula, what we're now seeing is that in

growing school divisions there are thousands of unfunded students, 4,000 for Edmonton public and 8,000 for Calgary public alone. I had the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to speak to some rural and mid-size boards, and they will say that it's not any better for them. In fact, for smaller school boards they have the opposite challenge, which is their numbers. They're underfunded in another way because their numbers are lower. The weighted moving average is not adequately supporting kids in this province.

On top of that, what we're finding is that we are the lowest funded per capita in education right now in the country. My colleague has already mentioned deep cuts to program unit funding. As a former school board trustee I should mention that for some school divisions it was actually up to a 60 per cent reduction in funding. They did it, really, in the most sneaky of ways. It's not really a word, but I'll use it today. What they did was that they changed the eligibility criteria. Instead of casting a wider net to ensure that more kids, particularly between the critical ages of zero to five, receive more supports, now it's fewer kids receiving those supports.

They also, as my colleagues have mentioned, got rid of the regional collaborative service delivery. While it wasn't a perfect instrument, it was certainly one that encouraged collaboration amongst regional school boards. It allowed sharing of resources. There were certainly cost savings there. More importantly, it created a system where there were wraparound supports that many school divisions can share.

They also stopped reporting on class sizes, Madam Speaker. We know that when we don't have adequate data that is publicly released, frankly, we can't hold the ministry accountable. I can't help but feel that this was all part of a larger design.

I'm going to speak to the importance of sort of zero to five, the early years. We know the importance of early intervention. If a child is able to read at grade level by third grade, they are much more likely to complete grade 12 and succeed beyond grade 12. Yet what we're seeing is that not only are they cutting PUF, not only has this government eliminated the structures that provide those wraparound supports, but we're seeing, frankly, cuts to critical supports in the classroom, cuts in educational assistants at a critical time, during the pandemic. If you sort of consider all of those reductions in funding and the lack of resourcing and you consider the overcrowding and the space crisis that many of the urban school boards as well as rural school boards are facing, that is really a double whammy in so many cases.

I invite members opposite to visit a school to speak to teachers, because what they will tell you is that what's happening in classrooms right now isn't sustainable. It's not working. I know the hon. minister likes to talk about all of these wonderful supports that they're providing in education funding, but the reality is that it's not commensurate with the amount of growth in student population that we've experienced over the last few years. It's not commensurate with the amount of complexity that has now increased in the classroom. While it sounds good to list a whole slew of so-called supports, it simply isn't adequate.

Now, as I talk about the systemic dismantling of publicly funded education, I also want to talk about what this government did. One of the first things that they did was that they removed the cap on charter schools through legislation. Rather than adequately funding public education and publicly funded education, they decided that they were going to dilute resources from publicly funded, accessible places of learning into charter and private schools. Let me be clear. There is a place for charter and private schools in our education ecosystem, but it cannot replace effective investment in publicly funded education where there is equal and equitable access to supports. Under the UCP we are seeing the advent of a two-tier education system where not all access is equal.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I want to talk a little bit about charter schools, because this government is doing it under the guise of choice. When charter schools were first introduced in the 1990s, it was meant to be experimental, a laboratory of pedagogical experimentation with a mandate of five years. If proven successful, those practices would be folded into a public system. But we haven't seen that, Mr. Speaker. What we have seen is that this government is modelling education after the American public education system, and we know that that's not a great model. We know that south of the border they are not producing the best outcomes.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others on Bill 208? The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod has approximately one minute.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to speak against Bill 208, the proposed Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act. It is crucial that we carefully examine the implication of this proposed legislation. While the goals of this bill may seem admirable at first, it is essential to consider whether they truly benefit our education or the students it serves.

Mr. Speaker, it is essential to recognize that the committee established by this bill would simply duplicate the responsibilities and functions of the Ministry of Education. To wrap it up for you, the establishment of a committee mandated to make recommendations on issues that are already being effectively addressed by the government is not only redundant, but it also runs the risk of impeding progress. With our current momentum and proactive approach to addressing educational challenges, the creation of this committee could lead to unnecessary delays and add red tape. I therefore urge all members to vote against Bill 208 and instead focus on supporting, enhancing . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. However, the time for debate on this particular matter has elapsed. Having said that, the hon. member will have nine minutes remaining should she choose to use it the next time this matter is called.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions Provincial Water Management Strategy

512. Mr. McDougall moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly

- (a) support the government's ongoing commitments to
 - (i) review Alberta's water management strategy to increase the availability of water and water licences,
 - (ii) evaluate potential long-term infrastructure investments to ensure the sustainable management and safeguarding of water resources for the benefit of all Albertans, and
- (b) urge the government to expand these commitments by undertaking a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources in the province, including the consideration of interbasin water transfer as a means of optimizing the use of existing water resources.

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, I'm excited to speak to and advocate for the passage of my private member's Motion 512 regarding Alberta's water management strategy. If passed, Motion 512 would support the government in responding to the need to review and enhance our approach to water management in light of the evolving challenges and opportunities facing our province.

While reflecting on the future strategic importance of water, I am reminded of a speech given by our late former Premier the hon. Peter Lougheed, that I attended around 20 years ago. The thesis of his speech was essentially that water would supplant oil and gas as Alberta's most strategically important natural resource in the following 20 to 25 years. While we can debate what is our single most important strategic natural resource today, his visionary words recognized the inherent value in our freshwater resources and their pivotal role in shaping Alberta's destiny.

As we look ahead, it is essential to acknowledge several key factors that underscore the urgency of action in this area. It is true; Canada boasts some of the world's best freshwater resources, and Alberta is no exception. However, as we look ahead in the coming decades in terms of water management, there are both challenges and opportunities that lie before us. Access to plentiful and comparatively inexpensive freshwater has historically represented one of Alberta's key sustainable competitive advantages. Water has been and continues to be a critical asset that underpins our agriculture, industrial, residential, recreational, and environmental sectors.

With the projection that Alberta's population could double by 2050, the reality of such growth presents the need to consider the implications of a substantial increase in demand on our limited water resource. The increased demand for water is not limited to increased residential or municipal demand, which represents only 12.5 per cent of Alberta's current water allocations. We must also consider increases in irrigation, cooling, oil and gas, and other industrial or commercial purposes, which all represent the bulk of current and future water use.

At 44 per cent irrigation continues to represent the single largest component of Alberta's overall freshwater allocation and an important part of anticipated demand growth. Based on the 2021 economic value of Alberta's irrigation districts report, irrigated land generated \$5.4 billion to Alberta's gross domestic product, \$3.2 billion to direct labour income, and 46,000 full-time equivalent jobs. However, with a continuing increase in global population, there is an opportunity for Alberta to supply even more food by expanding irrigated farmland and industrial food processing capabilities. This growth opportunity is constrained by the availability of dependable water supply for irrigation.

Water has also become an increasingly important resource for low-carbon electricity generation. Large quantities of water are required for essentially all forms of basic electrical power production, whether it's by natural gas, nuclear, or hydrogen, whether for production, cooling, or H₂ purification. Investors in this government have discussed the exciting possibilities for Alberta's burgeoning hydrogen economy. However, the production of blue hydrogen also requires significant volumes of water. The implementation of carbon capture and underground storage also requires significant quantities of water. Water is starting to be a major factor that could constrain our opportunities in this area. There is also a need for current water flows to dilute effluent discharges and to sustain vital ecosystems. The need has never been more pressing.

Opportunities for increased agriculture, energy, and industrial development abound, but they are constrained by humanity's ability to meet future societal needs, by the limited availability of water in certain regions, and such rapid population growth necessitates a comprehensive review of our water management strategy to ensure the sustainability and equitable distribution of this vital resource.

Given the important role played by irrigation and water management, it is useful to summarize the government of Alberta's current strategic blueprint for the future of irrigation in Alberta. First, in terms of productivity, is to increase the primary and value-

added productivity of water used by industry. This involves efficiency. To improve the efficiency of water conveyance and on-ground irrigation systems, irrigation districts are replacing open-channel canals with buried pipelines, reducing water conveyance losses and improving water delivery efficiencies.

Conservation: promote the effective use of management of water to ensure that only the water required for irrigation and other uses supplied by irrigation infrastructure is diverted from the rivers.

Water supply: assess the management options to existing reservoirs and the potential for new reservoirs to enhance water security to meet future needs, particularly in the South Saskatchewan basin region.

And environmental stewardship: manage the effects of irrigation on surface and groundwater quality and promote beneficial management practices for irrigation and handling of crops to ensure they are safe for consumption.

There's much that has and can continue to be done to optimize water use for irrigation. The distribution of water supply and demand within Alberta presents unique challenges. Over 80 per cent of our water supply is located in the northern part of the province while 80 per cent of water demand originates in the south. This geographic mismatch underscores the need for effective water management practice to address regional disparities and ensure equitable access to water resources across the province.

The need for efficient water management is most acute, as I mentioned, in the South Saskatchewan River basin, where critical water resources are under strain. The Bow River, Oldman River, South Saskatchewan River, and Red Deer River constitute the lifeblood of this region, supporting vital ecosystems and sustaining agriculture, industrial, and municipal needs. In evaluating the use of the South Saskatchewan River basin, we must recognize that we must share this resource with our fellow province to the east, in Saskatchewan. Currently we allow over 70 per cent on average of the water to flow through Alberta to Saskatchewan when only 50 per cent is required. The seasonal variability of flow rates exacerbates this challenge, with flow rates in spring and early summer giving way to declining rates as the summer progresses. It is therefore imperative that we explore innovative solutions to optimize the use of existing water resources.

There are no shortages to solutions to investigate and analyze. One such solution lies in the exploration of groundwater as an alternative source of water during drought emergencies. While 96 per cent of current allocated water in Alberta is surface water, there is untapped potential for utilizing Alberta's vast groundwater resources. Initiatives to address information and knowledge gaps about the availability and feasibility of groundwater offer promising avenues for enhancing water security and resilience.

Investments in water storage and conveyance infrastructure, complemented by nine structural solutions such as green infrastructure and nature-based solutions, have important roles to play in sustainable water management. By reviewing existing water conservation efficiency and productive plans through the lens of drought management and adaptation, we can ensure that our water resources are managed responsibly and efficiently.

Motion 512 therefore calls upon the Legislative Assembly to "support the government's ongoing commitments to review Alberta's water management strategy" and "evaluate [a] potential long-term infrastructure [investment]." It recognizes the need for a holistic and forward-looking approach to water management that balances demands of urbanization, industrial development, and environmental conservation.

This motion would also urge the government to undertake "a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources in the province, including the consideration of interbasin water transfer as a means of optimizing the use of existing water resources."

Interbasin water transfers hold the potential to enhance water supply reliability and resilience by redistributing water resources to areas of high demand, thereby mitigating the impacts of regional water security and promoting sustainable development. The motion specifically highlights consideration . . . [Mr. McDougall's speaking time expired] Oh, boy.

5:10

The Speaker: The hon. member will have five minutes to close debate should he choose to make additional comments.

The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to this Motion 512, groundwater management and drought. I want to thank the member opposite for bringing this motion to the floor.

The Speaker: Sorry. I'm just going to have to interrupt. It's my fault. It's going to be, like, 30 seconds, so you might want to have a seat.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, at the beginning of the motion, I believe, and out of an abundance of caution, you failed to say the words "I move Motion 512," so if you can just rise. I assume that that was your intention, but out of an abundance of caution if you can move the motion for me, then we'll have a response.

Mr. McDougall: You assume correctly. I rise to move Motion 512.

The Speaker: We'll go ahead and restart the clock for you. The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise to speak to Motion 512. I do want to thank the member for bringing the issue of water management and drought to the floor today as a motion. As we all should be aware, we are currently in a stage 4 drought in Alberta, so water is definitely at the top of mind for a lot of people in the province. We know that reservoirs, particularly in southern Alberta, are the lowest that they've been in decades. You know, I had the opportunity to go to the Oldman reservoir and stand on the edge of a dry reservoir, and I can say that it was scary and awful.

People want to see action and concrete steps to address drought, but I think what this motion is missing is that these concrete steps really should be focused on community and industry resilience in the face of fluctuating water levels, whether that be flood or drought. Unfortunately, we can't make it rain and we can't create water, which means we have to manage the water that we do have. We do this by working collaboratively, working with scientists to base our decisions on evidence and the best available scientific knowledge.

But with water, especially because water is what it is and it goes everywhere, we need to really think holistically. We need to think beyond people. We need to think beyond Albertans. We need to think about livestock, species at risk, ecosystems, and other provinces. We also know that there's a lot that we don't know about water, and the member opposite did a great job of highlighting, especially in the area of groundwater, how little we know and the need to better understand groundwater.

So there are parts of this motion that I do support. I do think that we should update the current water management strategy. We have a growing population. Things are always changing. Of course, we should always look at updating these government policies and strategies. We should definitely evaluate the potential long-term infrastructure investments we're talking about. Reservoirs and dams cost billions of dollars. Before we construct these humongous pieces of infrastructure, we should be sure that it will be worth the

money. We should undertake a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources, especially groundwater.

But all of these things should be done in ways that acknowledge and plan for a multiyear drought in the context of climate change, which is not mentioned in this motion. These things should be done in a way that is part of a climate action plan, which the UCP does not have. And we must recognize that some water must stay in the river for the river itself and for the ecosystems around it. There are a whole bunch of things that we get when we leave water in the system, which I will get to in a moment.

The other important thing here, I think, that we need to recognize is that we do have an apportionment agreement with Saskatchewan that requires Alberta to pass on 50 per cent of the natural flow annually of each watercourse that flows across our provincial border, and Alberta is entitled to consume, divert, and store a minimum of 2,590 million cubic metres from the South Saskatchewan River. That amount is calculated throughout the year so that we don't give all the water to Saskatchewan all at once, for example. This 50 per cent is not based on the ecosystem needs of the river, and that has always been one of the top criticisms of this apportionment agreement and our water management strategy in general, that the volumes of water don't consider what we call in-stream flows.

So why do we need water in the river? Well, there are a whole array of what are called ecological goods and services that are provided by river and groundwater and lakes. I mean, obviously there's fish and fish habitat and other habitat available for countless species, but that fish also provides angling and tourism and recreation opportunities, which we all seem to really enjoy in Alberta. There are also many species at risk that live in aquatic environments that we need to consider. One of the things, I think, that we often forget is that water in rivers and creeks and lakes actually helps cool the landscape. It helps keep water in the soil. It cools the temperature of the landscape, which of course helps us be more resilient in the face of drought. Water in these systems is essential for wildlife, livestock, but also our individual sanity. We need water. Water is the foundation of life.

Another important role that this water in the system plays is to dilute effluent from municipalities so that water quality is sufficient for irrigation use downstream. We cannot just take all the water out of the river and use it for ourselves. That is one of the key parts of this motion that I struggle with, that it really focuses on water for all Albertans, but water is for so much more than just the people who live in Alberta. Overall the long-term needs for healthy aquatic and riparian ecosystems are not considered, and we know that these ecosystems are declining in health.

Water is life, and when we think it's only for us, we act selfishly and not in our own best interests over the long term, which brings me to the issue of interbasin transfers. This is highly problematic, and it's not the first time that this has been discussed and rejected in this House and outside of this House by the public service. The idea of interbasin transfers was discussed extensively with the water for life strategy that was developed in 2003 and updated in 2008. It was also discussed in *Our Water, Our Future: A Plan for Action*, which is the most recent update to the water for life strategy in 2014. It has been systematically rejected every single time. We can keep talking about interbasin transfers. It doesn't make it a good idea if you just keep repeating it.

We keep thinking it's a good idea, and it's not. Well, why not? There are an array of reasons why interbasin transfers are really problematic. The most recent paper I could find on this was Yan et al. from 2023 in the journal *Engineering*. It was a review of interbasin transfers. Basically, interbasin transfers change the hydrology of a system and characteristics of local water bodies affecting ecological and human communities. The donor basin,

which is where you're going to take the water from, obviously has a decreased river discharge downstream from where the water is taken, which can spread drought risk. The stage 4 drought that we're in right now applies to every watershed in Alberta. For the first time we're actually experiencing drought conditions in the north as well. We don't want to make decisions that would exacerbate the drought risk in the north.

Interbasin transfers also change the water chemistry and aquatic habitats. This can be really problematic. While the technology may exist to reduce these impacts, it is very costly, which I will get to in a moment. The receiving river, the receiving water basin also has a whole array of impacts, changes to the water chemistry which will require constant monitoring to address water pollution control measures. It can also result in soil salinization. Accelerated pollutant dispersion to groundwater is also a risk. Invasive species, which we spend millions of dollars a year trying to control, is also a risk associated with interbasin transfer. That's a challenge to address the biodiversity crisis, which the whole world is also in right now. Overall interbasin transfers reduce the stability of the water supply system in the receiving watershed or water basin, and that means that we don't even know if it will work.

The other part, of course, is the cost. Interbasin water transfers will cost billions of dollars. We're literally talking about a water pipeline from northern Alberta to southern Alberta. It would be a massive infrastructure project that would cost billions, and the science can't even prove that it will work.

5:20

So what are the solutions to our water situation here? Well, the first thing is that we need a climate action plan that includes water. We need to plan better, and we need to accept how much water we have in the different parts of the province and plan around that. We can't make it rain, and we can't create water, so we need to make sure that our land-use decisions are more reflective of the water that is available.

We also have options to make nature work for us; for example, beavers. I'm sure a lot of my colleagues are getting tired of me talking about unleashing the beavers all the time, but I'm not going to let this go.

Member Irwin: I love beavers.

Dr. Elmeligi: Beavers are great.

Beavers will make dams for us for free, and those dams, of course, will store water. Wetlands are also a critical solution to drought and flood control as well. All of this is work that nature will do for free.

We also need to work on increasing the efficiency and conservation of water use, which is not a focus of this motion but should be. If Albertans want us to protect the headwaters and they want us to spend taxpayer dollars efficiently, why not do both at the same time?

The Speaker: Are there others? Perhaps the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to talk about something essential to all of us, and that is water. For our agriculture, for our industries in energy or production, all aspects of life, water is our greatest resource. I'm grateful to the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for bringing up this important motion. Water management truly does affect us all.

As the chair of the Water Advisory Committee, a resident of Medicine Hat, and the MLA for the charming constituency of

Cypress-Medicine Hat, drought and water issues are top of mind for me. We regularly have flooding and droughts affect our ag producers, the ecosystem and habitats, our citizens and industry in the southeast. Our government has been diving into the solutions for how we can better sustain and manage and safeguard our precious water sources by working with and developing programs and policy off WaterSmart's research and projections.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 512 seeks to ease and resolve some of the problems we are facing right now. What are some of these problems? Well, the problem is pretty clear. Drought is disrupting many industries and lives across the province. We especially felt this in the southeast corner of our province last year. This time last year Cypress county issued a state of agricultural disaster due to drought, where time and time again I heard from my constituents that we need to be addressing this.

Some lessons we can actually take, Mr. Speaker, come from our irrigators. One of the most common pieces of feedback I get through my office is how well our irrigators do at managing water. But the other side to that coin is what I hear also pretty regularly, that when it comes to on-stream storage, the federal red tape has blocked these types of projects, delaying them as much as a decade. Both play important impacts on managing our water.

After several dry years and El Niño producing warm, dry winters across Alberta and Canada at the risk of severe drought this year, especially in southeastern Alberta, recent rains, while have helped, still are not enough. The province's snowpack remains below average. Many rivers are lower than normal, and multiple reservoirs are as low as being 38 per cent to where they should be at this time of year.

Motion 512 aims to address this by calling on the Assembly to support the government's ongoing commitments to reviewing our water-management strategy as well as exploring innovative solutions like those proposed by WaterSmart and strategies brought forward by different stakeholders to optimize what our water solutions and resources could be. This is a necessary step in the right direction for conserving and protecting our waters.

Mr. Speaker, we only have to look a short distance back in our history to see the cycle of water that goes on in our province. In July 2012 the *Globe and Mail* talked about the drought of 2000 to 2001 as being the worst drought in 800 years. The other side to that coin is that we just have to look at the flooding that happened in 2023. Where we address drought, we must also prepare for flooding. Albertans should care, and they do care, because our water is essential to our way of life. It is the lifeblood of our province, for our agriculture, our industry, for our recreation and our wildlife. I appreciate the Member for Banff-Kananaskis drawing on the impact that angling and hunting and tourism has from the impact of water.

Water touches all aspects of our society. If we fail to act now, we risk irreparable damage to our ecosystem, our environment, our communities, and our industries. We cannot afford to ignore the potential threat of water scarcity. Motion 512 calls on the Legislature to support the ongoing commitment to reviewing water management strategies and evaluate potential long-term infrastructure investments. It also calls on the government to expand its commitments by undertaking a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources in the province, including the consideration of interbasin water transfers, something that has been a discussion for members of the Water Advisory Committee, which is made up of municipal, industrial, irrigators, and in meetings also Indigenous leaders.

As the MLA for Cypress-Medicine Hat I've witnessed first-hand the damaging impact. Our farmers, our ranchers, our families:

they're all feeling the strain. Motion 512 seeks to find a solution and offer hope for a brighter, more water-secure future.

Motion 512 perfectly aligns with the government's commitment to responsible resource management. It reflects our dedication to ensuring the prosperity and well-being for all Albertans now and for generations to come. Through Budget 2024 we're investing in strong water management infrastructure and conservation efforts to address challenges that we face.

One specific one that continues to be looked at even on our Water Advisory Committee is the impact of wastewater and ensuring that all water can be reused in the appropriate way. One of the challenges we have during times of El Niño or drought are impacts on municipal waste lagoons, which are typically used by smaller communities. Drought conditions can affect the capacity of how these lagoons treat the water. Traditionally, the water is released twice a year once the treatment process has completed; however, in extreme drought conditions this can go down to one time of year, and it can also facilitate challenges in regard to the quality check of that released water.

Budget 2024, Mr. Speaker, includes \$481.9 million in grants for municipal water programs over three years, an increase of \$73.9 million from 2023. To ensure we're ready for whatever may come in the future, Budget 2024 also includes an additional \$50 million over three years totalling more than \$140 million for the water maintenance program to complete vital projects like the Dickson Dam spillway enhancement project. But there's still so much more to do. I hope that the opposition sees the importance of Motion 512 and why this is necessary for all Albertans. I hope that this is something we can unite on in this Chamber to protect water, to protect the resources that we have, and encourage new and innovative ways to protect and further our commitment to water conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 512 takes a comprehensive and pragmatic approach as it seeks to address our water challenges. Motion 512 is a vital step forward in securing water for the future of Alberta. By reviewing our water management strategy and exploring innovative solutions, we can ensure that Alberta remains resilient in the face of drought and uncertainty and even flooding in the future.

I encourage all members of this House. Let us come together as Albertans, as representatives, and a voice for our regions to support this important motion and safeguard our most precious resources.

Thank you.

5:30

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is next.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and offer some thoughts on Motion 512. Let me, first, start off by thanking the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for bringing this forward. I want to underline a number of the points that my friend from Banff-Kananaskis made in her response to the speech. Although it's clear from her comments that she's obviously in the pocket of big beaver, notwithstanding that, a lot of her concerns that she expressed in her statement in response to the member's motion warrant serious consideration.

I will say that I do support the parts of the motion that request that we review Alberta's water management strategy and undertake a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources in the province. I want to thank the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for highlighting yet again the need to evaluate the groundwater resources that we have in Alberta. This is a promise that Conservative governments have been making for decades to the people of Alberta that has yet to be fulfilled, Mr. Speaker.

Before my time in this House I spent a number of years working as a groundwater professional, and every single year that I worked in groundwater, we heard something about the government of Alberta finally funding a groundwater mapping project through the Alberta Geological Survey. Every year it was like: "Oh, well, next year we're going to have a really complete data set. Well, it turns out we couldn't get the funding, and the timing wasn't right; we'll have to wait until next year." And then the year after that and the year after that: 20 years later, Mr. Speaker, the people of Alberta are still waiting for comprehensive groundwater mapping to be completed in this province, and I don't understand what is taking so long.

I know that the government has drastically underfunded the Alberta Energy Regulator, which houses the Alberta Geological Survey. If the government is serious about evaluating groundwater resources, it would restore the funding to the Alberta Energy Regulator that it cut five years ago and make sure that we have enough technical expertise in-house to conduct that work. But I want to offer a word of caution as well because we can't just simply evaluate the groundwater resources that Alberta has and then say, "Here is X million cubic metres of additional water that's available to us," because we need to understand what sustainable withdrawal of groundwater will also mean.

We only have to look at the Midwest United States. The Ogallala aquifer that underlies most or a good portion of the Midwest United States has been overdrawn for almost a century, and now entire states who have built their economies on the agriculture that is supported by groundwater are at risk because there may not be groundwater much longer in the future. It would not be fair to future generations of Albertans to establish a water regime that is built on mining groundwater like they did in the United States. That is short-term thinking, and we must learn the lessons that have been taught to us by our American neighbours when it comes to managing groundwater and not repeat those here in Alberta.

So I would encourage the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek to press his government colleagues to make sure that the Alberta Geological Survey is properly funded so that we can get an adequate understanding of what our groundwater resources actually look like here in Alberta and come up with a sustainable plan for developing those groundwater resources to the benefit of Albertans over the long term. I look forward to the government finally fulfilling a promise that it's long held out to the people of Alberta in that regard.

But I don't think this government has a very good track record, broadly speaking, on the issue of water management, and I want to talk about a couple of recent issues that we've seen this government mismanage. The first is the Fortress ski resort. My friend from Banff-Kananaskis will probably remember this issue because it was a pretty hot issue in Kananaskis in 2019. Now, the Fortress ski resort is an aspirational ski resort; I think that's the best way to describe a long-held dream to develop a ski resort where probably one will never materialize, Mr. Speaker.

The operators of that ski resort, in a desperate attempt to keep themselves financially viable, sought permission from this government to have its water licence reconsidered so that instead of using water on-site for the creation of snow, they could use that water on-site to put into cans and sell to people in Edmonton and Calgary, Mr. Speaker. That was a mistake, and it was a significant change in the use of the water that was initially approved. The government's ears were deaf to that plea, and this government made a really significant error when it approved the change of the water licence to allow for that.

If the government is serious about reviewing its management strategy, it will revisit the issue of the Fortress water licence and

take away their ability to can that water and sell it to the good people of Edmonton and Calgary and other grocery stores around the province because that's not what that water was licensed for. We cannot let water out of that river basin any more. That goes counter to the environmental needs and the long-term needs of the people of southern Alberta.

I also want to highlight some of the ongoing issues of this government failing to notify our neighbours about potential downstream water issues, and I think of the Northwest Territories in particular. When the government suspended environmental monitoring in the oil sands, they failed to notify the government of the Northwest Territories that they were going to do so. There were additional instances subsequent to that where the government of Alberta failed to notify the Northwest Territories about what was going on with the Athabasca and Peace River water basins. That goes counter to our agreements, Mr. Speaker. We need to uphold the agreements.

It's incredibly concerning to me to hear that the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek not only failed to mention our irresponsibility in managing our existing water agreement with the Northwest Territories but seems to be implying that we need to rejig the water agreement with Saskatchewan. I don't think that anyone, any of our neighbours trusts the current government of Alberta when it comes to renegotiating water agreements, and they shouldn't, Mr. Speaker, because we haven't treated them with respect and with the trust that they deserve and that we committed to when we made those agreements.

The third issue that I want to highlight when it comes to this government's failure to adequately manage water resources is with respect to protecting our irrigation infrastructure and specifically the threat of zebra mussels. Now, a number of water reservoirs in southern Alberta are not only water reservoirs for irrigation use but also recreational use. This government has failed for years to adequately monitor incoming watercraft to make sure that they are free of zebra mussels.

We've heard the government say that they're going to do a better job of it this year. I guess it remains to be seen whether or not that will be true, but the way this current government is going, it's only a matter of time before zebra mussels infest our irrigation reservoirs, and that will be hundreds of millions of dollars to control. We can't fix it. Once the zebra mussels are in, they're in there for good, and then we will be on the hook for millions and millions of dollars to just control the problem and make sure that our irrigation infrastructure is still usable. We should not be negligent when it comes to inspecting the recreational watercraft that come into the province.

I recall the minister of environment beating up on the federal government for neglecting its duties. Well, a lot of the recreational watercraft don't actually cross international borders when they come into Alberta, I'll remind them. It comes in from Saskatchewan. It comes in from B.C. The federal government doesn't play a role in monitoring those watercraft; the provincial government does, and they've been doing a terrible job of monitoring those watercraft, and our irrigation infrastructure is at risk.

One final note. This is a long-standing issue. When Don Getty was defeated in the 1989 election, he sought to run for office in a by-election in Stettler, and part of his commitment to the people of Stettler, if they were to vote for him, was the promise to sustain the water levels in Buffalo Lake for a long time to come. All of that water came out of the Red Deer River, which doesn't have the capacity to sustain stabilizing the lake levels at Buffalo Lake. Now, it's my understanding that the government has stopped that, but we can't trust this government to manage our water effectively.

We should vote against this motion.

5:40

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in this House to speak in favour of Motion 512 and to support the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, who has taken a great interest in a very important issue. They say, Mr. Speaker, that whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting over. I wouldn't know anything about that, but I would say that that's probably pretty true.

Just before I get into the contents of my speech, I want to talk really quickly and correct the record. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said that the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek was implying that he didn't feel we needed to make sure that we had the agreements with our neighbours intact. That is absolutely not what I heard, and I know that that's not what the member was ever saying. I want to make sure that that record was cleared up. The member's comment, from what I heard, was that the average is that about 70 per cent of the water is leaving the province and going to Saskatchewan whereas our agreement actually says 50 per cent. In reality we're being great neighbours, historically, yet you would have listened to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and you would have thought we'd been terrible neighbours.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I know that Saskatchewan is very grateful that this government is in now. I do remember when the NDP were in for four years, during 2015 to 2019, and the Conservative government in Saskatchewan was not pleased about working with them. I know that they are quite pleased with working with us at this point, but I digress.

Let me talk about what I think is valuable to this and germane to this argument and this motion. In this motion it says, "support the government's ongoing commitments." I think that that's an important verbiage because we have seen in our history the past governments, past Conservative governments, to be truthful – we've had over 40, I think, 48 years of Conservative governments in this province, which I'm very grateful for. My family grew up here, and we've benefited greatly from having Conservative governments. The idea that the government's ongoing commitments – Mr. Speaker, 70 per cent of all of Canada's irrigation land is right there in southern Alberta, 70 per cent of Canada, the full, entire size of Canada, something that a lot of people don't really know.

Past governments showed their commitment and the value and the forethought to be able to see the importance of water, and the ability to support past governments through also providing great leadership when it comes to water and water management is something that our government in the last go-around, the last four years before this government, was doing. We made record investments in irrigation, again, in the last go-around. We saw a billion dollars invested in irrigation. We had a 280,000 irrigated acre expansion.

Now, there are people who say: "Why would you do that? You shouldn't be able to do that. That's a closed basin." The reality is that because the farming practices down there were so state of the art, they were able to find 35 per cent efficiencies. Actually, they found more than that, but of the 280,000 irrigated acre expansion, 35 per cent of that expansion was found because of the efficiencies that they found in the systems. You know, I take my hat off to the innovative farmers and ranchers and irrigators that we have in this province. They have been great stewards of the land. They have been incredible entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker, that area down there and much of the eastern part of this province: they call it the badlands, and there's a reason for

that. Historically those areas could grow hardly anything because they just did not get the water. But there was something that our forefathers and foremothers saw. They saw that if you add water to it – they've got the heat units in these areas. If you just add water to it, you can grow amazing crops. It's got a sandy loam composition, so you can grow amazing crops: potato and sugar beets. In fact, in the south we grow 60 specialty crops. These specialty crops are high-value, high-yield, high-margin crops that actually feed the world.

When we talk about expanding irrigation, when we talk about an ongoing commitment to water preservation and to making sure that we have enough water, it's because we're taking that and we're putting it onto fields. We're growing incredible yields, bumper crops year after year, in these areas to feed the world. We do that very well in Alberta. We are exporters of foodstuffs. We're exporters to the world. We provide the world with important food products. A few years ago we recognized that we were doing that pretty well but that we needed to invest some more, so we invested over a billion dollars into being able to have that expansion. I'm very proud of the work that our government did in making sure that we could not just build on the great work that was already done but see that expand exponentially in terms of what we can do.

As the world's geopolitical situation continues to unravel, they are going to look for places that are stable places like Alberta in order to be able to provide for and feed the world. It is incumbent upon us to remember the responsibility – the incredible responsibility – we have to feed the world. I'm concerned when I hear some people stand in this House and talk about other things that they say are of importance, but they forget the most important thing we can do: we can be productive with our land, and we can feed the world. There are more mouths to feed. There is a hierarchy of needs, whether some people opposite – and I know that because I've actually read their constitution. If you read their constitution and go into the appendix – and I've actually spoken about this a few times in this House, and I won't go into detail because I've said it many times – you can recognize that the members opposite don't recognize the hierarchy of needs.

But I would say that the most important thing we can do is that we can be good stewards of the land, the arable land that we have. We can put water onto what they used to call the badlands, and we can grow some of the best high-margin, high-value crops in the world. We can ship it all over the world, and we can help feed the mouths of the world. That is something we can all be proud of in this House and in Alberta, and I hope that we remember that that's the value of what we offer with this expansion that we're going to be doing.

Mr. Speaker, I want to finish with: my family lived in Okotoks for 10 years, and I remember that at the time they were having problems getting water. At the time they had said that they were going to cap how many houses can be built in Okotoks, so they capped it. You know what happened? It drove the price of houses up. Well, I was a beneficiary of that because I lived in Okotoks. My house doubled in value in three years. In that situation you can see the value of water. The reason why they couldn't expand is because they did not have the water resources.

So when the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek talks about this, he's not talking just about irrigated land. He's not talking just about farming. He's actually talking about growth. People want to come to Alberta because of the Alberta advantage. We've had it for many years. If we don't have the proper program and strategy for water, those people won't be able to come and build in these areas, like Okotoks, where they wanted to go. It is absolutely incumbent upon us to do this.

I want to finish with this. The hon. member said that we cannot transfer water from the north to the south. California is doing it right now. Why can't we?

5:50

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I think it's safe to say, after listening to debate in the House on this important matter, that on this side of the House beavers rule while on the other side muskrats only drool. Without further ado, I'll get into the meat and potatoes of the debate here this afternoon and try to use a little less invasive humour and talk about water, H₂O, a very, very important topic because, of course, we don't have enough of it in this province. That's, I think, something that the government benches seem to be forgetting with this Motion 512, the water management piece of legislation that they're bringing through, to talk about supporting our government's ongoing commitments.

You know, the Conservatives are supposed to conserve what we have, Mr. Speaker, knowing, of course, that water is a finite resource. We also recognize, hearing debate this afternoon from the Member for Banff-Kananaskis and the distinguished Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who both have a much deeper knowledge than I do in the technicalities with respect to water and hydrology and conservation, that it is a finite resource. How does this motion address that limited quantity? How does it address conservation?

Well, in fact, I would contend, Mr. Speaker, that it doesn't address conservation. In fact, if you look at the language of the motion, it does the opposite. It would

support the government's ongoing commitments to

- (i) review Alberta's water management strategy to increase the availability of water and water licences,

as if we have the ability to do that, to increase water. It's a finite resource we can't increase on our own, of course. We've got what we've got, and we have to make use of it respectfully.

- (ii) evaluate potential long-term infrastructure investments to ensure the sustainable management and safeguarding of water resources for the benefit of all Albertans.

Well, once again, this goes to the heart of the matter with respect to this motion, and that is that they're looking at infrastructure investments to gather water from one basin to another, interbasin transfers, spending billions and billions of dollars to allow us to expand water consumption when, in fact, what we need to be doing is looking at how we're using water right now and perhaps do something called conservation, which one would expect of a Conservative government, not necessarily looking to exploit a resource such as groundwater, which we certainly don't really know about well enough. We don't have an inventory of it.

Rather than looking at conservation, Mr. Speaker, and doing so in a way that really prioritizes how we use water in this province, the government, with this Motion 512, is in section (b) urging the government

to expand these commitments by undertaking a comprehensive and updated assessment of water resources... including the consideration of interbasin water transfer as a means of optimizing the use of... water resources,

which does nothing to conserve the resource, does nothing to recognize that we have a finite resource that we need to manage properly. It does nothing to take a look at how we got where we are right now.

It's common knowledge that we have reduced our wetlands in this province by about 90 per cent compared to what they were previous to European occupation of North America. Imagine that, Mr. Speaker, that 90 per cent more wetlands than we have right now

is what we actually started off with. Now we're in a position where we have a shortage of water, and we're considering interbasin transfers and massive infrastructures and dams and reservoirs to preserve water when, in fact, the beavers of Alberta would do us a wealth of benefit by them being allowed to preserve and grow the wetlands that we had before. So there's investment required there that definitely would be an investment that...

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. However, pursuant to Standing Order 8(3), which provides five minutes for the mover of the motion to close debate, I now call on the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek to do so.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Motion 512 calls upon the Legislative Assembly to support the government's ongoing commitments to review Alberta's water management strategy and evaluate potential long-term infrastructure investments. It recognizes the need for a holistic and forward-looking approach to water management that balances the demands of urbanization, industrial development, agriculture, and environmental conservation, which is part of the current strategy.

The motion also highlights consideration for interbasin transfers. In doing so, the motion does not necessarily assume that this is what should be adopted to implement today but, rather, that it's time to incorporate serious study as part of our serious solution tool box for tomorrow.

I remind members that we're looking at a population that's going to double between now and 2050. The Century Initiative says that between Edmonton and Calgary we will have 15.5 million people by the end of this century. How are we going to do that with the increased electricity requirements, industrialization, agriculture, and residences unless we look at all options and evaluate them based on the technical issues and economics? Of course, economics has to be incorporated in that.

I recognize that interbasin transfers would take several years, even decades to fully evaluate. Just look at how long it's taken just to talk about and deal with the issues of storage on the Bow River, which, you know, we're still talking about 11 years after the floods of 2013. Given such time frames it is incumbent that we begin the process of evaluating the options now, because it will take years and perhaps decades to move forward on such things. These are complicated issues.

Historically there has been some opposition to any discussion on interbasin transfers. Certainly, there are significant issues that we must take into consideration, including the threat of species or microbiological contaminations and other viable considerations and, like I said, of course, economics. However, we must recognize that technology has evolved. There are proven solutions to many of these previous issues and dozens and dozens of examples of positive interbasin transfers that have occurred in Canada and around the world. This is happening all the time. Why are we so particular that we can't even look at this? We must recognize that effective water management requires collaboration and co-operation across multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, Indigenous communities, industry partners, and civil society organizations. By working together, we can develop innovative solutions to address Alberta's water challenges and ensure the long-term health and prosperity of our province.

While we may have made strides in water management since Premier Lougheed's time, the challenges we face remain formidable. Alberta's population growth brings with it certain challenges for water management. Disproportionate distribution of water resources across our province also exacerbates the vulnerability of certain regions to water scarcity.

Motion 512, which I have the honour of introducing today, would build upon Premier Lougheed's legacy by reaffirming our commitment to safeguarding Alberta's water resources for future generations. This motion underscores the imperative of reviewing our water management strategy, evaluating infrastructure investments, and exploring innovative solutions to address the growing water demand, many of which have already been discussed here today on both sides of the House.

As we debate the merits of this motion, let us heed Premier Lougheed's cautionary tale and act with foresight and resolve. Let us seize this opportunity to demonstrate leadership in water stewardship, ensuring that Alberta remains a beacon of sustainability and resilience

in the face of mounting challenges. If passed, Motion 512 would represent a critical step towards safeguarding Alberta's water resources for future generations and a necessary foundation for a more resilient and sustainable water future for all Albertans.

With this, I urge all members to please support this motion. Thank you very much.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 512 carried]

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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