



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, November 25, 2024

Day 72

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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United Conservative: 49

New Democrat: 37

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, November 25, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our King, to 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 Nwando Amobi. I invite you to participate in the language of your 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, 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 also acknowledge that the province of Alberta exists within treaties 4, 7, 8, and 10 territories and the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, I do have a number of visitors and guests joining us today. It's my absolute pleasure to introduce a special visitor to the Speaker's gallery this afternoon, the consul general of Japan in Calgary, Mr. Wajima. Born in Tokyo, he has an impressive 33-year career in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before his posting in Calgary he was the senior coordinator at the central and southeastern Europe division. Some of his prior postings include Hungary and Los Angeles. He is accompanied by Dr. Bilash, the honorary consul general of Japan in Edmonton, and Ms Okada, the vice-consul of public relations and culture of the Japan consulate general in Calgary. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

For those of you who were paying attention, last week I was so eager to introduce this visitor that I held a dress rehearsal on Thursday. So for my second time it's my pleasure to introduce the former member joining us in the gallery this afternoon. The hon. Deron Bilous is the 829th member elected to the Assembly. He served as the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview from 2012 to 2023. He is joined in the gallery by Dylan Topal, senior consultant,

Counsel Public Affairs; Zach Steele, chairman of Cariboo Clean Fuels; CEO Bob Blattler; and adviser Jeff Crone. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, today we were led in the singing of *O Canada* by Nwando Amobi. Nwando loves singing and has been singing in her church choir since she was a teenager. She's also a member of a small choral group that she enjoys leading. I invite her to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the 35 grade 6 students from A. Blair McPherson school. I ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and introduce the students of grade 6 from Garneau school in the wonderful constituency of Edmonton-Strathcona. They are, I believe, accompanied by their teacher Tessa Hornbeck. I hope that's true. Either way, I would ask that they all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, it's an honour to rise and introduce Jaymie Fallon's family: her father, Matthew, her mother, Mani, and her sister, Ruby. Jamie's the wonderful LC for myself, the MLA for Leduc-Beaumont, and the MLA for Cypress-Medicine Hat. They're visiting us here today, but tomorrow is an exciting day, as it's Jaymie's convocation from her university. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat has an introduction.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise and introduce members of the search-and-rescue advisory committee. In the gallery today we have got Brian, Doug, Luke, Jeremy, Joe, Jamie, Dave, Sheldon, Sebastien, Rosemary, and Paul and John from STARS, HALO, rural crime watch, Parks Canada, the association of police chiefs, RCMP, AHS, and the Alberta Emergency Management Agency . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you members of We Together Strong Community group and their president, Rajeev Maheshwari. They represent an active community group that distributed cooked meals to those who needed them during the Jasper forest fires this year and also in Grande Prairie. So not only from the bottom of my heart but for the members for West Yellowhead and Grande Prairie-Wapiti, please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce members from the We Together Strong Community: Sanjiv Gupta, Anuj Gupta, and Gurbinder Rajpoot. Their charitable work speaks for itself: more than 15,000 food hampers delivered since 2010. I ask those individuals to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you my guest Tarra Carlson, who is an autistic Albertan who shows up regularly to make sure she can do everything she can to keep this government accountable. Please give her a warm welcome.

Mr. Glubish: Mr. Speaker, earlier today I had the pleasure of meeting with some students from Holy Redeemer Catholic school, who are visiting us today. If they're in the Chamber, I'd like for you to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka has a statement to make.

Affordable Housing Partnership Program

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's government is committed to ensuring Albertans have housing options that meet their unique needs and circumstances. That is why last week the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services announced a critical investment of up to \$150 million into the affordable housing partnership program, the largest round of funding to date. This program encourages creativity and innovation and supports a range of housing options, including specialized housing, mixed-income housing, and mixed-use housing. Since its inception in 2022 the AHPP has made a real difference for Albertans, supporting more than 1,500 housing units and more than 300 shelter spaces across the province.

1:40

Just to name a few successful projects, previous rounds of AHPP funding supported \$14.7 million toward Civida's Lendrum mixed-income housing development in Edmonton, \$4 million towards Rocky View Foundation to support the conversion of a hotel into seniors' housing in Airdrie, and \$4 million towards the Fresh Start Recovery Centre in Calgary. These are just a few examples, and I'm pleased to share that this new round of funding will help meet the housing needs of even more individuals and families in our province. This isn't all we're doing, Mr. Speaker. Together with our partners Alberta's government is supporting \$9 billion in housing investments to provide affordable housing for 25,000 more families by 2031.

We are making major investments to build new homes, improve existing affordable housing, and deliver programs that improve access to housing. The previous NDP government approach resulted in the affordable housing wait-list growing by 76 per cent. On this side of the aisle we're taking real action and investing in programs to meet the affordable housing needs of all Albertans. Mr. Speaker, our government knows there's no one-size-fits-all solution to meet the housing needs, but through these critical investments and by working with our partners, we can get a step closer to meeting the housing needs of all Albertans.

International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

Ms Hayter: On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women I rise with a shocking statistic. Every 10 minutes somewhere in the world a woman is murdered by her partner or a family member. In 2023 alone 51,100 women's lives ended this way; each one of them was someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's mother. Globally 1 in 3 have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. I want

every member in this House to sit with that number for a moment. Look around at the women in your life, your colleagues, your family members, your constituents: 1 in 3.

The global crisis of violence against women is intensifying. It's spreading into our workplaces and into our online spaces, and Alberta is no different. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters' numbers tell a devastating story: a shocking 19 per cent increase in women and children needing shelter from abuse in 2023, but, even more heartbreaking, our shelters were forced to turn 32 per cent more people away than the year before, not because they wanted to but because they simply had no space.

One-third more Albertans fleeing for their lives are being told there's now nowhere for them to go, and how does this government respond? By diverting time and resources away from this crisis to instead push through politics that further harm vulnerable women in our communities. They're leaving our shelters chronically underfunded. They're leaving sexual assault survivors with one-month-long wait-lists for counselling. They're creating an environment where some women, particularly our transgendered sisters, feel even more afraid to access the limited services we do have.

The solution is clear. We need robust responses. We need real accountability for perpetrators. We need well-resourced strategies and increased funding for women's organizations. Women and girls across Alberta are watching. They're waiting, they're suffering, and they cannot wait any longer for this government to finally choose them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat has a statement.

Search-and-rescue Operations

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Search-and-rescue, or SAR, operations are time critical, complex, and involve a variety of skills and expertise to save lives in the most challenging of situations. These search-and-rescue teams take part in ground, air, mountain, and water operations across the province and in some tragic situations even underwater recovery operations.

Their work demands co-ordination, precision, but, most of all, sacrifice. They put the needs of others before their own as recently seen in my riding, where on November 24 SAR teams went into action to find a missing hunter. SAR volunteers gathered to fight freezing temperatures, fluctuating weather, and the darkness of night in attempts to locate a missing hunter. Because of the rapid response of local SAR teams, this hunter was found alive at approximately 4 a.m. To those who aided in finding this hunter: thank you. Situations like these demonstrate how important SAR organizations are, responding whenever and wherever Albertans need them.

Mr. Speaker, across the province not all regions have the same access to SAR services due to distance between teams, resources, or other factors. This is why the work of the search-and-rescue advisory committee is so vital, bringing together 16 SAR organizations and stakeholders to discuss recommendations to improve operations across the province. The feedback and expertise of these SAR professionals have allowed the committee to review a number of recommendations to improve Alberta's SAR operations.

I'm honoured to be joined by members of the committee in the gallery today and recognize the profound impact they have on Albertans. Mr. Speaker, they are proof that not all heroes wear capes. Thank you again to the search-and-rescue volunteers and professionals across the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Government Policies

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing that Albertans are getting used to under this UCP government, it is that they are expected to pay more but get less. The UCP are increasing insurance premiums, giving Albertans a 15 per cent hike. This will cost, on average, hundreds of dollars more a year.

They're playing games with deindexation, meaning that Albertans could see the government take more of their income, in a move that their former leader says was a "back door tax increase." The same move could see Albertans with disabilities and seniors see their benefits cut thanks to the highest inflation in the country. This government is increasing costs on buying a house, on fuelling our cars, and has allowed rent to skyrocket at the highest rate in Canada, all in the midst of an affordability crisis.

But let's give the government the credit they deserve. They have addressed some costs, for the benefit of themselves and their buddies, that is. One of the first orders of business for this government was to protect the gifts and tickets they can receive, and knowing that the cost of living is making it harder for many to make ends meet, this government last week approved what the energy minister said was a "big, fat pay raise," doubling the pay for their friends on the Alberta Energy Regulator board.

Albertans are struggling, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has the highest inflation and the lowest minimum wage in Canada, but this government won't lift a finger to ensure that all Albertans can afford groceries, rent, and insurance. Alberta is in the midst of a health care crisis, a housing crisis, and an affordability crisis. Albertans deserve a government that will stand up for them, and that's not the UCP. But in 2027 they will have the chance to elect an Alberta NDP government that will make their lives more affordable.

Provincial Passenger Rail Plan

Mr. Wiebe: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's government is laying the tracks for a more connected and sustainable future with the development of a passenger rail master plan. This ambitious initiative is poised to reshape how Albertans move across our province, creating opportunities for economic growth, community connection, and more options for businesses and families. To inform this plan, the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors hosted the very first passenger rail forum, bringing together global experts from places like Ontario, California, Italy, Spain, and Japan. These leaders shared invaluable insights on governance, procurement, and operations. By learning from their experiences, Alberta is building a foundation for success.

But, Mr. Speaker, it isn't just about adopting global best practices. It's also about addressing the unique needs of Albertans. That's why we've launched an online survey, inviting Albertans to share their perspectives on the future of passenger rail. Whether it's connecting Edmonton to Calgary or better linking rural and urban communities, this survey ensures that every voice can help shape this plan. Additionally, Alberta's government will host regional open houses in early 2025 to further engage municipalities, Indigenous communities, and industry leaders.

By crystallizing our shared vision, we are creating a rail system that meets the unique needs of our province. This plan isn't just about infrastructure; it's about opportunity. The passenger rail master plan will include a 15-year delivery road map, financial models, and governance recommendations to ensure long-term success.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's future runs on rails, and through bold leadership, collaboration, and public engagement we are ensuring that the future is built for Albertans by Albertans. Thank you.

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

Commercial Vehicle Insurance Costs

Member Boparai: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to highlight the significant financial challenges facing commercial drivers, particularly those who live in Calgary-Falconridge and greater northeast Calgary, where many families depend on these jobs for their livelihood. These workers are disproportionately impacted by rising insurance costs and the lack of government support. This government has done nothing to ensure commercial drivers have affordable insurance. In fact, their costs have soared. Insurance premiums for taxi and truck drivers in Alberta have risen beyond reasonable limits, making it increasingly difficult for workers to afford basic coverage. Worse, taxi driver insurance does not cover hail, theft, or fire, leaving drivers exposed to additional financial risks. In addition to insurance-related challenges, Calgary has experienced several severe hailstorms since 2019, causing millions in damage, particularly to commercial vehicles, including trucks and taxis.

The UCP government has only allowed costs to skyrocket instead of a better commercial insurance system. Today thousands of commercial drivers in Calgary and their families are directly impacted by these escalating costs. Many of these workers, particularly from racialized and newcomer communities, have turned to transportation jobs as a path to financial stability and upward mobility. However, the current economic environment threatens to undermine this opportunity for success. The UCP government must act urgently to enhance insurance coverage, provide financial relief for hailstorm damage, and support these communities who rely on transportation work for their livelihoods.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Primary Health Care in Lethbridge

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, Lethbridge families are desperate to find a family doctor. The Premier has failed to recruit family doctors to our fourth-largest city. Not a single family doctor in Lethbridge is accepting new patients. The situation is so bad under this UCP government that family doctors are literally packing up and leaving for places like British Columbia. Why, when family doctors are so essential to keeping Albertans healthy, has this Premier and her government chased family doctors out of Lethbridge?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Why, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good news to report. We have an arrangement with the University of Lethbridge to start training 50 family doctors every single year, not only in Lethbridge but also in Grande Prairie. This was a recommendation from the Alberta Medical Association. One of the things they observed is that if you train doctors in southern Alberta, they're likely to stay in southern Alberta. We know that in future years this is going to result in every community in southern Alberta being able to keep and retain more family doctors. We're currently sitting at about 120 family physicians in Lethbridge, and we're seeing that number continue to grow.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, we need doctors to train new doctors, and I understand that's been a bit of a challenge. The government's own

website today says that the only family doctors in the Lethbridge area accepting patients are in Milk River and Pincher Creek. Those two communities are an hour's drive away from Lethbridge. Tell that to a senior who needs to find a ride for a two-hour round trip to get health care. Our hospitals like Chinook regional can't handle folks going to the ER just to requisition a prescription or get a blood test. Why has the Premier chased doctors away from Lethbridge?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I mean, the Leader of the Official Opposition should know that there is a changing nature of primary care practice. In the past doctors would take on a 1,500 patient load. If you just do the math on that, in the past 120 doctors would have been able to see 180,000 patients, which is far more than the population of Lethbridge right now. As doctors get more and more trained and they work at hospitals, they're having smaller and smaller practices, which is the reason why we are expanding the scope of practice to other health professionals, so pharmacies can do more primary care and do prescribing, and nurse practitioners offer another option.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, the Premier should know that if a family is looking for a family doctor, there are zero available in Lethbridge. One in 5 families in Alberta cannot find a family doctor. We need people getting good health care. Instead, family doctors are closing their clinics, they're leaving patients stranded, and the current government has turned their back on the people of Lethbridge who need a family doctor. It's clear that the people of Lethbridge need an NDP MLA who believes in public health care. Instead of telling doctors to pack up, why won't the Premier join us in telling us: better is possible? Sign the contract that she's already promised she would.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have a fantastic MLA who's been doing double duty, representing both ridings of Lethbridge-East and Lethbridge-West, and we're grateful for his efforts in doing so. We're investing, as you know, in expanding the capacity not only of pharmacists but also nurse practitioners, and we're working very closely with the Alberta Medical Association on a new funding model. We know and the Leader of the Official Opposition knows that the changing nature of primary practice means that we need to do team-based care. The new funding model will allow for doctors to lead a practice but also bring in other health professionals, and we'll be able to fill those gaps.

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

Automobile Insurance Reform

Ms Gray: Albertans pay the highest auto insurance in all of Canada, and this Premier has announced that it's going to stay the highest and go up even more, way up. If you pay \$3,000 right now for your car insurance, the Premier's new insurance scheme is going to drive that up by \$225 next year and then \$240 the year after. When insurance lobbyists come calling, this Premier always sure does say: go ahead; jack up your rates. Why is the Premier's new auto insurance scheme going to cost Albertans hundreds of more dollars that they just don't have?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier has risen.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that we did, as we were doing the analysis of how to change the system, was that we capped the amount of increase on good drivers to 3.7 per cent. We're increasing that cap slightly to 5 per cent, and then we're also allowing for a 2.5 per cent increase across the board to cover natural disaster coverage. The Member for Calgary-Falconridge was just talking about the hailstorms. We've had hailstorms. We have also had fires. We've had floods. We've had ice storms. All of these things add costs, and the insurance model needs to be able to pay for those.

Ms Gray: The Premier has no vision. Public auto insurance could have been seriously considered. You know what they have in other provinces? Hail and severe weather. You know what they have in other provinces? Large trucks and SUVs. They also have affordable insurance. Albertans are sick of this Premier's economic agenda that leaves them with the highest auto insurance in the country, highest inflation in the country, highest utility costs in the country, lowest minimum wage in the country. Why is the Premier refusing to explore a public option that would save Albertans money?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our care-first model, which we'll be implementing as of January 2027, looks over at NDP Manitoba for inspiration on how to put care first. Manitoba, run by the NDP, has the most generous care-first model, and we wanted to make sure that we were offering the most generous care-first model. We shouldn't have a situation where when you get into an injury accident, the first thing you have to do is call a lawyer because the benefits schedule is so poor. We want to make sure that the benefits schedule is there to meet the needs of the majority of people who get injured. That's what we're going to do.

Ms Gray: Governments of completely different political stripes have public auto insurance, and as a result drivers in both B.C. and Saskatchewan pay way less. The Premier's own report says that a public option would save drivers \$765 a year. With 3.7 million vehicles in the province Albertans would save \$2.8 billion in just one year, says the Premier's own commissioned report. Why is the Premier refusing to consider that kind of public auto insurance, that would immediately save Alberta drivers hundreds of dollars a year, instead of promising them they're going to go up now?

The Speaker: The Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When our new model is implemented, not only will it give the best care options in the country, because it's a care-first approach modelled after Manitoba, but it will also reduce premiums by, we estimate, a minimum of \$400 per insurance policyholder. That allows for us to have the balance of both. When we went out and asked Albertans what they want, they want the choice of more than one. I know that the member opposite believes in public monopolies, doesn't believe in the private sector the way we do. We are offering a private-sector option so people have choice.

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

Homeless Supports and Affordable Housing

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, the cold snap and heavy snowfall means that the record-high population of people living unhoused on Alberta's streets has nowhere to turn. In Calgary the 410 beds are full at both Mustard Seed locations. This is a crisis. Without

affordable housing and with some shelters already saying that they have no space left, people have no options. With the temperature dropping below minus 20 in both Edmonton and Calgary this weekend, where are folks supposed to go if shelters are full?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year we increased the number of shelter spaces, and we also have a number of emergency shelter beds when we get to those incredibly cold days. When we look at both what has happened in Calgary and Edmonton, we have had capacity. We have enough spaces to be able to provide a bed for every person who needs one; more than that, we believe that we've got to get people off the street permanently. The members opposite keep arguing for encampments. We know encampments are dangerous. They are a place where people have died. They are a place where people are being victimized. Our navigation centre connects them to the supports they actually need to get off the streets.

Ms Gray: Under this government we have only seen the number of people who need emergency shelters rising consistently year over year. According to the Mustard Seed shelter director, Dave Conrad: when you see the discrepancy between minimum wage and living wage, you begin to see that picture of how hard it is for individuals in our city to make ends meet. We know that this Premier refuses to increase the minimum wage. Instead, she's going to spend money on a record number of amputations for frostbite. Why, in a province as full of resources as this one, are so many people having amputations because of frostbite, and why are thousands of people unable to find shelter?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, 57 per cent of the people on minimum wage are young people below the age of 25, most of them working part-time and most of them living at home. So the member opposite shouldn't be conflating the two.

We have a very serious homelessness crisis, often as a result of mental illness, addiction, and so we need to connect people compassionately to the services that they need to not only get the interim support but get onto a road to recovery so that they are permanently off the street, permanently reconnected with community and their family and then have some brighter prospects to look forward to.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, did the Premier hear? The quote that I read was from the executive director of the Mustard Seed, Dave Conrad, where he sees the low minimum wage causing very real problems for his clients. It's not just people without housing who are stressed about the cost of living. More than a quarter of Calgarians surveyed by the Calgary Foundation say that they're stressed by their housing situation. Their rents are going up, and their mortgage rates are pushing them to the brink. More than half of working Calgarians say that they can't find an affordable place to live. In this Premier's Alberta the cost of living has driven record counts of homelessness on our streets. Why has this Premier neglected to make sure of warm, affordable housing for everyone?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we're doing is not standing in the way of the private sector to build more affordable housing. We have a couple of things that we've seen occur in the last year. Because we have worked with BILD, we have seen a record increase in year-over-year construction, new housing starts, which also includes purpose-built rentals. When you have more housing and you have more rental housing, it automatically then works to bring the prices down. Calgary: we're already seeing a year-over-

year decrease in rate of 8 per cent. We have also increased the amount of rental supplements so that we're able to support those who need it.

Alberta Energy Regulator Salaries

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Speaker, last week I questioned the minister of energy's pay raises to his friends on the AER's board. His defence: those salaries are "less than competitive." So I did my own research. The chair of the board of the B.C. oil and gas commission makes \$22,000 a year, \$150,000 less than the AER board chair. Will the minister admit that these pay hikes are not about competitive salaries but are just gifts to his friends?

Mr. Jean: No, I won't admit that. It is simply not true. What I do know is that the AER is the best regulator in the world. It regulates \$183 billion a year just in gas and oil for the people of Alberta, because they own the resource. It also regulates other things like lithium and helium and so many other things that possibly the member is not aware of because they're actually the things that are driving our economy, that are creating jobs, that are paying for hospitals and schools and bridges and roads. Maybe the member should recognize when we say that they are not being paid by taxpayers . . .

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

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I can see the minister is having a bit of a Joe Biden moment there answering the question.

Speaking of competitive wages, B.C.'s minimum wage is \$17.40 an hour. That's \$2.40 more than Alberta. Minimum wage workers in Alberta haven't had a raise in five years . . .

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Mr. Schmidt: . . . but last week the minister doubled the wages of the AER's board members, whose only work is to rubber-stamp the orders of that minister. Can the minister explain why people doing honest work in this province don't get a pay raise, but his friends get their pay doubled?

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:05.

The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hard-working Albertans across our province do earn an honest wage, the highest wages in the country, and when they earn that highest wage, they don't have to pay a sales tax. They don't have to pay health premiums. They pay the lowest taxes in the country, which is why, unlike the NDP, who saw 13 consecutive quarters of people choosing to leave Alberta, we are seeing record numbers of businesses and Canadians relocate to Alberta to experience Alberta under our management and not theirs.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I can understand why the energy minister didn't want to answer the second time around.

While we also have the highest unemployment rate of any province west of Newfoundland, we also have the highest pay raises for board members in the entire country. The minister continues to justify these wages, that are way higher than what my hard-working constituents are getting. Will the minister just do the right thing, stop the gravy train, and reverse these outrageous pay raises today?

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, the gravy train the member is talking about is the gravy train paid for by industry – paid for by industry – not by the people of Alberta. They are self-regulated, but at the highest standards in the world. I don't know what the member has a problem with.

They're paid for by industry. They're not paid for by taxpayers. They do the best job in the world, and they do it for the people of Alberta. What does he have against that?

Affordability Measures

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, 77 per cent of people in Edmonton and 80 per cent of Calgarians report that making ends meet is increasingly becoming difficult. Skyrocketing bills like auto insurance, utilities, and rent increases are hurting people's cost of living. This government has scrapped their so-called affordability action plan since the election. To the minister: where is the affordability action plan given the high cost of living and the stagnated wages for Albertans?

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to be part of a government that is taking a full ministerial approach to looking after the futures of Albertans. Every single ministry keeps affordability top of mind. We are doing the work that the NDP failed to do when they got off coal and charged taxpayers \$100 million a year for 15 years, when they signed agreements with renewable contracts where the price is too low. Don't worry; the taxpayers will bail them out; \$80 million just this year because of their bad contracts. We're not going to take any advice from the NDP on affordability. All they did was raise costs, drive people out, and leave us here to pick up the tab.

Mr. Haji: Given that groceries, housing, insurance, utilities are the most concerning expenses and given that the government is now imposing a 7.5 per cent auto insurance hike on Albertans this year and another 7.5 per cent next year, the double duty at 15 per cent that the Premier just mentioned, can the minister of affordability explain why he is choosing now to add more costs onto Alberta's families? Is that the double duty?

Mr. Neudorf: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite does ask a good question. This is a very difficult time for Albertans particularly with auto insurance. That's why the Minister of Finance has led a specialized team to work with industry to find the best option available to us. A care-first system will provide better, faster, and more affordable auto insurance to Albertans. We are seeking the fastest pathway there to keep the most jobs, providing the most benefit to Albertans. We're doing the hard work that the NDP had four years to do something about. They did nothing, left 40 per cent of people without insurance at all. We're fixing the problem they left behind.

Mr. Haji: Given that Alberta has the highest inflation in the country, making life more unaffordable for Albertans, given that the Premier has not taken real action to lower costs but worries about how gifts she receives are impacted by the inflation and given that the minister is more worried about supporting profitable insurance companies than coming up with an affordable action plan for Albertans, what will it take for this government to finally put Albertans first?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government continues to put Albertans first. That is what we do and what drives us to the office every single day. This is why we continue to stand up to the federal Liberal-NDP coalition that continues to drive up the carbon

tax, the single greatest cost to all Canadians. When will the NDP stand up for Albertans and stand with us and ask their leader to stop supporting a government that just charges them more and more in carbon tax, layering costs on Albertans, layering costs on Canadians, and driving us to the poorhouse? Do what's right.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Alberta Drilling Accelerator

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is a historic day for Alberta energy. The Minister of Environment and Protected Areas along with our esteemed Premier at the historic Leduc No. 1 site, the site that kicked off Alberta's oil and gas sector in 1947: this was the perfect location to announce \$50 million in support for the Alberta drilling accelerator. This is the first type of program of its kind in Canada. To the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas: why is this such a huge announcement for the future of Alberta energy development?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thanks to our geology expertise and the highly skilled workforce that we have, Alberta is known as an environmentally responsible energy producer of choice. Today we took another step forward by creating Canada's first-ever drilling accelerator. Whether it's geothermal renewable baseload energy or critical minerals that the world needs, this sends a message to industry leaders, investors, and innovators that the future of drilling and energy is, again, right here in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta energy is the key aspect for Canada's energy security across our country and given that Alberta is a major part of the United States' energy security through supplying them with 15 per cent of all their oil imports and given that Alberta is supporting Canada's first test site for advanced energy technologies and further given that this announcement includes big names like Halliburton, Eavor Technologies, and Tourmaline, to the same minister: can you tell us what it means for Alberta when companies like this continue to choose to innovate and build here instead of elsewhere?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, it was awesome to see so many industrial partners there at the announcement today. It also means that no one is moving and innovating faster and better than Alberta's entrepreneurs and industry leaders. When we look at countries like Germany, who moved too far, too fast to eliminate fossil fuels and were left struggling to provide affordable energy to their people, it was Eavor Technologies, based out of Calgary, that stepped up, using technologies perfected from our very own oil sands to help that country meet their energy needs. This accelerator will drive more innovation that can be tested here and used right around the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this funding will help us continue powering the world and meeting global demands year after year and further given that countries and companies from around the world continue to come to Alberta for a partner they can trust and given that the NDP told people that they should move to other provinces because they were embarrassed by the jobs in Alberta's energy sector and given that Alberta energy is the most responsible energy produced in the world, to the minister: how will

this funding help ensure Alberta continues to be a responsible producer of energy for years to come?

The Speaker: The minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As my colleague mentioned, unlike the members opposite, we are proud supporters of our energy industry. Alberta is stepping up to answer the call of rising global energy demand here and around the world. The world needs and wants our energy. It's not about choosing between oil and gas, geothermal, hydrogen, nuclear, or other energy sources. It's about leading the way in all of the above, and that's what we intend to do. The Alberta drilling accelerator will help us keep leading the way in meeting global demands for generations to come.

Deaths of Children in Care

Member Batten: Aden, age 20; Lucy, age 15; Mira, age 15; Montana, age 13; Gage, 18 months. Aden died of non-accidental injuries. Lucy, Mira, and Montana all passed away as victims of violence. Gage died of blunt force trauma. These five victims of violence, who will never grow and never get to live their lives, are just some of the children who lost their lives in government care this last year. The system has failed them. Instead of continuing to offer empty sympathies, can the minister explain today what he has done to ensure that these tragedies stop?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. The death of any child within the system or within the province of Alberta is a horrific event. As a father and as Minister of Children and Family Services my heart absolutely grieves any time I hear about these stories. That's why we're working with the OCYA on implementing these recommendations. Since 2013 we've implemented over 100. We know that these are making a positive difference in the system to help support children in care. We're going to continue to do more because we know that the children of this province are depending upon us to do the right thing.

Member Batten: Given that the minister has not actually implemented most of the recommendations and given that in March of this year Nina died at three weeks old, last December Jacy died at 10 weeks old, given that last September Gage died at 18 months old, Katie died at 23 months old, Ellen died at 21 weeks, and Hope died at two years old, given that there has not been a single piece of legislation, not a single motion, not even a question in this legislative session from that side of the House about this crisis in child intervention, what will it take for this government to end these tragedies?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Just to correct the record again, since 2013 CFS has implemented 105 of the 111 recommendations issued prior to this report, and five more are in progress. These recommendations are important. We take these extremely seriously, and we're always looking for additional ways that we can improve the system. The information in the report from the OCYA plays a key part in those recommendations on how we can improve the system.

Member Batten: Given that this year 44 young people died receiving government care, given that last year 50 young people died in the child intervention system and given that the year before 49 children died in the intervention system and given that the minister expresses his sympathies when he has the power to end the

crisis and the power to ensure these tragic losses end, will the minister today table in the House his plan to keep these children alive and stop saying he's done recommendations he hasn't?

Mr. Turton: Well, Mr. Speaker, the OCYA would disagree with the member opposite when she makes the allegation that we haven't implemented the recommendations because we have. We've implemented over 100 of the recommendations issued since 2013. Each and every single month we have on average over 9,000 children in care, and they access a number of programs and services that we have throughout my entire ministry as well as other ministries. We're taking a crossministerial approach when it comes to this very serious matter of keeping children safe here in our province.

Edmonton Police Commission Membership

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, it seems the minister of public safety has such a low opinion of the work of the Edmonton Police Commission that he's reaching in to as much as double the number of provincial representatives on it. He says he has to do this to urgently improve public safety. Now, I've talked with many Edmonton residents, business owners, and others about their concerns about safety. They've asked for more patrols, faster response times, investments to address the root causes of crime; not one has said that what we need is more police commissioners. So to the minister of public safety: how exactly does he feel adding more provincially appointed members to our police commission will urgently improve safety in our communities?

Mr. Ellis: I, too, Mr. Speaker, speak to members within the Edmonton community – in fact, I believe I have a meeting later on today speaking to some of the business community members – and I can tell you that what they don't agree with is the support for C-75, which has caused civil and social disorder, chaos, repeat criminal offenders to be committing havoc within the streets of Edmonton and throughout the province of Alberta and, quite frankly, the confederacy. There are ongoing social and civil disorders within the city of Edmonton. We need to make sure that we are proactively providing provincial resources to help the police service as well as the city of Edmonton.

Mr. Shepherd: Given that the Edmonton Police Service operates independently under the direction of the chief of police and the oversight of the Edmonton Police Commission and given that the chief of police makes all decisions about how EPS operates, including directing where front-line officers patrol, how often, and what strategies they use, and given that the province doesn't actually fund the commission to ensure public safety for Edmonton, to the minister of public safety: if the government believes the only way to improve safety in Edmonton is for him to add more hand-picked UCP members to the commission, who is this government suggesting is failing at their job? The commission or the chief of police?

2:20

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Speaker, I hope the member opposite read the amendments to the Police Act of 2022, which certainly give us the ability to promote up to 49 per cent on any police commission throughout the province of Alberta if, of course, the ministry deems that to be necessary. There are serious social and civil disorder issues. I hope that as somebody who represents Edmonton-City Centre, he looks outside and sees that occurring. We need to make sure that provincial resources get to the Edmonton Police Service, get to the city of Edmonton, so that we can address it, because those members support C-75 and the destruction of Canada.

Mr. Shepherd: Given that if the minister wants resources from the province to get to the EPS, he could write them a cheque and given that the CFIB survey on safety concerns shows that 83 per cent of business owners want government to take action on poverty reduction, affordable housing, addictions, and mental health issues and given that's also what I hear from front-line police officers, social workers, and others on the front lines and given that those are the responsibilities of the provincial government but given that the UCP doesn't seem to want to do their job – they're more interested in controlling and interfering with everyone else – to the minister. Municipalities across the province are concerned about safety, too. Is this what they should expect as well, more meddling and interference while this government's neglect makes their problems worse?

Mr. Ellis: Mr. Speaker, this government will put its record on public safety against the members opposite, against British Columbia, against anywhere where there is an NDP government. There is no one except maybe the members opposite who actually believe that the NDP can make anything better when it comes to public safety. When he talks about support, we gave a \$5 million grant to the city of Edmonton to clean up the city of Edmonton. We have provided 50 new police officers that we are directly funding on a predictable, sustainable basis for the city of Edmonton and the city of Calgary. We're going to continue to support law enforcement in this community.

Red Deer River Reservoir Feasibility Study

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, reliable access to water is fundamental to the sustainability and growth of Alberta communities, businesses, and the agricultural sector. Recognizing this, Alberta's government has launched a two-phase feasibility study to explore the potential for a new reservoir near Ardley on the Red Deer River. This project has a potential to significantly enhance water security, mitigate drought risks, and support economic growth in the province. Can the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas explain how this study aligns with Alberta's long-term strategy for sustainable water management and resource development?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of environment.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I do want to thank the member for this question and his interest and advocacy in both water and infrastructure. Demand for water is increasing as more families, businesses, and industries choose to live, work, and expand in central Alberta. By launching this new study, we're taking a good look at whether expanding water storage capacity on the Red Deer River will help reduce the risk of future droughts and meet the growing demands of water as well. This is part of our work to maximize Alberta's water supply and make every drop we have count.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for the response. Given that water security is essential for Alberta's growing communities and industries and given that this study includes key assessments such as stakeholder engagement, environmental impact analysis, and cost-benefit evaluations, can the same minister provide more details on how these study components will shape the government's decisions on future water infrastructure investments?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This study is about finding the facts. We need to invest in projects that work for Albertans and, of course, use tax dollars wisely. This multiyear study will explore the costs and value of constructing and operating the reservoir and its impacts on downstream communities, farmers and ranchers, and businesses. Once this study is complete, we will have the information needed to decide if this is right for central Alberta. Of course, then, if needed, we move on to the next steps, detailed engineering and design work, and regulatory approvals as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that reservoirs play a vital role in irrigation, drought management, water security, and flood protection and given Alberta's commitment to proactive water management with a \$4.5 million investment in Budget 2024 for this initiative and given the need to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability, can the same minister explain how this initiative, once completed, will reflect Alberta's broader efforts to build resilient infrastructure, mitigate challenges such as droughts, and support the long-term prosperity of families, businesses, and industries across the province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Water is a top of mind issue for all Albertans right across our province, and that's why the Premier has asked me to look at maximizing the water that we do have here in Alberta. We're stepping up to make Alberta more naturally resilient and create a 21st-century water management system. Along with this project we've launched the \$125 million drought and flood protection program and a province-wide review of water storage opportunities. We're also investing in wetlands and engaging on ways to modernize our current legislation, regulations, and policy when it comes to water use. All of this supports our growing communities and industry and helps make every drop count.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Municipal Growth Management Boards

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been informed that the growth management boards CMRB and EMRB will lose all provincial funding in 2025 and municipalities will no longer be mandated to participate. Why has the minister defunded the growth management boards with no consultation? Is he expecting municipal property taxpayers to make up the cost, or is he expecting the boards to just disappear?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I'm a little perplexed that the hon. member is so unhappy about an NDP policy. When the NDP put the growth boards in place, they always said the funding would be temporary. This is that policy coming to reality. I know all NDP policies are bad; apparently, they understand that now, too.

Mr. Kasawski: Given that the boards have been in place for 15 years, I'm not sure what the minister is talking about.

Given that regional boards work to attract and retain investment to create good-paying jobs which pay Albertans' mortgages and expenses, given that defunding these boards is just another hit to local municipalities trying to provide services to Albertans struggling to pay the bills, given regional boards develop growth plans to conserve

ag land, build infrastructure, diversify industries, and develop vibrant communities in Alberta, what happens to the regional plans if memberships in the boards by municipalities is voluntary?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member may not want to listen to me on this issue, but if he listens to the chair of the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board, this weekend he said, I believe: we work together not because the provincial government mandated us to do so; we worked because we understand the immense value of our work and how critical it is to the region's future. The responsible members of the municipalities in the Edmonton region and the Calgary region know they are an integral part of the growth and success of this province, and we support them in that.

Mr. Kasawski: Frankly, the minister's understanding and short-sightedness on this is astounding given that this board has created a regional agricultural master plan that is a core component of our 30-year growth plan for the region and given that without a mandate for municipalities to participate in EMRB, the agricultural master plan will have no teeth or requirement to be followed, how is this minister going to conserve prime agricultural lands and enable value-added agriculture, adding valuable jobs and GDP to the province, if this plan is not in place?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know that the folks across don't make it outside of the urban municipalities very often. If they had, they may have run into somebody from rural Alberta and they might have talked to them about the resolution passed at the rural municipalities of Alberta board in – oh, wait for it – November 2023. It says growth management board voluntary membership. So the member seems to be concerned about rural Alberta, but what the rural Albertans are telling the other folks is that they want a voluntary membership. Our government has said yes. Now, those folks over there say they listen, but I don't see any evidence of it.

Police Services Funding Model

Mr. Rowswell: Mr. Speaker, at the opening of the Rural Municipalities of Alberta fall convention Alberta's government announced that it has temporarily frozen the total amount that rural municipalities are responsible for paying for front-line policing costs under the provincial police service agreement. This pause is intended to allow time for the province to engage rural municipalities across the province about future policing needs. To the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services: what will this mean for our rural municipalities, especially as concerns about crime continue to rise due to the failed policies of the federal government?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of public safety.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and of course thank you to the member for the question. Look, we all know this. Repeat violent criminal offenders are wreaking havoc within not just Alberta but right throughout Canada, of course, because of the NDP-Liberal alliance. I know on this side of the House that we certainly understand that, and I thank the member for the question on that.

Alberta's government continues to take action. Look, the expiring regulation would have municipalities seeing a 39 per cent increase when it comes to their costs. I mean, this is not acceptable, Mr. Speaker. We understand that. This freeze is going to give rural municipalities stability, predictability. This is something that they need to allow for meaningful engagement, to ensure that we are working with our municipalities on a very important issue.

2:30

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

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that response. Given that this government understands the importance of stability and predictability, particularly when it comes to budget planning, and further given that Alberta's government is expanding its efforts by paying a higher portion of the cost so that a municipality's cost remains the same, to the same minister: can you provide the House more clarity on the police funding model, especially to rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of public safety.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah. Thank you to my esteemed colleague there for that question. Look, the province is responsible for providing policing services to municipal districts, counties, or urban municipalities with populations less than 5,000 people. Of course, we have this increase in response to that rural crime issue. The Alberta government announced increased funding for the RCMP in 2019. This helped create, Mr. Speaker, hundreds of additional RCMP positions right across the province. I think it is very important that we make sure that we continue to support all municipalities in the province to make sure that we have adequate policing services for all municipalities due to these rising crime rates caused by the NDP-Liberal alliance in Ottawa.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you once again, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta's government is expanding the safer communities and neighbourhoods unit with the creation of a new team based in Red Deer to serve the province's central region and further given that an increased sheriff presence will mean police services can remain more focused on front-line duties while increasing local knowledge and building stronger relationships with the community, to the same minister: are there any plans to further expand the safer communities and neighbourhoods unit and protect the northern Alberta rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah. Well, Mr. Speaker, again thank you to the member for that question. The simple answer is yes. I want to talk about some of the great things that the safer communities and neighbourhoods teams have been doing. Of course, since 2008 the SCAN teams have investigated more than 9,500 properties, issued 126 community safety orders. This is why we recently funded 20 new officers to expand the safer communities and neighbourhoods teams. These teams are ready and willing to continue to augment and support RCMP and other police services right throughout the province. Let's make sure that we continue to support the RCMP. Let's make sure that we continue to support all the police services in Alberta that provide those . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Wait-lists for Disability Programs

Ms Renaud: Mr. Speaker, I've raised the alarming trend of exploding wait-lists for disability services many times in this place only to be met with weird comments about unrelated subjects, so let's try again. The UCP government stopped reporting on wait-lists for disabled people in 2021. When they stopped reporting, we knew that 4,400 children and families were in planning, which is what

government calls wait-listed. To the minister: how many children who qualified for the family supports for children with disabilities are currently on the waiting list or whatever you choose to call it?

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

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We continue to run the family support for children with disabilities program the exact same way that it was actually run underneath the NDP government. About a year ago we increased money towards wait-list work, particularly around Calgary, where we saw the largest wait-list. That was able to reduce a large amount of the wait-list. Like all of our programs, we see in the social services sector increased pressure because of what's taking place with population growth. We are committed to continuing to run the family support for children with disabilities program, but at the same time we're also working with sector advocates to be able to make sure that it can have the longevity that it needs.

Ms Renaud: Given that we all watched and listened in April of 2023 as the minister, Jeremy Nixon, promised disabled Albertans and their families that the UCP would address exploding wait-lists by investing an additional \$240 million and given that, last we heard, over 1,000 adults and over 4,000 children were waiting for supports, many for more than a year, and given that we know how dangerous it is for people to linger on wait-lists, to the minister: why is this government not reporting progress on addressing the wait-lists for disability programs like FSCD and PDD? If you're proud of it, tell us the answer.

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, this government spends a lot more than just a quarter of a billion dollars when it comes to disabilities. In fact, we spend billions of dollars: \$1.7 billion on AISH alone, almost \$300 million when it comes to children with disabilities, a little bit over a billion when it comes to persons with development disabilities programs, as examples. We continue that investment. In fact, we've increased that investment this year, and we'll have to increase it again next year based on what we're seeing with population growth in our province. We remain committed to helping those with disabilities. That's why we continue to have the best benefits in the country, and in fact we have evidence that people are moving here just for those disability benefits.

Ms Renaud: Given that one of my constituents recently contacted me that her nine-year-old disabled son was assessed and approved to receive services from FSCD well over a year ago without any indication of how much longer they'll wait and given that this child is struggling in the classroom and at risk of losing after school care, Mr. Speaker, given that we've heard this government say that they're investing in reducing the wait-list but they refuse to tell us the numbers, it makes me question: why is that? Where did that \$240 million go, and what is the wait-list number?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, that \$240 million the hon. member refers to was spent on reducing the wait-list. We saw situations in Calgary where the wait-list went down considerably because of that investment, primarily in things like IT and caseworkers, and we've seen the results of that. At the same time, we have to balance the population growth that we're seeing. We continue to do so. We are having serious conversations with the disability sector when it comes to children, and you can anticipate that there will be more conversations with the public to be able to make sure that program can be here for many generations to come. Yelling in the Legislature ain't going to help make that any faster.

Funding for Educational Support Staff

Member Hoyle: Mr. Speaker, educational assistants, library technicians, and administrative assistants are among the 3,200 support workers who every day make sure our children get the best possible education, but their pay isn't keeping up with the rapidly rising cost of living. The insidious consequence is that we lose a renewed workforce of people becoming educational support workers. Inclusive education cannot happen without support. Why hasn't this government made sure that support workers are paid a good living wage?

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

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We recognize, absolutely, the incredible hard work that EAs and other support staff provide to our students and to kids across the province, which is why we've made sure in our latest budget to dedicate almost \$1.5 billion in learner supports to our school authorities. These funds go to our school boards for our school boards to manage but primarily for the purpose, of course, of learner supports so that they can hire additional support staff as needed, as the school board determines, to support those students.

Member Hoyle: Given that I recently spoke with a teacher who told me that the past few years have been the most difficult she's faced in her career as an educator and given that she's seen a steady decline in the number of educational support staff in her school and given that she said that four years ago a sick EA would mean a substitute would be called, but now there are none and given that it's unsafe for students that need support to not have those workers in the classroom, to the minister: what's this government's plan to make sure all the necessary staff are available to support children and families in our schools?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Happy to talk a little bit more about our plan. Our plan includes making sure that we're addressing classroom complexity. That's why our government created the classroom complexity grant last year, which provides over \$120 million over three years specifically to help school boards hire additional support staff. We're also working to ensure that learner supports, as I mentioned in my previous answer, are available to all school boards. We're also making sure to address funding needs. We just recently provided \$125 million in new funding to our school boards, and there's more as well that we're doing.

Member Hoyle: Well, given that educational assistants work 35 hours a week, 10 months a year and earn an average of \$27,000 a year and given that many of these workers are not only working multiple jobs but visiting food banks and struggling to pay their bills and given that educational support staff are dedicated and passionate about supporting students but they're pulled in multiple directions when they can't make ends meet on one job, does this minister really believe that underpaying and undervaluing these critical workers will benefit children and families in Alberta as a whole?

Mr. Nicolaides: Mr. Speaker, of course, EA salaries are determined by their employer. That, in this scenario, of course, is the school boards. We do ensure that we work with our school boards to provide them with the funding that they need. As I mentioned a moment ago, just as recently as this past summer we provided over \$120 million in new operational funding to our school boards for them to use for their

needs as they determine best. Of course, we are continuing to work on other improvements to help ensure that our school boards have the resources that they need.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner has a question to ask.

2:40 Pharmacy Services Funding

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's pharmacists play a crucial role in health care delivery, providing Albertans with additional access to important primary care services, especially in rural areas like my constituency of Taber-Warner. At the same time, Alberta's government is looking to reduce the forecasted overspend in this year's publicly funded pharmacy costs. Can the Minister of Health please provide clarity on how these changes will impact patient access to essential pharmacy services, particularly in rural communities, where some districts only have one pharmacy?

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

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Pharmacists are essential and valued members of our health care teams, and I want to assure you that access to pharmacy services will not be affected. The Alberta Pharmacists' Association, or the RxA, as they're known, worked with us on a mutually agreed upon annual budget. This year's costs are forecast to exceed that budget for the fiscal year, and some changes were necessary to prevent the budget overrun. Access to these clinical pharmacy services along with other core pharmacy services like pharmacist prescribing and renewals will still be available to all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for her response. Given that on October 22 the Alberta Pharmacists' Association was notified that Alberta's government will be introducing several cost-saving measures to reduce pharmacy fees for select clinical pharmacy services, specifically care plans and follow-ups, to the same minister: could you please tell the House and the pharmacists in my constituency how this government plans to ensure that these adjustments do not undermine the broader role of pharmacists in supporting primary care across Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to emphasize that these cost-saving measures were introduced to ensure that pharmacy costs stay within the budget. We recognize that pharmacists provide Albertans with access to basic primary care services, often during evenings and other weekends. Their accessibility is especially important to Albertans who live in rural and remote areas of the province. Pharmacists will continue to provide primary care services to Albertans, and they will continue to play a crucial role within a patient's primary care team. Importantly, access to these services will remain unchanged.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that some of my constituents who work in the pharmacy industry are worried about these new changes and how it could affect the way they conduct their business and further given that pharmacists are a vital part of our communities that we want to continue to wholeheartedly support, to the same minister: can you provide more clarity to

pharmacists across Alberta on how the Alberta government will continue to support them and their practices to meet the needs of their ongoing communities?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, pharmacists are and will continue to be an integral component to Alberta's health care system. These adjustments made to accommodate budget concerns do not change the fact that pharmacists in Alberta have the broadest scope of anywhere in Canada. I'm so thankful for all the hard work that they do each and every day to provide primary care services to our communities. They're going to continue to do that. We value them, and we look forward to working with them on the next contract and the next budget that we will be doing with them very, very soon.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we will 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. It's not even December yet, but I bring you tidings of good joy. I rise to move that pursuant to Government Motion 51 I wish to advise the Assembly that there shall be no evening sitting tonight.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first one is from an article in the *Edmonton Journal*, November 23, titled Short Term Pain, Then What?, which quotes "Albertans pay among the highest premiums for auto insurance and now the province will be doubling the insurance premiums cap for good drivers." I have the requisite five copies.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, on this weekend many people joined with poet Maria Kruszewski, who has recited her poem, You Gotta Help Me, Got No Place to Live, and I table that because people are crying out for adequate housing.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, followed by Calgary-Edgemont.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In question period today I made reference to a resolution at RMA called growth management board voluntary membership, and as such I table five copies thereof.

Ms Hayter: I rise to table the five requisite copies of a heartfelt letter from a constituent, Lila Webb, asking for the destructive policies impacting trans and gender-diverse communities and reminding us all that we do represent all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I rise to table four of the thousands of e-mails we've received from people all over Alberta denouncing the UCP's antitrans bills. These are all from parents, in fact – Izzy, Kayla, Kirsten, and Andrea – and I urge the UCP to read them.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the requisite number of copies of an e-mail from a constituent who is an educator and a counsellor and is deeply concerned that bills 26, 27, and 29 are not based on evidence that the government has introduced. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others?
Seeing none.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Horner, President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance, pursuant to the Sustainable Fiscal Planning and Reporting Act the government of Alberta 2024-25 second-quarter fiscal update and economic statement.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that brings us to points of order. At 2:05 the hon. the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Schow: Yes, I did, Mr. Speaker. At the time noted, according to my unofficial records, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was speaking and said in response to the answer given to him by the hon. minister of energy that, "Well, I can see the minister is having a bit of a Joe Biden moment there answering the question." I think that members of this Chamber would be familiar with the concerns about the current president of the United States and his mental health and well-being. As a result of that, it led to him leaving the candidacy and paving the way for Kamala Harris, who then ultimately lost to the now president-elect Donald Trump.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that it would be wildly inappropriate for the member opposite to question the mental health and well-being of an hon. member of this House, especially a minister of the Crown. I think there's a point of order under 23(h), (i), and (j), particularly (j), which is "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." Disorder was in fact created, but I leave it in your capable hands.

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader in this case.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very confident that the member was not questioning the mental health of the minister. The member made an association. It could be interpreted in many different ways. Just like President Biden, this minister is part of a government that is overseeing a period of very high inflation and a high cost of living; just like President Biden, the minister has overseen a period where the outcomes have certainly gotten worse for many Albertans; just like President Biden, the government is headed for a historic defeat in the next election, and just like the Biden administration, changing the face at the front of the ticket isn't going to save them. If that's what the member was thinking about, I think the comparison is apt, and I do not believe there is a point of order.

The Speaker: I do have the benefit of the Blues, and I am prepared to rule. Is there anyone else wishing to join or have something substantive to add to the debate? I think what we saw here was a perfect example of what happens when we use points of order to continue debate here inside the Assembly albeit a valiant effort on both sides of the Assembly. The Government House Leader and the

Official Opposition House Leader valiantly defended points of order. I am not of the opinion that on this occasion the accusation or the association that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said when he said – and I do have the benefit of the Blues – "well, I can see the minister is having a bit of a Joe Biden moment there answering the question" and a point of order was called: I'm not convinced that this raises to the level of a point of order. I provide a caution to members when using language that may be considered to be abusive or insulting. This is not a point of order. I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

Ordres du jour.

2:50

Orders of the Day Motions for Returns

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

Provincial Highways Speed Limit

M7. Mr. Dach moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, reports, studies, and communications prepared by the government during the period from May 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024, related to the consideration of raising the speed limit on provincial highways to 120 kilometres per hour.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and have a few Lorne Dach moments here in the Legislature and respond to the fears that I've had and constituents have raised in the correspondence that I've received to an issue that raised the attention of Albertans in 2021, which I fear may also raise its ugly head again. I say "ugly head" because it potentially will cause a higher number of traffic accidents and a higher number of injuries and potentially accidental deaths on the highways and much more property damage.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I refer, Madam Speaker, to a point in time in the Assembly here where the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain in 2021 introduced a private member's bill, Bill 213, to raise the speed limit on Alberta's highways from 110 kilometres per hour to 120 kilometres per hour on divided highways. Immediately it caused me to question why this proposal was being made. Certainly, I had heard nobody demanding an increase in Alberta's highway speeds. Right now the current speed limit maximum in Edmonton on our roadways unless otherwise posted is 40 kilometres an hour. In our school and park zones the speed limit is even lower at 30 kilometres an hour. These speed limits were put in place by the city of Edmonton as bylaws to improve safety by lowering the speed limits.

It's pretty common knowledge, Madam Speaker. I mean, it takes a 30-second search on YouTube to take a look at various repeated crashes at successive, increasing amounts of speed. These videos show how much more damage is done to a vehicle at each increase in speed. It's not rocket science to know that the crashes that take place at higher speeds result in higher rates of injury, higher rates of death, higher rates of property damage.

It certainly raised a question in my mind as to what the member was bringing this proposal forward for. During the first reading the member at the time said, "The aim of this bill is to maintain the safety of Albertans, improve the commutes of Albertans across the province, and increase the synchronization between posted speed limits and the speed that highways are engineered . . . for."

Well, really, Madam Speaker, the responses that I heard from my constituents both in Edmonton-McClung and in my role as the shadow

Minister for Transportation and Economic Corridors had nothing to do with increasing the commute synchronization. They were concerned about increased danger on the highway.

Many communities and concerned Albertans want to know if the government actually did any due diligence, and that's the reason, Madam Speaker, that I brought forward this motion for a return. It makes no sense to me or the Albertans who are responding to this minister's attempt to raise the speed limit to 120 kilometres on certain roadways in 2021, and I fear that it may raise its head again.

Now, the UCP government issued a request for proposal before the last election on raising the speed limit. Given that an RFP was issued, at least some documents, reports, studies, and communications must have been produced by the government. The minister likely got a briefing note on raising the speed limit. That's basically what we're asking for, Madam Speaker. If this information was not produced before the RFP, well, Albertans watching from home would probably be very interested in that as well.

We deserve some clarity on the issue of what the government did to consult when at a similar time we saw the department missing its targets in fatalities and major injuries. We are concerned that this issue, even though it died on the Order Paper, has not died in the minds of the UCP caucus across the way, and we're fearful that it may be brought forward once again. We'd really like to see some analysis or what the government looked at to prompt it to bring forward this measure in 2021 so that Albertans will understand why common sense did not prevail and the government decided to go ahead and make this proposal in the first place.

I'm certainly glad that it died on the Order Paper, but I would really prefer and Albertans who are consulting with me at my office prefer to see it not raise its head again; therefore, I would ask that the government accept this motion for a return.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, can you just clarify for me and/or say the words that you move the Motion for a Return 7? Can you please stand up again and just say that you move the Motion for a Return 7?

Mr. Dach: Yes, I do move Motion for a Return 7, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Perfect. Thank you very much.
The hon. minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Motion for a Return 7 requests the release of documents, reports, and communications related to the consideration of raising the speed limit on provincial highways to 120 kilometres an hour. After careful review I recommend rejecting this motion. It is interesting that the member was talking about how he wants to know how an open and collaborative government has internal decision-making moments; I guess he never experienced that when the NDP was in power.

The primary reason for rejecting this motion is because of the information which it requests. Deliberations regarding policy changes such as speed limits or variable speed limits involve a rigorous process of analysis and consultation by government. These materials referenced in this motion would constitute confidential advice to cabinet, Madam Speaker, and are protected to ensure that open and candid discussions within that decision-making process are maintained. The public release of these materials at this time would set a precedent that undermines this confidentiality and also would impede government's ability to develop sound policy. Disclosing preliminary studies or internal discussions could lead to confusion or misrepresentation of government's intention.

Now, finally, decisions regarding speed limits have significant impacts for road safety, traffic flow, and infrastructure. By maintaining confidentiality, we ensure that all perspectives are thoroughly evaluated

before any recommendations are made. Public discourse should be informed by finalized and vetted proposals, Madam Speaker.

I'll give maybe just an example to the member opposite of what is publicly available information and what is not for public information. It would be the student reviews of when the current NDP leader, Naheed Nenshi, was a professor in Calgary, and I'll just read you a couple here. "This guy is so totally full of himself. We were lucky if we got to learn anything from the actual class material. Mostly we just learned about . . . how highly he thinks of himself." Another example of . . .

Member Irwin: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Point of Order Referring to Nonmembers

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to question the current speaker, the minister, how this is relevant to debate. Frankly, attacking our leader when our leader may or may not be present to defend himself is completely a point of order under 23(h), (i), and (j).

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. government whip.

3:00

Mr. Getson: Madam Speaker, I appreciate the member opposite defending the position, but I believe this is a matter of debate. The minister was just responding back to MR 7. He had eloquently started his debate. I'm sure he's going to bring it right in line with it.

As far as the member not being here, any one of the members opposite could sit down in their seats and allow this member to run. He could have ran in Lethbridge. We're well looking forward to the phantom of the opposition to come join us.

But I think this is a matter of debate, and the minister was simply making a point regarding MR 7. I'll leave it up to your opinion, but we don't believe it's a point of order on this side.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, in the future, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, I would appreciate a reference to the relevant matters. I appreciate your comments on this debate, and I appreciate the – sorry; you did make reference in the end there; my apologies – comments from the hon. government whip.

I would express some caution to members who are making statements about members of the public that can't defend themselves in this House. There are lots of examples when it comes to that in this Chamber. Perhaps the hon. minister is teetering on those lines sort of at the start of his remarks. I look forward to the end given my comments about members of the public not being able to defend themselves in this Chamber. There is no point of order at this time. It is a matter of debate.

The hon. minister.

Debate Continued

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I do have numerous other examples that I was planning on going through, again, to make the point of nonconfidential or public advice that can be given and can be tabled here in this House and then confidential cabinet advice, which just simply cannot be.

For those reasons, I ask the Assembly to reject Motion for a Return 7. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members on Motion for a Return 7? The hon. government whip.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to address Motion for a Return 7. It requests

that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, reports, studies, and communications prepared by the government during the period [of] May 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024, related to the consideration of raising the speed limit on provincial highways to 120 kilometres per hour.

I want to recognize the member's unswerving dedication to road safety. However, I'm not in favour of this motion, and I can't support it. Two main reasons for this, Madam Speaker, similar to what the minister just articulated here. Firstly, perhaps most practically, speed limits have not been raised to 120 kilometres an hour on any provincial highways in Alberta. I've tried to use this argument at home with my wife a couple of times, and she doesn't buy it either. We still haven't raised the speed limit, so we have to stick within those constraints.

Secondly, and most importantly, cabinet deliberations have long been established as a protected class of information and are considered confidential. So Vegas rules: what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, Madam Speaker. Similarly with cabinet, so to speak, you have to allow cabinet to have confidentiality, to have deliberations, to have communications, to consider a number of items. To request all of this for something as innocuous as it may seem, for a 120-kilometres-an-hour speed limit, really starts to undermine the whole Westminster process in itself. In fact, this policy was never enacted upon, and I'm not sure why we're taking the time to debate it, but, you know, respecting the system, anyone can ask any questions they want at any time in here for the most part.

And then why would we want to find out details about a plan that was never implemented in the first place? I'm not sure where the smoking gun is there. I struggle to see the urgent, pressing need for disclosing details around the idea of raising the speed limit to 120 clicks, which, in fact, were speed limits that had not been raised at all. We may have talked about it, may have wanted it at some time. I'm sure both sides of the aisle may have wanted the speed limits to change at one time or the other. Speed limits, again, are about road safety.

Also, with the highways that we have in the province, there is also an engineering design. Most of these highways, actually, in fact all of them, have a safety tolerance that is built into them. Typically what happens is that those thresholds, those safety tolerances, based on your tires' performance, based on the curvature of the roads, based on line of sight, interfacing with other vehicles, animals, et cetera, are all a lot higher than what our posted speed limits are. So you have to understand that there is an absolute safety factor that's been built into those as well.

The member opposite had talked about using the reference for city versus highway driving. Again, if it were to be considered on our highways or byways, that might be for future consideration, but it hasn't taken place to this point. Again, if we're requesting items that are in confidence or in cabinet, it doesn't really meet the need here.

In regard to the actual speed limits themselves, I mean, it's related to collisions. It's related to a number of items the other member opposite had mentioned, and that's why our government introduced the speed limits in the first place. I'm, you know, here to recognize that.

Oh, here's a little tidbit, just since we're going down memory lane and taking up really good time. As you know, Madam Speaker, in 1906 the Assembly debated and voted on an act regarding speed

limits. In fact – and this is something for Mr. Speaker; he would really like this one, too, I'm sure – An Act to Regulate the Speed and Operation of Motor Vehicles on Highways was granted royal assent on May 9, 1906. I will note that the speed limit in question was not for 120 kilometres an hour. Rather, the rate of speed was not allowed to be greater than 20 miles an hour on public highways outside of cities and towns or incorporated villages; a little bit different than today. However, it is important to note that these changes in speed limits deal with the roads that we have, the safety factors, the technology that we have, the vehicles, et cetera. In case you're wondering, the speed limit was 10 miles an hour within villages and towns at that time. I'm sure there was robust debate. I'm sure a lot of things took place to get it to that point, and, again, we're at where we're at right now.

So rather than taking this too much further, basically, what I would like to impart on the members of the Assembly, coming down, again, around that cabinet confidentiality – this, what we're talking about here, is completely different than the debate back in 1906. You know, I'd like to look at the topic of cabinet confidence as it's important to discuss that we have it in this place. Cabinet confidence is the backbone of the Westminster system and shared by every provincial government in Canada and in the federal government itself. The Westminster style of government is also in place around the world, especially in Commonwealth states.

The cabinet system consists of ministers which establish government policies and priorities. Ministers are collectively responsible to take actions by the cabinet and must publicly support cabinet decisions. In view of that, it's imperative that individual ministers have the freedom to speak their views frankly and forthrightly. In fact, the Supreme Court of Canada has also recognized this. In its landmark *Babcock* decision the court found that the process of democratic governments works best when cabinet members charged with government policy decision-making are free to express themselves around the cabinet table unreservedly.

Simply put, Madam Speaker, the best decisions that happen at those tables are when people can speak openly without concern or cause or pause for concern of some of the items we're talking about here today. The convention in such is that the collective decision-making process is protected by the rule of confidentiality. When ministers know their perspectives will not be made public, they can express their views more freely during the decision-making process, and deliberations will take place, obviously, on one side of those conversations or the other.

We've got to keep a safe space for the cabinet ministers, Madam Speaker. The underlying principle here of what's being asked by this motion, again, may seem innocuous on the surface, but literally what it would do is set a precedent, if you would, or start pulling all of the decision-making process from a large period of time, potentially anywhere where somebody mentioned 120 kilometres an hour. It's not the outcome, I don't believe, that the member that put this forward would be looking for, and that's one, again, of the reasons why I'm asking my colleagues here, on this side and across the aisle, to reconsider this and to not support it.

Documents, reports, studies, and communications prepared by the government to Executive Council are considered private to the cabinet. Consequently, those items fall under confidentiality. Deliberations by the cabinet can't be released due to cabinet confidence.

The principle of this is not new. It's not something that should be under debate. It's an integral part of our system, so it's something that, even though the member opposite really wants to know what was discussed around the table and otherwise and what we may be thinking about 120 kilometres an hour – which is not what's up for debate here. What's really up for debate is the question of why or how this member opposite would request all of these confidential

documents from inside. Quite frankly, it would have a ton of people wasting a bunch of time pulling documents.

With that, I implore the members of the Assembly to not support this motion, to vote against it, and if the phantom of the opposition wants to show up and be part of this one day, we would love to have him here.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any members wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak in the Assembly today, and I just rise to speak to Motion for a Return 7, which requests that this Assembly provide documents and communications from May 1, 2019, to March 31, 2024, concerning any considerations related to raising the speed limit on provincial highways to 120 kilometres per hour. I spend a lot of time on the highways myself. My constituency is roughly four and a half hours from here, so I've seen a lot of highways. As well as that, my parents live on the other side of the province, down in southern Alberta, so I've spent a lot of time on the highways when I go visit them.

3:10

One of the main concerns, one of the questions on this discussion is touching on public safety, so I think that's important to talk about here in a moment just because, as many Albertans have, we spend a lot of time on the roads. I think public safety is a key piece we need to be talking about but then also the transparency of our government processes. This is also an important portion of this, and I'd like to talk about that.

First and foremost, Madam Speaker, it's very important to understand that the government of Alberta has not increased the speed limit to 120 kilometres per hour on any provincial highways. We haven't done it. It's also important to note that any considerations or discussions about future speed limits are currently confidential and are considered private advice to cabinet. This is key and standard protocol, as the members opposite would understand, and also on this side of the House we also understand this, too, that advice to cabinet is private and confidential until made public. This is standard. This established protocol really just makes sure that the advice, the consultations, recommendations regarding any potential policy changes are reviewed with the utmost diligence and also that those principles of responsible governments in decision-making are able to be freely thought through, challenged, brought out, and also with different ideas presented.

As part of this, we also must remember that items discussed with cabinet are held in strict confidence to allow for comprehensive, candid debate, this back and forth, before anything is brought forward. Madam Speaker, I think it's really important for the public to know that this is of utmost importance, and this is essential to uphold the integrity of our policy development. We need people who are able to challenge ideas and then walk out of that room on the same team. This type of confidentiality really allows decision-makers, allows cabinet, Executive Council to really examine every single avenue, every single potential outcome very thoroughly, openly engage in the discussion, and make choices that are in the best interests of Albertans, as they have thoroughly done so far, as they have shown so far that they are trustworthy, Executive Council as well.

This isn't to say, Madam Speaker, that we're going to be keeping further bills under wraps to surprise Albertans. This isn't the case of what we're talking about. But this is to state that any bill put forward by our government is thoroughly vetted and goes through

a long time of careful consultation with experts and members of the public before the bill is allowed to be introduced in this House.

Motion for a Return 7, while well intended, seeks to access records and communications that fall under the category of private advice to cabinet. I think on this side of the House we fully understand as members of this Assembly that transparency and accountability are twin pieces of the public service. But there is also an equally compelling need to respect the sanctity of cabinet discussions, to foster really effective and sound policy development and decision-making. Disclosing documents relating to these considerations would compromise this really foundational principle and set a dangerous precedent that would inhibit the free exchange of ideas within cabinet in the future.

Madam Speaker, it's also important to acknowledge that any contemplation regarding changes to highway speed limits must be approached with caution. They're not simple decisions. They involve many intersections, many complex variables, from public safety to infrastructure capabilities. Increasing speed limits on provincial highways is not just a question about: can we just raise them or not? Can our roads accommodate higher speeds while also ensuring the safety of all of our users? As I said prior, as someone who spends many hours on the road, we need to make sure that we are safe and make sure that everybody gets to where they need to go well and safely.

Just to talk a little bit more on the public safety side, Madam Speaker, we've seen the research and evidence from jurisdictions that raising highway speed limits suggests some mixed outcomes as well. We have a pretty big province. We have a very diverse landscape. We have just incredible scenery as well through very populated areas as well as some more remote rural regions of the province. As speed limits are tailored, we need to be very careful as we approach this. It's not a quick one-size-fits-all approach to the policy, and this is why some of these decisions and some of these discussions regarding speed limits on our provincial highways need to be considered very carefully and very closely, and this is why they haven't been altered yet by this government. As public safety remains a top priority, this also remains a priority to make sure that the lives of Albertans, the drivers, passengers, everyone: all must be safeguarded.

Madam Speaker, this motion suggests that sharing documentation related to consideration of higher speeds could enhance transparency, but we also must weigh this against the established practice of protecting the privacy and deliberations of caucus processes. The public trust really relies on a balance between openness and the assurance that sensitive discussions can take place without undue exposure of that potentially sensitive information. If our government ever decides to reconsider the speed limit on provincial highways, I'm very confident that there will be many steps that will be taken in tandem with stakeholders, that we will be bringing in the experts, and that we'll be talking with Albertans across our province before any final decision would be made.

I believe that Albertans right across this province have put their faith in this government to do what is right for them, and we intend to keep that faith, Madam Speaker. We have a great government on this side of the House. We have seen Executive Council make great decisions for Alberta and Albertans, and we have continued to see evidence-based decision-making here on this side of the aisle. I'm very committed to making sure that we have taken the time to listen to Albertans before we decide to move. This is important to Albertans. I think we all recognize that when it comes to these deliberations of cabinet and these other conversations, disclosing such information would be inconsistent with the norms of the Westminster style of government.

Madam Speaker, the government of Alberta recognizes the importance of transparency and accountability to the public.

However, this motion for a return requests access to cabinet advice, which must remain confidential to preserve the integrity of policy-making within our own government. I believe that all members of this House are expected to not divulge protected confidential information, which is why any information related to consideration of speed limits across Alberta should remain privileged to protected information. This is also part of why I recommend the rejection of this motion put forward by the Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Thank you for the opportunity, Madam Speaker, for being able to speak on this motion.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to join the debate?

Seeing none.

An Hon. Member: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: I will decide who calls the question.

Hon. member, would you like to close the debate?

Mr. Dach: Close debate.

[Motion for a Return 7 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung to move the motion.

Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2022

M9. Mr. Dach moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, studies, data, and communications prepared by the government that were considered by the Executive Council in relation to the decision to rescind on February 28, 2023, the proclamation that would have brought into force on March 1, 2023, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2022, which amends the Traffic Safety Act to require drivers in all lanes of traffic going in the same direction on divided highways or travelling in either direction on single lane highways to slow to 60 kilometres per hour when passing stopped vehicles with flashing lamps.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I do hope that we have as much engaging debate on this motion for a return as we had in number 7 and that all members of the House do wish to support the Motion for a Return 9, which I propose now.

3:20

Now, this legislation was unanimously passed in this House by all members; unfortunately, the government did not proclaim the entire bill as it was passed unanimously in the Legislature. I tended to think, Madam Speaker, that notwithstanding the advice the government got, they chose simply to ignore it. In fact, I think it might have been just simply the minister's whim and decision and personal preference to go ahead and make the change so that only the lane of traffic closest to the parked vehicle on the shoulder had to slow down and move over.

Now, the tow truck drivers association and the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association, the Alberta Motor Association, and others were supportive of the change that was unanimously passed in this House that all lanes of traffic had to slow down and move over to provide a safe corridor so the workers on the emergency vehicles or tow truck drivers or emergency responders, fire truck drivers and operators would have a safe space to work in, yet the minister of his own accord decided that, notwithstanding whatever evidence the government received, they would choose to ignore the advice. Madam Speaker, that's the reason for this motion for a return, to discover exactly on what basis the minister changed his mind to

ignore the will of the House to only require that the one lane of traffic move over, resulting in what the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association, the Alberta Motor Association, and the tow truck drivers association were calling an unsafe workspace at that time.

Now what we have, Madam Speaker, is a situation where the same position is maintained by these advocates on behalf of their workers; the safety of their workers was always the goal of the proposal, to have "slow down; move over" mean: all lanes, slow down and move over. Unfortunately, the minister overrode that, and the situation we have right now is one where workers' lives are at risk and their workspace is less safe than it otherwise would have been had the minister chosen to respect the will of this House and the advice that others were publicly given.

I ask this House to support this Motion for a Return 9. I move Motion for a Return 9 so that the House can indeed find out upon what information the minister relied to indeed override the will of this Assembly, which is a serious matter.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Mr. Dreesen: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Motion for a Return 9, which seeks the release of documents, studies, and communications considered in the decision to rescind the proclamation of the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2022: I am recommending rejecting this motion. The documents reviewed and considered by cabinet cannot be shared outside the department at this time.

It is also important to highlight that many of the goals of Bill 5 have already been addressed through amendments implemented in September of last year. These changes reflect a balanced approach to enhancing traffic safety all while maintaining practical enforcement measures. The Department of Transportation and Economic Corridors is actively monitoring and evaluating the impacts of these amendments to ensure their effectiveness.

Now, releasing the requested documents at this time would not only violate the confidentiality of the cabinet process but could also disrupt the ongoing evaluation of these amendments. Premature disclosure of materials risks public misinterpretation and could hinder the department's ability to implement evidence-based traffic safety improvements. In light of these considerations, Madam Speaker, I recommend rejecting Motion for a Return 9.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to join the debate on Motion for a Return 9?

Seeing none, would the hon. mover of the motion like to close the debate?

Mr. Dach: Close debate.

[Motion for a Return 9 lost]

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

Basic Minimum Wage

M10. Ms Wright moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list showing the number of Albertans, organized by year, paid the basic minimum wage described in section 9(1)(a.1) of the employment standards regulation, Alta. reg. 14/1997, during the period from June 26, 2019, to March 31, 2024.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Madam Speaker. What this motion is really asking for, in terms of information, is that it's asking to see

for a very, very specific subset of people how many of those people were relying on minimum wage for their income during that period of time. If we look at the employment standards regulation, it's very, very clear; 9(1) says that "employers must pay wages to employees," and section (iii) says:

from October 1, 2018, \$15.00 [an] hour;

(a.1) except [of course] . . . for an employee who is under the age of 18 . . . and is a student enrolled in an educational institution.

For those folks

the rate is \$13.00 per hour for

- (i) work performed during a school break for the employee, or
- (ii) [for] the first 28 hours in a work week for work performed other than during a school break for the employee.

Again, Madam Speaker, this is looking for a very, very specific set of data that presently does not exist. Now, one of the reasons why we are looking for that data – and it's tough, to say the least – is because, one, when making policy decisions that impact a particular group of people without someplace to start, without a foundation, then you're losing some of that essential reason perhaps for making that decision.

Almost 10 years after our NDP government began raising the minimum wage in a series of steps that culminated at that \$15 an hour wage rate, it's important right now to look back at what's happened since: the impacts, the successes, the gains, the gaps, the complexities, and what any next steps might be. Discussions surrounding important policies that can make a real difference in the lives of folks – it can make a difference between whether or not a person can afford to thrive in their life or not – cannot be done in a vacuum. That, of course, is where good data comes in, and the data must be easily available from this government. That's what's lacking, to say the least.

When we're talking about the importance of data and data-driven or data-informed decisions, the folks over at the Harvard Business School in an article entitled *The Advantages of Data-Driven Decision-Making*, which appears online, talk about the differences between kind of, you know, "I'm going to follow my gut, my intuition tells me," and those sorts of things we hear over and over and over these days, particularly in the times of an awful lot of dis- and misinformation: I know it's the right thing to do just because my gut tells me it's the right thing to do. The problem with that sort of approach to decision-making, Madam Speaker, is that while there might be a place to follow your heart from time to time and listen to your intuition, when you are making policies that have the capacity to impact the lives of hundreds or thousands or perhaps even millions of people, you really need to be thinking about: is your data verified? Is it quantified? Is it easily understandable? Then, can you move on from there?

In the article *Why Good Data Is Critical to Making Informed* – you can hear the teacher in me now because I've gone to information and research – *Business Decisions*, which comes to us from Forbes, the author discusses the need to assess the quality of data because data isn't data if it isn't good and if it isn't the kind of data that you actually require and need. They talk about asking a series of questions: how exact is it? Is it truly quality data? What exactly is the degree of error? How valid is it? What were the parameters? Were they strict enough? Does the data appear consistent? Perhaps the most relevant to this discussion today is: is that data timely, is it applicable, and does it truly cover the information you need? Is it comprehensive enough so that you can get a really full analysis from it?

Certainly, Madam Speaker, where governments are concerned, if there's a broad swath of data, that becomes even more important because it can allow all of us as legislators to address policy questions and challenges much more effectively. Not only that; it

can allow for a great understanding of citizens' needs versus preferences. We can have insights into trends and patterns. We can perhaps begin to address challenges before they become a crisis, with those trends and patterns as they emerge. In the case of the data that's requested in this motion today and those trends and patterns that emerge over time, all of that information would assist us as we discuss the nature of Alberta's minimum wage and its impacts on all Albertans, including those under 18. Hence the reason for Motion for a Return 10.

3:30

As we know, of course, and as I've already mentioned, those folks under 18 who are currently students are only earning \$13 an hour rather than the usual minimum wage of \$15 an hour. We need to understand the nature and the basis of any decisions that a government might make, and that comes back to not only the data, of course, but also how that data is collected and stored, how and when it's available. It's important for government to allow a measure of transparency about all of that. That indeed is what can instill some confidence and trust in the government. However, we also do know that given the actions of this government over the last number of months the level of confidence and trust that Albertans have in their own government and in the way in which government makes decisions and who's making those decisions and why those decisions are being made, Madam Speaker, is eroding.

Part of that, of course, is because when all of the decision-making is in the hands of a very, very tiny group of people or one person, as in one minister – and that's what we've seen with some of the most recent bills that have passed lately – there is little, for lack of a better word, sharing of all the processes involved and the data that informed a particular decision. All that has really happened right now is just simply a continued erosion of trust, and erosion of trust is not a good thing when you're talking government.

In addition to all of that, Madam Speaker, we make our collective way through a succession of crises that all of us are facing, including those under the age of 18. We've got a housing crisis, homelessness, health care, education, workers who are not being paid fairly, unfair bargaining practices in the midst of bargaining. Add rising unemployment to that list, all under that umbrella, that inflationary number that's risen over 50 per cent in the last number of years. We've got the highest inflation, highest unemployment, and lowest minimum wage in Canada. How on earth can we expect folks to thrive when we know the current minimum wage is not enough to afford the basics, Madam Speaker: a place to live, some groceries in the fridge, a bus pass, maybe even a few extras for kids? Five years on from the UCP government to create what in effect is a two-tiered minimum wage, it's crucial that we be able to have all the data we need in order to truly examine the effects of that decision, particularly the effects on young Albertans who of course will become the employees of the future.

We know that that particular group, Madam Speaker, is challenged by an ever-rising unemployment rate. When combined – and this comes from information that is indeed available on the Alberta government website. The unemployment rate for folks from 15 to 24 years now stands at a whopping 15.5 per cent. That's an increase of over 3 per cent from just a year ago. When you add in some additional geographic data, we know unemployment in Edmonton is over 8 per cent, unemployment in Calgary over 7 per cent. Alberta's overall unemployment rate is now at 7.5 per cent.

Then adding more complexity to the mix, we know with those folks who have some high school or some postsecondary or who may indeed be a high school graduate: those are the folks who indeed have the highest levels of consistent unemployment. But how many of those folks, in which sectors, in which places, regions,

municipalities, are making not only minimum wage but of those how many are under the age of 18, and how many are earning a student wage? We don't know because the data doesn't get into specifics like that.

By providing the data we're asking for in this motion, we could begin to discern the effects of the lower student wage and provide some information that might form the basis of future decisions but only, of course, if the data is both available and shared. Now, I'm fairly confident that the folks opposite are going to say, Madam Speaker: "But we do have reports. There are reports. Data is available." It's true; there are some reports available to the public now.

However, this is where that issue of trust comes in. It's curious, Madam Speaker, that just a few months ago the last most recently uploaded minimum wage report that appeared on the government website was for the period of October 2019 through September 2020, the year in which the legislation was amended to include that new student wage. That report was uploaded on June 24, 2021. That's what the situation was when this motion was filed.

The curious part was that all of a sudden, on August 6, 2024, suddenly two more reports appeared. Each included two years' worth of data, so that's four years' worth of data. The missing years were found.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, can you just say the words "I so move Motion for a Return 10"?

Ms Wright: I so move Motion for a Return 10. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: That'll work. Thank you very much.
The hon. Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise this afternoon to speak to Motion for a Return 10, which requests

a list showing the number of Albertans, organized by year, paid the basic minimum wage described in section 9(1)(a.1) of the employment standards regulation, Alta. reg. 14/1997, during the period from June 26, 2019, to March 31, 2024.

The government is recommending the rejection of this motion for a few key reasons, which I will outline today.

The motion as presented asks for a list showing the number of Albertans who were paid the basic minimum wage during the specified time frame. However, Madam Speaker, the specific data requested does not exist in the format outlined by the motion. The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade does not track the number of individuals earning the minimum wage as specified under section 9(1)(a.1) of the employment standard regulation. Simply put, this data is not captured by our current systems, and we do not have a direct record of the number of people earning minimum wage under that specific regulation.

However, Madam Speaker, good news: there is an alternative. The government of Alberta uses a proxy measure based on Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey, which provides estimates of minimum wage earners. This method is widely used across jurisdictions in Canada and allows us to estimate the number of Albertans earning at or below minimum wage. The data generated by this proxy is publicly available through Statistics Canada. In fact, this method has been the standard for estimating minimum wage earners across the country because it is based on a comprehensive and statistically robust survey of the labour market.

Under our standing orders a motion for a return cannot "seek information set forth in documents . . . accessible to the questioner." Please see *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules & Forms*, sixth edition, paragraph 428. So while we cannot provide the precise data

as requested in the motion, I want to emphasize that this proxy data is easily accessible to anyone who wants it. It is a reliable and transparent measure, and it provides valuable insights into the trends and dynamics of Alberta's labour market.

I would like to take this time to point out some key facts about the minimum wage in Alberta. As of October 1, 2024, Alberta's minimum wage remains highly competitive at \$15 per hour compared to the provincial average of \$15.83. Our minimum wage is highly competitive with other jurisdictions, Madam Speaker. We have lower taxes, higher basic personal exemptions, no sales tax, and a competitive cost of living that has resulted in record numbers of Canadians and new Canadians locating to Alberta.

Alberta's government is constantly evaluating our current minimum wage to ensure it's best serving the needs of Albertans. Some stats on the minimum wage that may be of interest to the member opposite: 57 per cent of minimum wage earners are between the ages of 15 and 24, which is a demographic across Canada that is seeing elevated unemployment. We certainly don't want to prevent youth – 47 per cent of minimum wage earners are living with their parents. We don't want to create any barriers to those youth getting their first job, gaining experience, gaining skills, many of which are attending school at the same time. We don't want to create barriers. We want to ensure they get that first job, get that experience so that they can move up in the Alberta labour market to earn the highest wages in the country while paying the lowest taxes.

We've also seen that over 30 per cent of minimum wage earners, about 37 per cent, are landed and nonlanded immigrants. As you know, Madam Speaker, the federal government has recently made a number of changes to immigration programs across Canada. They're making changes to the temporary foreign worker program, they're making changes to the international student program, and they're broadly reducing immigration. Well, with so many immigrants currently occupying minimum wage jobs, it does seem prudent to give Albertan youth the best chance possible to onboard on those jobs that may become available with changes to our immigration system federally.

3:40

Madam Speaker, the majority of minimum wage earners work part-time – this is an important point to consider when looking at minimum wage policy – and this is by choice. In fact, only 10 per cent of minimum wage earners cite a preference for full-time employment, and only 5 per cent of minimum wage earners looked for full-time employment before taking up part-time employment. The reason is simple. Many of them are attending school; 47 per cent live with their parents. They have other hobbies and interests. We want to ensure that youth and young Albertans, in particular, can choose to live the life they want to live while earning money and gaining experience at the same time, the flexibilities that part-time employment provides. Now, employers will be less likely to hire someone who has limited availability or requires tremendous flexibility in their schedule or has to respond to the demands of personal hobbies or caring for family members or attending school if the wage is comparable to what they can hire an adult without those complexities at. These are the things that we have to keep in mind when setting policy.

I appreciate, Madam Speaker, the member opposite emphasized that decisions must be made based on data. For example, if a government was to suggest shutting down your primary industry which contributes tens of billions of dollars of revenue and hundreds of thousands of jobs, that would be an example of a decision or a policy that is not based on data or logic or reason. If they wanted to introduce a carbon tax for a population at a time

when affordability was becoming a challenge, that would not seem to be based on data.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, over the last five years the number of Albertans earning minimum wage has declined by 53 per cent, basically since the previous NDP government. This is a positive trend as it shows that more and more workers are moving into higher paying jobs, reflecting the strength of Alberta's economy and the success of our job-creation efforts. In fact, more than 94 per cent of workers in Alberta now earn more than the minimum wage. This underscores the strength of our labour market, which continues to outperform the national averages in terms of employment growth.

Alberta's economy continues to be one of the strongest in Canada. We continue to see job growth and the attraction of billions of dollars of investment to our province. Alberta was responsible for about 40 per cent of the private-sector jobs created in Canada over the last 12 months, about 80,000 jobs, Madam Speaker. This means more opportunities for Albertans, more high-quality jobs, and more stability for working families. Alberta remains one of the most attractive places to live, work, and invest in Canada. Why? We have affordable housing, low taxes, and a government focused on creating opportunities for everyone. Alberta's economy is increasingly diverse, resilient, and open for business. Whether you're a young professional, an entrepreneur, or a family looking for a better quality of life, Alberta offers limitless opportunities for growth and success.

In closing, while I appreciate the intent behind Motion for a Return 10, I would ask the Assembly to reject this motion.

There are also some additional minimum wage statistics that I'd like to share with you. The members opposite, again, who have said that they want to base decisions on data, have indicated that minimum wage earners are working multiple jobs trying to make ends meet, but, again, the data does not support that, Madam Speaker. Ninety-three per cent – 93 per cent – of minimum wage earners work one job. Again, we're going to base decisions on data. The majority work part-time. All the data points to the fact that this is really – the minimum wage is for people who are entering the workforce, getting their first jobs, gaining experience before they move up in skills, experience, and education to work at the highest wages in the country. That's why we should be factoring these things in when we approach the policy.

We can't do what the NDP did, Madam Speaker. We can't ratchet up at an incredible rate to the detriment of youth, to the detriment of our small businesses, retail or combination. The members opposite have talked about a \$25 minimum wage. They keep referencing a living wage of \$25 an hour. Is that what they are suggesting is their minimum wage policy setting? I would ask their leader, but his opinion clearly isn't going to add value to this debate or he'd be in the Chamber.

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

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Hearing the member from the other side speak is the argument for why we should be capturing the kind of data that he says, well, we don't need to capture because we can rely on the federal government, on the census data, so we don't have to gather that.

Let me speak to a reality perhaps that a lot of the members on the other side don't even know. You know, the minister talks about the fact that 47 per cent of minimum wage earners are students, young people living at home with their moms. Okay. What about the other 53 per cent, Madam Speaker? What about the reality that of that 53 per cent, the majority of those people are racialized? I know it. I see it each and every day in my riding.

Now, let me tell you another fact, Madam Speaker. My parents had to do this, and I see so many racialized people having to do the same thing. They have that minimum wage job, but then on top of that they're having to do small, little contract jobs in the gig economy because that's all they have left to do. The other day I was at South Common, and I saw a family – mom, dad, baby in a car seat – and they were picking up food because they were working for one of these companies that will deliver food to your home. I won't name which one.

See, this is the reality of a lot of people here in the province of Alberta. They're stuck doing these little gig economy jobs, and the members on the other side can't be more happy about it because when people are having to work in the gig economy, Madam Speaker, they don't get benefits. There's no minimum wage for gig economy jobs, for ride share and getting food to people's homes. There's no minimum wage. There's no benefit.

So here we are: people in Alberta having to work a minimum wage job, and then on top of that they need to supplement it by having this little gig economy job on the side and maybe even two of them. I know people in my community that are not just driving for one company; they're finding a way to get around the rules, and they're having to drive for another company. They're setting up different profiles.

This is the reality that our people are having to go through, Madam Speaker, not to mention that then you have a wide variety of people where they have their minimum wage job and then on top of that they're doing cleaning contracts on the side. I know because a lot of people in my riding are having that kind of a reality.

Everyone's trying to have their little side business so that they can complement the minimum wage job that they're doing, and I can guarantee you, Madam Speaker, that that data is not being captured. It's not being captured by the census. It's not being captured by the Alberta government. It's not being captured by anybody, and it is devastating to the people of Alberta. We don't capture that data because we don't care.

3:50

If we truly cared about Albertans and the realities that they were going through – I find it shameful, Madam Speaker, absolutely shameful, that the majority of racialized people living in this province have got to do a minimum wage job and then on top of that have to go out at night with their child in a car seat to go and deliver food to somebody. That kind of job should be for some single person but not for a family.

Then, Madam Speaker, how will we look into other data about how many of those people have to complement their minimum wage job, their little side business, or their gig economy job with having to go to the food bank? Shame on us. Shame on us. That's the reality that Albertans are going through, and the members on the other side couldn't even care about collecting the data.

I'm sick of it, Madam Speaker. I am absolutely sick of it. Albertans deserve better, and the people that come from half a world away to come and call this place home deserve better, too. If you're good enough to work here in this province, then you're good enough to be treated with the dignity and respect that you deserve. They need a full-time job, a job that's mortgage paying so that they can get that house that they're dreaming about, just like everyone else in this province. Let's treat these people with dignity and respect. Let's create an economy and legislation that will make sure that they're getting a living wage here in this province so that they're not having to do a minimum wage job and then that gig economy job or the little contracts on the side in order to complement what they're making on a monthly basis.

The majority of the people in my riding, Madam Speaker, are living paycheque to paycheque. If they missed one paycheque or two paycheques, that means forfeiture on their mortgage: gone. House: gone. Is that the kind of Alberta that we want? No. I would say no. We want people to be secure.

You know, the members on the other side of this House, Madam Speaker, tell it like: oh, yeah, the Alberta advantage; we're getting there. They claim: oh, we're already there; the economy is doing fantastic. But it's not doing fantastic for everybody, and that is a truth, and that's why we should be collecting the data on minimum wage. We should be collecting all that data so that we know how we can improve the lot of the majority of Albertans that call this place home.

I get it. The minister got up and he talked about, "Oh, well, these are landed immigrants," or permanent residents, we call them now. Regardless, those people who are permanent residents are on the track to becoming full citizens, and you know what? They pay their taxes just like everybody else. Those permanent residents pay their taxes just like everybody else. They deserve dignity and respect, and they deserve a government that's going to stand up for them. They deserve a government that's going to build an economy that lifts everybody up, not just a few.

So I'm asking the members on the other side of the House: start doing your job. Collect the data. Collect the data, and make legislation based on that data. [interjections] You know, a member on the other side of the House is just having a field day laughing it up, because that's what they think. They just laugh it up at the reality that these Albertans are going through. They couldn't care less. They couldn't care less, but I'm telling them: get the job done, collect the data, make legislation based on that data, and let's improve the lot of all Albertans, not just a few.

The Deputy Speaker: I'd just remind all members to direct their comments through the chair.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you. I appreciate very much the words and the advocacy of my colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie and his passion. You know, the members opposite might laugh, but your words resonated with a lot of us, so thank you. As well, my colleague from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview: we have bordering ridings, and we hear from a lot of almost shared constituents, sometimes folks who are kind of scrambling along 118th Ave, looking for a place to live. We hear from a lot of people in our shared neighbourhoods who are struggling.

You know, one thing I never want to happen as an elected official is to become so out of touch that I have no idea what it's like for folks who are struggling to make ends meet. I'm afraid that this is exactly what we're seeing with this UCP government. They're sitting back. They're laughing. They're ignoring the plight of so many Albertans. They're allowing skyrocketing rent increases with zero action. They're lifting the cap on car insurance so that people who are already paying so much are going to be paying even more, 15 per cent, in fact, over the next two years. They're refusing to act on, really, anything that would make life more affordable for all of you, and that just kills me.

Today we're talking about minimum wage not because they want to talk about it. They've made it clear that they absolutely do not. We've got the lowest minimum wage across Canada, one that's been frozen since we, the NDP, increased it in 2018. Guess what. It's been six years since then, and Albertans are falling further and further behind. In fact, the data shows that a minimum wage earner in Alberta cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment. They'd need to be making nearly \$24 an hour, far from our minimum wage. To rent a two-bedroom unit in Calgary, a minimum wage earner would

have to work 116 hours a week. A hundred and sixteen hours a week. Let that sink in.

The UCP will say, as they have, that it's just kids making minimum wage; no one is really impacted by this. They're wrong. They're dead wrong. Approximately 85 per cent of employees making minimum wage in Calgary are adults. Imagine being that single parent making minimum wage in Calgary and trying to pay rent. I wish the UCP would imagine that person because these are real people who are struggling, and I hate that we're here, that we're in a place where we have a government that refuses to act and refuses to understand what it's like for people who are struggling.

Those stats that I shared come from Out-of-Control Rents, and that's a report from the CCPA, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which I believe I tabled when it first came out but will confirm for the benefit of the fine folks of *Hansard*.

Speaking of stats, I want to share another report, and this is one that just came out last week and one that the Member for Calgary-South East, I believe, mentioned earlier in a derogatory, condescending sort of way. That was the report that Vibrant Communities Calgary in collaboration with the Alberta Living Wage Network released. They released a report finding a new living wage of \$24.45 an hour for Calgary. "Calgary's living wage is now almost \$10 per hour, or 63 per cent, higher than Alberta's minimum wage." For those folks who don't know, because, again, that member referenced a living wage, what that means:

[a] living wage is the hourly wage a worker needs to earn to cover their basic expenses and have a modest standard of living, once government transfers have been added and taxes have been subtracted.

I'd like to quote the ED, Meaghan Reid, of Vibrant Communities Calgary, who points out that

this year's living wage demonstrates the impact of government policies on affordability. The increased childcare affordability grant and lower regulated electricity rates have contributed to a more affordable cost of living.

She gives them a little bit of credit, but then she goes on to note that the increased cost of housing and food has left many hard-working Calgarians skipping meals or living in overcrowded, unsafe conditions. Albertans deserve more, and the time to act is now.

She's absolutely right because, again, if you scroll through that report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, you'll see just how challenging it is for somebody in Calgary who even is making a bit above minimum wage to afford rent.

As we know, and as members in the House would know from me sharing it many times in this Chamber, Edmonton and Calgary were number one for rent increases across Canada for over a year. Now Edmonton gets to be number one. They've stayed at the top of that leader board, a leader board that we can't be proud of because it means that more and more people are just unable to find anything affordable to rent. Add on top of that the fact that vacancy rates are at an incredibly low number right now.

4:00

I should note as well, because, you know, we've got a number of folks in this Chamber right now who represent rural areas, that these are issues not just impacting Edmonton and Calgary. They're absolutely not. We've seen communities like Lloydminster, for example, lead the rent increase leader board as well in Canada, so these are not issues just facing urban communities. It's shocking to me and maybe a little bit alarming but not surprising that we're not hearing more from those rural MLAs about the cost-of-living impacts on their constituents. We hear from them. We hear from them all the time.

You know, Meaghan Reid, the ED of Vibrant Communities Calgary, noted that the time to act is now, and she's absolutely right. The time to act is now, but will this government act? Given their track record I am skeptical. We've called – and my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview made a lot of really good points about the need for data and the need for transparency. But as we've seen with this government – we saw it just recently, a stark example, the AG report that came out on the status of affordable housing in Edmonton. That was another clear example of – not just in Edmonton, actually; across Alberta – the UCP absolutely refusing to take accountability and, in fact, so much so that they stopped monitoring, they stopped collecting data on affordable housing units in November 2019. So I would love to see some action from this government, but their track record shows otherwise.

I want to just also point out – I mean, we've said it many times in this Chamber. We asked about it in question period today, that it's got to be challenging. You know, I posted on the weekend about the skyrocketing insurance rates, and I had stories from people all over Alberta of how these insurance hikes, 15 per cent in two years, are going to impact them. They weren't just my constituents, that's for sure. And when we asked the minister and we asked the Premier about how they expect Albertans to be able to take on another huge increase in payments, we get laughter, we get a denial of what real-life Albertans are struggling with, and we should all be concerned. It raises questions about why. Why is the UCP refusing to share information? Why are they refusing to listen to the real-life stories of our constituents?

I have so much more I could say on this, but I know some of my colleagues want to get in as well. Again, I started my comments by saying that I never want to be an elected official who is so out of touch that they don't listen to the stories of their own constituents and that they don't remember what it's like to struggle. Perhaps they've never struggled, but that lack of empathy and compassion is becoming pretty apparent from these members opposite. It's not too late for them to do the right thing, and I urge all members to support this motion.

Thanks, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thanks, Madam Speaker. I rise today in this House to speak about Motion for a Return 10 as submitted by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. This motion for a return requests data on the number of Albertans paid basic minimum wage as outlined in section 9(1)(a.1) of the employment standards regulation for the period between June 2019 and December 2023. This motion for a return is one I cannot support, and as such I'm recommending to this House that we reject Motion for a Return 10.

This government does take the concerns of minimum wage earners seriously. The last few years of inflation combined with recent elevated interest rates have been tough on everyone, but minimum wage workers have faced this reality more than most. This is one of the many reasons we are constantly working to keep tax rates and the cost of living low here in Alberta. That means for all wage earners, including minimum wage earners, more of your income is in your pocket at the end of every month.

However, Motion for a Return 10 is not something that will help to advance the interests of minimum wage earners in Alberta. Instead, it requests information which is not available under the requested regulation and service only to delay more productive debates in this House that we could have. As I just mentioned, the information requested under Motion for a Return 10 is not

something our government is positioned to provide. It is important to note that the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade does not track the number of people paid minimum wage under the employment standards regulations. That does not mean our government doesn't factor in the number of minimum wage earners in our province in decision-making processes. We are still able to do so using publicly available proxy measures to estimate the number of minimum wage earners in Alberta.

The Statistics Canada labour force survey provides data on average hourly earnings and can be used as a reliable indicator for trends in minimum wage employment across the province. I strongly encourage the members across the aisle to utilize this resource. My hope is that the members opposite would be aware of this information, as an online search is all that it requires to put this issue to rest.

Right now our House has set aside time to discuss this motion for a return, time that is incredibly precious, Madam Speaker. We have very limited time this session, and our government wants to make the most of it. It is unfortunate that when our government is trying to pass new legislation focused on the needs and priorities of Albertans, this House's progress is slowed down.

I also believe that Motion for a Return 10 could, under a particular perspective, be seen as an attempt by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview to indicate that our Alberta government does not take the economic well-being of minimum wage earners seriously. This is especially true given recent rhetoric from the opposition about raising the minimum wage. Frankly, Madam Speaker, it could not be further from the truth. The fact is that our government is constantly reviewing the economic health of Albertans. Additionally, our government considers a wide range of factors when determining the sustainability of the minimum wage rate beyond just the number of earners. Our regular assessments of the appropriateness of the minimum wage are made with consideration of the province's overall economic health, including the needs of workers and businesses.

We're also at a point now where 30 per cent of Albertan small businesses are struggling to stay profitable due to the current inflation crisis brought on by the federal government's reckless spending and the unjustified weight of the federal carbon tax. I would say that the carbon tax would be the major part of that. Now is absolutely not the time to get into and hike their costs. See, Madam Speaker, when our government makes decisions, they are made by weighing in pros and cons, not just based on the rhetoric.

I also think it is important to remember that the number of minimum wage earners has declined by over 50 per cent in the last five years. Demographics are also an important consideration when determining a minimum wage. Our thriving Alberta economy has 94 per cent of workers making more than minimum wage. Of those 6 per cent still earning the \$15-an-hour minimum, most are under the age of 24, a demographic with high unemployment, and nearly half of them still live at home. The largest category of these earners are students, and 93 per cent of that 6 per cent slice work only one job.

4:10

Simply put, the minimum wage needs to remain at the level suitable to those earning it. It needs to be at the level where businesses, big and small, can afford to employ first-time job seekers so those job seekers can build the skills they need to advance. I think this also reflects a bit of our attitude as Albertans. Albertans have an intuitive understanding that hard work and ambition should be rewarded. Our government is committed to ensuring that this ideal can stay a reality. Whether you are an entrepreneur or worker, everyone should be able to build a successful career or grow successful businesses.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Finally, I believe it is worth acknowledging that our \$15-an-hour minimum wage is not out of line with the national average of \$15.83 an hour. This is especially true when you consider that our low tax rate, high personal tax exemption, competitive cost of living, and limitless opportunities are still drawing thousands to our province every month.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, I stand firm in rejecting this motion, because not only could the opposition use the same proxy data this government uses when making decisions, but there are more important things for this Chamber to consider. This motion as proposed would not provide new meaningful insight beyond what we already have available. Beyond that, I reject Motion for a Return 10 as an attempt to paint our government as one that does not take seriously the circumstances of minimum wage earners. We do and we will continue to take them seriously, and I would call on all my colleagues to join me in rejecting this motion.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support my friend from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview in requesting this information on minimum wage. It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon talk about how we're not taking the issue of minimum wage workers seriously. I think that if he were serious about taking on the plight of minimum wage workers, then he would at least be accurate around how much taxes minimum wage workers pay in Alberta compared to other provinces. I just had a look at the provincial tax rates in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and British Columbia. In all of those provinces a minimum wage earner pays less in income tax than they do here in Alberta.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite referred to the high basic personal exemption. Well, right now before this House is a bill that actually caps the amount that the personal exemption will increase next year so that it doesn't actually track with inflation. So a minimum wage earner who is struggling to keep up with the cost of living won't have his or her tax bill reduced by the personal exemption because these guys are not allowing the personal exemption to raise with the rate of inflation, which was something that the former leader Jason Kenney railed against when he was in opposition in the federal government.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the jobs minister keeps talking about not wanting to throw barriers in front of young earners. Well, it's interesting. In 2019, in May of that year, when the UCP was elected to office, they implemented their so-called student minimum wage to increase youth employment. In May 2019 the youth unemployment rate was 11 per cent. In August 2024, the most recent date that's available on the Alberta economic dashboard, the same youth unemployment rate is 14 per cent. Plus, we know that the population of Alberta's 15- to 24-year-olds is much higher now than it was five years ago. So why is it, when the minister stands up and talks about his desire to make sure that more young people are employed, we actually have thousands and thousands of more young people unemployed than when they took office in May 2019?

The fact . . .

Mr. Nally: It's because of immigration.

Mr. Schmidt: I hear the Member for Morinville-St. Albert beaking off. I would like him to actually come forward to this House with some constructive proposals to actually put our young people to work. What they've offered the people of Alberta for the last five years has not worked, and the data bears that out, Mr. Speaker.

Now, I want to thank my friends from Edmonton-Ellerslie and Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood for talking about the plight of the lowest paid workers in the province, but I want to spend a little bit of time talking about how this government is treating some of the highest paid earners in the province. We know that the student minimum wage is for students, some of whom are going to university and paying increasing tuition costs that go in part to cover presidents' salaries, Mr. Speaker. Now, it's interesting because the youth unemployment rate hasn't been raised since 2018, but you know what has gone up just as recently as June of this year? University presidents' salaries.

That's right, Mr. Speaker. On June 5, 2024, the Minister of Finance approved big, fat pay raises for the president of Lakeland College. She got a \$20,000 pay raise. So did the president of Red Deer college: a \$20,000 pay raise. The president of MacEwan University got a \$21,000 pay raise. The University of Lethbridge, NAIT, and SAIT: those presidents got a \$26,000 pay raise. And get this: the U of A and the U of C presidents are both seeing their pay packages go up by \$33,000. Now, if you calculate the number of hours that a person earning the student minimum wage would have to work just to get the amount of money that the Lakeland College president's salary was raised, they would have to work 1,538 hours. To get the amount of money that the University of Alberta president's salary was raised, a student worker would have to work 2,538 hours.

And it doesn't stop there. I've questioned the minister of energy a number of times in the last few days about the big, fat pay raises that he's giving to his friends on the AER board. You know, if a student had to work at \$13 an hour to earn the kind of pay raise that a board member got at the AER, they would have to work 4,846 hours, Mr. Speaker. How is that fair? You know, it is absolutely repulsive that these members are making sure that the highest paid earners and their insider fat-cat friends get big pay raises year over year, but the people who are working to pay their tuition and pay those presidents' salaries haven't had their wages go up in five years. That's absolutely offensive.

Sorry. I was in high dudgeon, Mr. Speaker, and I lost my train of thought. Oh, right. The one final point that I want to make is that the minister of jobs continues to talk about the fact that minimum wage earners live at home, so they don't need to earn higher salaries. Well, you know who has their housing paid on the public dime? University presidents. Not only does U of A earn \$595,000 a year; his rent is paid for by the students and the taxpayers. As I said, his wage went up \$33,000 just in June. So why is it that the highest paid earners also have their accommodations paid for, but students have to live at the hotel of mom and dad and don't get any help from this government in making ends meet?

It's absolutely outrageous, and the people of Alberta should know whose side the UCP government is on. It is clear to everybody watching this debate tonight, Mr. Speaker, that they are clearly on the side of their insider fat-cat corporate friends and that people who are working minimum wage at honest work that does a service to the people of Alberta get nothing and will continue to be ignored by the UCP government.

4:20

So I urge all members of the House to vote in favour of this motion, and on top of that, Mr. Speaker, I urge the members opposite to do something to help out minimum wage earners and at least raise the minimum wage.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I will recognize the member from Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak against MR 10, presented by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. Minimum wage is an important issue to Alberta's government. Our government recognizes the significant pressures many Albertans are facing, particularly in light of the recent high national inflation and elevated interest rates. This is an important question, and we all recognize that there are a lot of people that are suffering – people who work, people who cannot find work, small businesses – and this is something that we're going to talk about.

So what is the situation? Well, we are tied at \$15 an hour with Saskatchewan on the lower end of the range for minimum wages. On average we're 5 per cent less. Minimum wage on average across Canada is \$15.83, and Alberta's minimum wage is \$15 per hour. However, there are a couple of points here. The first point has already been made that, dealing directly with the motion, the data that they're asking for the Alberta government doesn't track at this point, so it's not available. There are alternative sources of data that are publicly available, and we invite all members opposite to go and visit the Statistics Canada labour force survey, and you can find all the data that you may want.

But this raises another issue here, and the question is, you know: is the minimum wage something that should be adjusted today? I guess the question that has to be asked is: what are the considerations that you're including in the discussion on this? Members opposite and others, including ourselves, are concerned about how it is that people making minimum wage make it through the world, especially with the nature of rising costs. However, there are many other considerations. We've talked about the fact that the vast majority of people making minimum wage are young people, most of which are living at home.

Now, as somebody who at one point in time in my life made minimum wage, I recognize that the value I was adding to the business that I worked for, certainly initially, was relatively low, so it wasn't surprising that the employer paid me commensurate with the productivity I could add to their business. But, thankfully, you learn, you work, you gain experience, and then you begin to access higher wage and salaries.

This is the point. People who make minimum wage do not stay at minimum wage the rest of their lives. What is the point of minimum wage? What is the purpose of that? It's to get people experience to be able to increase their productivity and capacity to contribute to the business or businesses generally, and then they will be remunerated accordingly. That's the way the private sector works.

There is an option, though. There is another question, however. Again, I often quote Thomas Sowell, an economist. It needs to be pointed out the reality about what the minimum wage is. I'll quote the following.

Unfortunately, the real minimum wage is always zero, regardless of the laws, and that is the wage that many workers receive in the wake of the creation . . . they lose their jobs or fail to find jobs when they enter the [work] force. Making it illegal to pay less than a given amount does not make a worker's productivity worth that amount – and . . . that worker is unlikely to be employed.

This is the other side of the equation.

I have talked to people in small businesses over the last couple of years quite a bit about what's going on in their businesses and particularly those who pay minimum wage for some of their staff or pay wages that are based on some percentage or some amount above minimum wage to reflect the fact that they should be paying people more because they contribute more. When I asked the question, "What would happen if we increased minimum wage?" many of these employers told me: "I would have to cut. I employ many people not necessarily because they're providing the

productivity to my business that is worth the money I'm paying, but I'm willing to do that to start training, to get them going. But if you increase the minimum wage, if you increase that cost on me, I need to find ways to cut because I can't increase my prices to the consumer." They're dealing with the reality.

There are many businesses in our economy today that have suffered dramatically, particularly over COVID. They're not quite back to where they would like to be. They're still suffering, they're carrying losses, trying to keep their business going, and you're going to impose – you're suggesting: well, let's just increase the minimum wage. Have you talked to those small businesses about what that means for them? It's not just about one group of people that we're talking about. We have to look at the big picture. Who is hurt the most by high minimum wages are those people, the very people – you talked about the racialized society, low-income people, people who are still working on increasing their productive capacity that they can provide to employers. They are the exact same people who will be hurt by this measure. It's called unemployment.

I believe that the best social program that we can provide as a government is a job. That's what gives a person dignity. That tells them: you know, you can be productive. You can work, you can improve your productivity, and you work towards that. That's what the vast majority of people will do. So 10 years after I was making minimum wage, I was making significantly above minimum wage. I got the job experience I needed to help me out, get me going, and I worked hard on producing, and this is what generally everybody does. It's not surprising. This is normal.

I had a meeting just the other day with a group representing some postsecondary students coming to our office, and one of the proposals they want is that they wanted us to provide subsidies for their summer unemployment. Why? Because there are not enough jobs. So they figure: add subsidies to the employers so that they can get that job. Now, we can talk about whether or not that's a good idea, but what's the point? The point is that what the marketplace is saying is that given what we have to pay, we don't have a job for you because we cannot afford to assume that cost. Again, this reiterates the fact that the real minimum wage is zero, and we don't want to see that. We want to see people employed. The younger generation is the group that has the highest unemployment rate right now. What do we think is going to happen to that unemployment rate if we increase minimum wage? It's going to get higher. Is that productive? Is that useful? Is that good social policy?

Other considerations in here. You know, you want to compare other parts of the country. Okay. The member opposite talked about: people in Alberta do not pay the lowest taxes in the country. Well, I disagree with that. I don't know what he's looking at. Is he talking just that one little element? Did he include provincial sales tax? Provincial sales tax is a pretty big item. Did he include rent? The rent here in Edmonton is 67 per cent below the average rent for a one-bedroom place in Toronto. So we're paying 5 per cent less than the national average on our minimum wage, but our rent is 67 per cent lower than the rent in Toronto. It's comparable in Vancouver and some other major cities.

Should we not be looking at the overall cost of living if we're going to take a look at these kind of things, or are we just going to be selective in the statistics you use? We've seen that the members opposite, Mr. Speaker, keep talking about, "Well, we have the high level of unemployment," but of course they refuse to acknowledge the fact that we've got by far the fastest growing population in the country.

4:30

We created 42 per cent of all private-sector jobs in this country here in Alberta, yet you want to take a selective statistic and say that, well,

you're going to ignore the fact that a huge mass of population came over here because we are the best place in Canada to live, the most affordable, the best income. You know, let's take a look at the whole big picture of what's going on here. We're creating jobs. Anyways, I will speak against this motion.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I rise to support the motion for a return on the basic minimum wage. The government should report on the number of Albertans making the minimum wage and provide as many details as possible, especially for those under 18 years old.

For starters, it is economic transparency. Despite that transparency isn't the UCP government's strongest suit, reporting on minimum wage earners provides a clear picture of income distribution within the province. It helps policy-makers, economists, and frankly the UCP government to understand how many individuals are earning at or near the minimum wage, which is essential for making informed decisions about economic policies, especially now in times of increased inflation and an affordability crisis.

Reporting on this data also informs decisions on labour policies, social programs, and potential adjustments to the minimum wage. Reporting and monitoring provides an understanding of the extent of poverty and income inequality in Alberta. It is, frankly, shocking to hear the jobs minister say that he prefers to use proxy data from the federal government rather than providing our actual data. Of course, it's hard to take this government seriously, as the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon alluded to. It is embarrassing that the jobs minister comes here and tells us that Alberta cannot collect its own data. This is not serious.

The minister needs to understand that having high levels of minimum wage earners may show a pattern and indicate a broader issue of economic inequality which could drive the need for interventions such as affordable housing, health care, and education needs. This can guide the education and workforce training programs to help individuals transition into higher paying positions or industries, not to stay living on minimum wage forever, as the Calgary-Fish Creek member alluded to, and that they deserve to stay on a low minimum wage for a long time just because they are in a productive period.

Reporting creates informed, responsive, and effective economic and social policies that benefit the well-being of Albertans. It is simple. Again, I'm not surprised the UCP does not want to report on minimum wage as it will raise public awareness about the economic conditions in this province. Sharing the latest trends on minimum wage, not the lagging proxy data from the federal government, will be politically uncomfortable for the government, especially as it reflects poorly on the UCP's economic policies and its mismanagement of the economy.

After all, this is the government that banned renewables for seven months and doubled down on its heavy-handed government intervention with unfair and vague rules that are practically paralyzing investments in wind and solar projects, resulting in massive loss of construction jobs and good-paying jobs in rural Alberta.

The UCP mismanagement of the economy has been a real thing, and I have to say that hearing about the UCP announcement on geothermal energy today is a welcome change after the UCP banned energy storage and geothermal energy with their renewables moratorium. We've been telling this government that we are in a race to attract low-carbon investments to bring projects to this province and to create well-paying, not just minimum wage, jobs.

The UCP government is funding geothermal energy through an industrial carbon tax, Mr. Speaker. Now, that's interesting. So much for the UCP rhetoric that the carbon tax is impacting affordability and jobs in Alberta. It is always a good day to remind the members opposite and this minister here of how industrial carbon pricing actually works, how it reduces emissions and creates good-paying jobs in Alberta. It is also a good day to remind the minister that in 2007 Alberta was the first jurisdiction to introduce carbon pricing for industry, the main mechanism to reduce emissions from heavy emitters now managed through the technology innovation and emissions reduction regulation, TIER.

A quick history lesson for the UCP. Prior to the formation of TIER, former Conservative Premier Stelmach brought the specified gas emitters regulation and then sat on it for eight years until the Alberta NDP government did the hard work of consulting with industry, the public, and experts to modernize it into the TIER system. Let's not forget that the UCP also withdrew from the Alberta climate leadership act, that actually had an exemption period for small oil and gas, and crashed them into the federal carbon price, giving up Alberta's control over the carbon pricing policy and the revenue that comes with it, Mr. Speaker.

To be clear, the UCP jeopardized Alberta's position by not having a plan; jeopardized that revenue. They took a made-in-Alberta plan and nicely handed it all to Trudeau; so much for the nonstop UCP rhetoric that the carbon tax is impacting affordability in Alberta while they continue to send it to the federal government. Again the UCP-Trudeau alliance in action, maybe, Mr. Speaker. I know this is news to the UCP caucus, but the UCP government increased the industrial carbon price to \$170 per tonne by 2030; this is the UCP's carbon pricing policy. In fact, it is time to provide more clarity around TIER beyond 2030 to add investment certainty to our oil and gas sector and other heavy industries.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the UCP needs to provide investment certainty, to create jobs, and to help Albertans earn more and more than the minimum wage. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak? I will recognize the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in the House today to speak against Motion for a Return 10, which requests the provision of data on the number of Albertans paid the basic minimum wage as outlined by section 9(1) and (a.1) of the employment standards regulation for the period between June 2019 and March 2024. While we all understand the importance of addressing issues related to minimum wage, I advise the Assembly to vote down this motion. Alberta's government recognizes significant pressures Albertans are facing, particularly in light of record national inflation and elevated interest rates.

Mr. Speaker, I'm actually going to table this document tomorrow; it's a document that was sent to me by a constituent. I appreciate the member opposite bringing the carbon tax into this debate. When we actually take a look at the cost to Albertans on that carbon tax, this constituent of mine was fortunate enough to send me their most recent utility bill that looks at the cost of the carbon tax on the gas portion. Now, their overall usage was \$93, and why I bring this up is that over 40 per cent of their bill for gas was just carbon tax.

So when we talk about the affordability impacts that Albertans are facing, their failed program that they first launched here in Alberta, that absolutely abysmal, impacting, devastating bill that the opposition brought in when they were in government, affects 40 per cent of people's bills, but they had no problem saddling themselves up with the failed mother ship at home. They had no problem saddling themselves up to the federal government, who has done everything in

their power to disrupt the actual costs of anything and what Albertans can buy with their minimum wage, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps it's about time that they acknowledge the failures of their policy and overspending and the impact that it has on Albertans of every income bracket.

We regularly review economic conditions and are constantly addressing the appropriateness of the minimum wage. Adjustments to minimum wage are made with consideration to the province's overall economic health, including the needs of workers and businesses. Ongoing discussions on minimum wage are re-evaluated within the broader context of job creation, which Alberta is leading in; economic growth, which, again, Alberta is leading in; and Alberta's competitiveness, which we again are leading in, with the country's largest weekly wage take-home by workers.

4:40

The Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade does not track the specific number of individuals paid minimum wage under the regulations, as required by this motion. Consequently, Mr. Speaker, the exact data the member is asking for in this motion is not available through provincial resources. However, as we've heard many speakers say, a proxy measure does exist to estimate the number of workers in Alberta earning this wage. It's readily available, and I would encourage the members opposite to go and take a look at that data. And it doesn't just stop at that; there's significantly more.

Something else we can also take a look at, and that I will be tabling as we go on, is that as we talk about resources and tools that are readily available to us, there's an interesting little website that actually breaks down what the 10-year inflation has looked like for Canada and its impact on Alberta when we look at the federal piece. If we take a look and shorten that window down to 2019, our national inflation was at 1.4 per cent in January 2019. In January 2020 it was 2.4 per cent. In April 2021 it rose significantly to 3.4 per cent. But the biggest jump was yet to come. When we take a look at June 2022: 8.1 per cent.

Now, when we take a look at the Bank of Canada's statements on the inflation growth during that time period, it specifically calls out overspending above budget expectations the federal government had put into play, and as a result of that, the five-year GIC bonds, that a lot of our mortgage rates are based off, actually went up significantly. That's why we're now seeing housing affordability challenges, because of failed champagne, socialist policies; overspending, with a tax-and-forget mindset that we've seen from Ottawa and that we've seen when the members opposite were in power.

We see the biggest rate cut going from 8.1 down to 5.9 and then down to 2.9. Two point nine, Mr. Speaker, is when the Bank of Canada actually slashed its prime interest rate number. Now, that's relevant because it opened up significantly what affordability could look like for some Albertans. There's a long way to go. But this is the by-product of failed socialist policies that the opposition continues to ram at us and Albertans, overpromising and underdelivering. What we do know that they have delivered on is the recognition, that we all see, of their failed policies and the impact to everyday Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, in the last five years the number of Albertans earning minimum wage, which I can't help but notice was conveniently left out by the members opposite because again it doesn't fit in to their narrative, has declined by over 50 per cent.

Ms Pitt: How much?

Mr. Wright: Fifty per cent.

This reflects Alberta's labour market, which continues to outperform the national averages, Mr. Speaker.

Do you know what else we can talk about? Every time the Conservatives of any party have been in power, job creation grows, but there's one little blip of four years, Mr. Speaker, where investment fled, jobs fled, and they had ministers saying: go to different provinces; we don't want you here. Let's also not forget that it didn't just stop there; it discussed how they view Albertans. We had ministers referring to Albertans as sewer rats, as embarrassing cousins. On this side of the House we actually believe that Albertans are the strength of what makes this province amazing.

I'd like to share a bit about my story with my family in this province. See, I grew up in Ontario.

Mr. Jones: Shame.

Mr. Wright: Yeah. I agree. I agree.

I grew up in Ontario, Mr. Speaker, and my entire life my parents worked five jobs between the two of them. When my mom would show up to go and apply for even a waitress job or a server job, there would be in line over a thousand people for that job. A thousand people. My dad had a great job working for a manufacturer, but because of failed continued Liberal and NDP policies in Ontario, it was driving job creation into the ditch.

We moved out west here when my dad got on with CP Rail, and we never looked back, Mr. Speaker. The impact to my family, we talk about, was almost a six-generational prosperity increase. My parents were able to go down to one job because of policies that made sense to make things more affordable.

Now, I know the opposition wants us to be in deficits and in a place where we spend and spend and spend and not worry about it until my children's generation and my grandchildren's generation has to pay the price for failed policies that they bring in, and we see that now with our debt. Our provincial debt that we're paying down, they've not been able to even consider. More than 94 per cent of workers in Alberta make more than minimum wage, serving as a testament to the growth and opportunities within our province. My family experienced that firsthand. Fifty-seven per cent of minimum wage earners are between 15 and 24. Mr. Speaker, unlike the opposition, we believe in creating an environment where people can prosper. If it was up to them, you'd own nothing and you'd be happy.

With that, I encourage everybody in this Chamber to vote down this motion and maybe for them to go and take a look at the resources they have available to them instead of asking to be spoon-fed. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows to speak next.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to have the opportunity to add short comments to this motion for a return, given the time limit I see.

I just wanted to say in the beginning that, you know, I'm speaking in favour of this motion. The reason why I'm saying: my colleagues have spoken on this issue very eloquently, backing their arguments with evidence and all kinds of facts. Albertans are going through the affordability crisis, and the worst part of this is the government is not doing their job, not from 2023 but since the UCP took this office. They made the decision-making, all their political decisions, their policies came in that are consistently making their lives worse.

We understand the world went through COVID, and we have a number of challenges. One of these was inflation; prices have gone up. But in Alberta you experience that inflation more than the average. On top of that, the UCP came in power and removed the cap from utility prices, removed the cap from tuition fees. The other greatest thing to the UCP ideology they have done: as soon as they took to the office, they rolled back youth wages, claiming that will

increase the youth employment. Thank you for them increasing the youth unemployment to the highest in the country.

The reason we are asking this question of the minister of jobs and economy is that every time he stands up in the House, we see this return: lower taxes, no GST, no PST, no risk. But on this public policy what we hear from Albertans, as my friend the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie very effectively highlighted in the case, is that there are communities that are disproportionately affected by this government's policies.

4:50

We had a meeting with the student leaders this morning. The government's representative needs to get out and talk to them and come back with the information that comes from them. The tuitions are increased manyfold. They are struggling with houselessness and transportation issues.

Every time we say that we share the data – they say, like, you can go to, okay, federal data, federal information websites; that's where we're coming from when we say that the inflation is higher than the average in this province, but the base growth is lower. That's the information.

Mr. Getson: What's causing that?

Mr. Deol: The member across the aisle can also use that. The answer coming from the ministry doesn't solve the problem. The public policy needs to be based on data, needs to be based on evidence, and the ministry needs to do their job. This is very important and imperative information that we need to build the public policy that serves the very Albertans – they're asking us.

I strongly support this motion, and I also ask the members across the aisle to reconsider their position. Please support this motion.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The government whip, the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I do have a great relationship with the member opposite from Edmonton-Meadows. Fine gentleman. We go out and do a lot of public engagements, and he's welcomed me in his community a number of times. Great gentleman. He's got some good points. Unfortunately, the points he's made on this one I have to disagree with. I'd love to agree with him, but then both of us would be wrong in here at the same time, and we can't have that. Two wrongs don't make a right.

People were wondering here a little bit earlier on Motion 10. This is talking about the minimum wage. Right now it's \$15 an hour. The opposition is asking for that to be changed, asking for data to be collected.

Mr. Jones: Twenty-five.

Mr. Getson: To \$25? They're not asking for \$25, are they? I mean, that would be outlandish if they're asking for something like that.

Here's what happened down in California when they raised their minimum wage to \$20 an hour. I just saw it recently. That was the tipping point for the fast-food industry down there, to actually start using good old robotics, and they're replacing all the fry cooks. They're replacing everybody in the back room because, quite frankly, they can't make ends meet otherwise. So now what you're going to see is a displacement of labour.

The opposition Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie: there is one thing I agreed with him on when I heard his speech. He was

speaking, and he was saying: shame on them. He was saying, "Shame on us," speaking as the NDP person, and you're absolutely right. Shame on you for supporting the carbon tax, shame on you for having an NDP alliance down in Ottawa, shame on you for shutting down the energy sector and driving people out, shame on you for driving all these costs up, and shame on them, Mr. Speaker, for messing with the electricity rates and driving costs up nonstop. They think these things are completely separated. They hammer the economy. They drive up inflation with all these policies. So with the Member for Edmonton-Meadows: I agree with him. It is policies, policies that they brought in, put in place, that we're trying to deal with and are messing up the entire country.

Shame on them for making assumptions that none of us over here worked for less than minimum wage or for minimum wage and worked ourselves up. For some reason, when they like to use the socialist purse, all I've heard is neo-Marxism, the mantra here. You may as well have Greta Thunberg wigs handed out to all of them. Put them on. Little pigtales.

[The Speaker in the chair]

This is wild. Absolutely wild. Shame on them for starting a flipping Dumpster fire and then wondering why everything's burning down. Their solution for all of this – and they're going to start pulling at the heartstrings of people and tugging at them and, quite frankly, getting people fighting amongst each other over this instead of doing something truthful and honest. Work with us. Work with us. Call up the bosses in Ontario that are working down in Ottawa, get an election under way, finally, and maybe – just maybe – get rid of some of the policies you help prop up.

They don't want me to speak now, Mr. Speaker. They were chirping a while earlier, but now that I'm up here – oh, my gosh – they don't want that. I've got to be quiet. [interjections] Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood: this individual jumps up a lot and raises her voice, but I get passionate about this, and I'm not allowed. How dare they? How dare they silence our voices? They only want it one way.

And the last time I saw the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar there, the last time I heard this rhetoric, he was holding a little protest sign out there trying to shut in pipelines. This guy can't figure out why . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order has been called.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah; 23(h), (i), and (j). You know, I listened with an incredible amount of patience. It takes so much patience to listen to the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland say anything in this House. Yet he suggested that I was out somewhere protesting pipelines. Now, he knows that that's not true. He also knows that most of the things that he's saying in his speech aren't true. He's never been confined to reality, let's say, when he's speaking in the House, but he knows that this particular allegation is not true. I ask that he withdraw the comment and apologize.

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What we all heard on this side of the House was a very robust debate from a very passionate member of the government caucus. There was nothing

in the comments that were made by the member that gave rise to a point of order. The member was passionately debating the matter before this Assembly. This is not a point of order. I respectfully disagree with the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Any others with substantive contributions to the point of order? I can't tell if you're rising or . . .

An Hon. Member: I'm just putting on my shoe.

The Speaker: Good idea.

Hon. members, I am prepared to rule, and what I would say is that, with few exceptions, if members of the Assembly are speaking to the content of what is before the Assembly – and I'll be the first to admit I just joined the chair, but I believe that it's Motion for a Return 14.

Some Hon. Members: Ten.

The Speaker: Ten.

It may come as a surprise to some members that since joining the chair, I was unsure of what perhaps we were debating and may have strayed from the content of the motion. With that said, I had the opportunity to observe some of the debate from my office earlier today, and I recognize that other members of the Assembly may, too, have strayed from the content of the motion, so I can see how on occasion there may be a tit for tat here in the Assembly, which almost never creates good decorum. I won't consider this a point of order.

The member, unfortunately, only has about a minute remaining.

Debate Continued

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As always, your guidance is much appreciated, bringing decorum back in, and you are right from what you had observed in your backrooms. I had a litany of lists of items that I felt I would address in the member's comments to Motion for a Return 10, regarding the minimum wage.

With that, I don't believe we need to be monkeying around anymore. I believe that we need to let the market do what it needs to do. I believe the Jobs, Economy and Trade minister spoke eloquently to why a number of my members, that I am fortunate enough to sit with on this side of the aisle, spoke emphatically about the system, how it works, how free-market enterprise works. It may not work well with the neo-Marxists – it may not ring true with them – but it sure works on our side.

The Speaker: That concludes the time allotted for debate of this very important motion for a return, Motion for a Return 10.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Foreign Influence in Canada

517. Mr. Cyr moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government of Canada to

- (a) recognize the importance of preventing foreign entities from interfering with or influencing the decision-making of governments in Canada; and
- (b) take all the necessary steps to protect governments in Canada from foreign interference by strengthening safeguards that protect Canadian sovereignty.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The purpose of this private member's motion is to respond to the progressively increasing

concerns over foreign interference that I'm hearing more and more every day from my constituents, Albertans across our great province, and Canadians as a whole. This motion is absolutely needed because the trust that Albertans and other Canadians have in their federal government must be paramount. Sadly, it seems that over the last nine years, particularly during the 2019 to 2021 elections, we have lost a lot of that trust due to our inept Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. He has failed to protect Canadians when it comes to safeguarding their democratic processes and decision-making processes. Canadians need to trust that our policies and governance are determined by the will of Canadians, not by foreign governments, not by foreign entities.

However, all media reports regarding the alleged foreign interference in the 2019 to 2021 federal elections – many Canadians, including my constituents, have expressed concerns about our very, very important democracy. A federal election is scheduled for the fall of 2025. Mr. Speaker, this gives our country less than a year to rebuild our lost trust in the democratic system. The intent of the motion is to urge the government of Canada to proactively safeguard the federal decision-making process from foreign interference. It is something I hope that all members of this Chamber can support as well.

I also wish, Mr. Speaker, that I didn't have to raise this type of motion in our provincial legislative Chamber at all. Still, alas, with our hopefully soon to be former federal Liberal government not doing their job, it seems someone has to. It is unfortunate that, again, our provincial government and our hard-working provincial ministers need to strain themselves by properly addressing provincial issues as well as federal issues. You heard that right. Our government is needing to not only deal with provincial but federal. That's insane. But, thankfully, our incredibly capable United Conservative government is up to the task.

Standing against foreign interference is standing for our sovereignty. After all, as an advanced economy and open democracy, Canada is a wonderful place to live, but it also means we are the target of foreign interference. It ranges from attacks on the integrity of our democratic institutions and processes, intimidating or harassing individuals speaking out against repression, to even stealing Canadian-made knowledge, expertise, and innovation. While our inept Prime Minister in Ottawa is busy bouncing from scandal to selfies to Taylor Swift concerts to simply not putting the work of our national security forward, the country is facing serious threats from malicious state actors who want to interfere with our country's affairs. That is something I am sure would cause Sir John A. Macdonald to turn over in his very grave.

Our provincial government is taking over the slack by doing the job of the federal Liberals that don't seem to be taking the time and interest in doing so, Mr. Speaker. I want to share some of the recent highlights from that list. It includes our very own Premier signing on to a direct partnership with 12 other U.S. states in the Governors' Coalition for Energy Security earlier this month. We are the first non-U.S. state to enter this agreement, Mr. Speaker. Where is Canada? It includes the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas travelling with our Premier to COP 29 to stand up for Alberta's interests because the federal counterparts refuse to do so. Where is Canada? It involves our Minister of Technology and Innovation continuing to bring in record venture capital investment in our province. Where is Canada? It also includes our Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women attracting more big-budget and job-creation television and film productions from all over the world. Where is Canada? I could go on.

I am so proud of our dedicated, hard-working Premier, ministers, and my United Conservative caucus colleagues, who are working so hard with each other and every day to show the world that Alberta is

the best place on earth. The best place on earth. We are showing how it is the absolutely best place to work, live, raise a family, and start a business, and all of this despite the federal government's seeming lack of focus on issues that matter to most Albertans and Canadians, Mr. Speaker. Because of this, I hope our federal government sees the private member's motion and takes this proactive measure to address their clear deficiencies on these matters. We need to be equipped with the right tools to address foreign interference threats against our democratic process and systems. If we all take a strong, united stance against foreign interference, this will show to those who wish to hurt our democracy that Albertans and Canadians will always advocate for our sovereignty locally and on the world stage.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that when it comes to Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, many of my constituency continue to see the failings of our federal government. The question is: where is the NDP in all of this? They play a large part of holding up the entire Canadian government right now. The shortcomings of Prime Minister Trudeau can also be equated to the shortcomings of the NDP Party. They are doing nothing – nothing – to protect our sovereignty, yet they get up in the House and they mock the United Conservative Party, who is trying to do something, who is being proactive, who is wanting to actually see Canada as a whole be successful. But when it comes to policies from the NDP, it aligns so much with Justin Trudeau that we forget it's them that really have the tools to make a real change, yet they don't. They don't. It is so shameful.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? When it comes to our democracy, we need to protect it. It's fragile. We forget how fragile it is. When we've got foreign interference and foreign entities going into our country and actually changing policy, a lot of times it is not for our benefit. We see that with our energy industry. We see that repeatedly. What happens is that they would love to shut down our energy industry so that other countries will actually progress forward. You know what? When it comes to our oil and gas, this is ethically, environmentally sensitive oil that we are creating, and the NDP along with their buddy Justin Trudeau are completely embarrassed of it. That is not okay.

I will tell you: we need to stand up to all of these bullies throughout the world when it comes to Alberta. I'm an Albertan. I'm a proud Albertan. My kids are Albertans. I'm going to tell you that we all want to see a better Alberta, a better Canada.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, those were some wide-ranging remarks from the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul. There was a lot there. I can't say that I agree with everything he said, but I will say that myself and my colleagues on this side of the aisle are in agreement with the motion that's in front of us. We want fair elections. We want elections in Canada, in Alberta, in our cities to be free from foreign interference. Albertans indeed deserve to know that their democracy is being protected, and we will always advocate for strong measures to protect our province from foreign interference.

5:10

Now, the reason we can support that, Mr. Speaker, is because we have concrete evidence. There is good reason to be concerned about foreign interference in Canadian elections. We have the special report on foreign interference in Canadian elections from the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, tabled March 22, 2024. That report indeed stated that foreign states are conducting "sophisticated and pervasive foreign interference specifically targeting Canada's democratic processes and institutions." They note that the

government was aware of this in 2018 and there were reforms implemented under the plan to protect democracy, but those steps were insufficient. They note that there are significant differences in how ministers, departments, agencies in the federal government are interpreting how serious and prevalent the threat is.

So we know there is significant work to do. These are all findings from the report, Mr. Speaker. They note that "Canada's current legal framework does not enable the security and intelligence community or law enforcement to respond effectively to foreign interference activities." They note that the federal government currently "continues to lack an effective approach to engage with the Canadian public and other orders of government" and that the "ability to address vulnerabilities in political party administration is limited."

Again, Mr. Speaker, we absolutely agree with the substance of the motion. We recognize the importance of preventing foreign entities from interfering or influencing decision-making of governments in Canada and believe that, indeed, we should be taking all of the necessary steps to protect governments in Canada from foreign interference by strengthening safeguards that protect Canadian sovereignty. The fact is that we are seeing interference in multiple ways.

Now, it is concerning that we do have some federal party leaders that are not choosing to step up on this issue. Every federal party leader with the exception of Mr. Poilievre has chosen to get their security clearance so they can read the full report, so they can understand if there are members of their own parties for which there may be concerns, so they can do their own due diligence within their political party. Mr. Poilievre so far has continued to refuse to do so. He is the lone standout. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, indeed, we all need to take responsibility. The Canadian government needs to act, but as noted by the committee, there are concerns within political parties. I would hope that Mr. Poilievre, if he wants to show that he wishes indeed to be Prime Minister of our country, shows the responsibility of stepping up to get that security clearance so he can ensure that he is addressing concerns within the Conservative Party of Canada.

Now, I note, Mr. Speaker, that indeed there have been reports of other foreign interference. There has recently been an indictment tabled in the United States, where the Justice department has charged two employees of Russia Today, a Russian state media broadcaster, in a scheme to secretly fund and direct the production of social media videos that racked up millions of views. What has happened is these two operatives from Russia Today have been paying a company, Tenet Media, in the States, which has been paying far-right influencers in the U.S. and, indeed, a suggestion that perhaps there are some in Canada that were receiving this funding through Russia Today from the Russian government to spread misinformation and disinformation in the U.S. and Canada, again, something of which we have concrete evidence. When you have evidence, you take action.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to protecting democracy – and the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul spoke very passionately about the need to protect our democracy. He noted that it's fragile. He talked about a lack of focus on issues that matter to Albertans. Well, when it comes to democracy, this government is focused on things for which they have no evidence; for example, the provision under Bill 20, which they passed in the spring, which bans the use of voting tabulators. There is no evidence for that action, none. There is clear and concrete evidence of foreign interference: a report that's been tabled, concerns that have been raised, findings, and recommendations. This government cannot give a single example in some cases of over 20 years of use of

voting tabulators of a single incident of fraud. Yet based on rumour, conspiracy theory they passed legislation which is going to cost Alberta taxpayers tens of millions of dollars next year to pay for extra workers to hand count every single ballot.

But they don't care, Mr. Speaker. It's not their money. They're forcing municipalities to pay for that. Municipalities will then have to turn and ask their residents to pay for that with their property taxes. Again, this is something for which there is no evidence. Foreign interference: yes, concrete evidence. We should take action. Voting tabulators: not one bit of evidence, but this government actually legislated on that.

Bill 20 also, Mr. Speaker, is stripping away the ability for anyone who doesn't have voter ID to be able to cast a vote in the upcoming municipal elections, again, something for which there is no evidence. None. Indeed, now they are trying to spread rumour, perhaps the minister of service Alberta going on about: well, maybe we need to put citizenship on a driver's licence because we've got to make sure we don't have that foreign interference of noncitizens voting in Canada in our elections. The fact is that there is no evidence that has ever taken place. None.

Foreign interference: yes, Mr. Speaker, there is concrete evidence. There are steps that could be taken, real things that could be legislated on, systems and processes that could be created, but this government is not, as the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul said, concerning themselves with the real issues concerning Albertans. They're concerning themselves with rumour and conspiracy and enacting legislation like what we have seen multiple times in the U.S., where Republicans have sought to strip the vote from particular voters. The groups affected by voter ID laws include Indigenous people, members of visible minority groups, people experiencing homelessness, low-income voters, the elderly, people with disabilities, people in rural areas because they have a much harder time getting photo ID.

Now, the Minister of Municipal Affairs said that he was going to make it the easiest it's ever been to get photo ID in the province of Alberta. That was in the spring, Mr. Speaker, about six months ago. So far we've seen no evidence that they've done a single thing to address it. Roughly 100,000 Albertans have used vouching. You know, when the government was asked to provide a single example where anyone who was ineligible to vote had cast a ballot, they could not provide a single one.

A reporter did dig into it: Courtney Theriault. He found that since 2013 Elections Alberta data shows that a total of three people voted twice in an election. One American voted. Another was ineligible. Two people aided someone to vote or to attempt to vote. So in the course of 11 years, seven instances, a total of five illegal votes, five votes out of literally millions cast, less than a fraction of a per cent.

Mr. Speaker, we will be happy to support this motion to call on the federal government to take action on something factual and concrete, and, unlike much of what the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul had to say, which, again, comes from the realm of conspiracy and, frankly, rank partisanship, what we do have is something here in the motion itself that is concrete. We do have a problem with foreign interference in Canadian elections. The federal government should take action to address it. We support that one hundred per cent.

But we will continue to call out this government when it is passing undemocratic legislation, when it is legislating on the basis of rumour and conspiracy, potentially stripping the vote from Albertans, taking away their right to vote, when it is causing us to have to spend tens of millions of public dollars at a time when Albertans are scraping for every dollar, Mr. Speaker, in a crisis of affordability that is within the power of this government to address.

We will support this motion, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Airdrie-East has risen.

Ms Pitt: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me to speak to this important motion moved today by my colleague the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, Motion 517, which urges the government of Canada to recognize the importance of safeguarding Canadian sovereignty and to ensure that every possible measure is taken to protect against foreign interference.

5:20

I'm pleased to see that there's a semblance of agreement here in this Chamber from all the members in this House. This motion speaks directly to the growing concern from all Albertans and all Canadians: can we trust that the decisions made by our government truly reflect what Canadians want?

We don't need to look far to see the dangers of foreign meddling in governance across the globe. We've witnessed eroded trust in institutions, destabilized governments, rampant corruption undermining the democratic process. Our government has taken measures in terms of going back to a system that provides confidence in elections, which is paper ballots and not voting machines. It might take a little bit longer, but it's certainly doable. Our party just had the largest political convention in Canadian history; 4,800 ballots were cast, and they were counted by hand in under two hours. This is a very, very, very attainable thing for municipalities to conduct across this province.

Canada is not safe from these threats that are happening around the world. In fact, our status as a democracy and advanced economy makes us a prime target. We know this. Foreign actors see our freedoms, they see our stability and our prosperity and all the things that make Canada great, and they want to exploit it for their own gain.

Reports from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS, have made it abundantly clear that foreign interference is on the rise, and there is no time for half measures or delayed responses. We see bad actors cropping up all across this country, most recently in Montreal, the protesters in support of Palestine ripping apart Montreal.

Unfortunately, our federal government has fallen short in its duty to protect Canadians from these threats, as recently seen under the Trudeau Liberals. Evidence of foreign interference has emerged time and time again, yet they fail to act accordingly. Some may point out recent actions like the Countering Foreign Interference Act. While it represents a step in the right direction, it falls short in addressing the full scope of our problem.

Let us consider the evidence. Allegations have emerged over the years of interference by foreign actors in critical moments. Here are some examples. The Chinese Communist Party attempted to sway elections, secretly funding candidates through its Toronto consulate during the 2019 election. The Liberal Party of Canada warned one of its candidates that they might be compromised by Beijing using diplomats and proxies to make undeclared cash donations to political campaigns and hiring international students to volunteer full-time for certain candidates. In 2021 a Conservative MP and his family were targeted by Beijing after the House passed a motion condemning China's human rights abuses. Imagine that, being targeted in your own country for standing up against human rights issues in another country.

The seriousness of these claims sparked a public inquiry into foreign interference in federal electoral processes and democratic institutions that was launched in September 2023. This inquiry is proceeding in two phases. The first phase focuses on the actions of foreign actors, including China and Russia, and their impact on the

2019 and 2021 elections. The second phase, currently under way, examines whether federal departments and institutions are adequately equipped to detect, to deter, and to counter such interference. The final report is expected by December 31, 2024. Unfortunately, we won't have a federal election before then, but we'll certainly have the results of this by then.

Let us be clear. This is not just about China and Russia. CSIS has also identified interference from Pakistan, Iran, and even our allies like India. These actions are not isolated incidents. They are part of a broader systemic problem that requires immediate and comprehensive action, which we are not getting from our leaders in Ottawa here today.

The consequences of foreign interference are already visible; as I mentioned, the unrest in major cities across Canada, most recently in Montreal. Diplomatic tensions, community disruptions, and even violence have resulted from these actions. The concerning case of Hardeep Singh Nijjar's assassination and the targeting of Canadian MPs serves as a stark reminder of how widespread this issue has become. This interference doesn't just harm individuals; it undermines our country's integrity. The world is watching.

Canada currently ranks among the top nations in the G7 for political stability and low corruption. I say "currently ranks." We must protect that standing and show the world that we will not be puppeted by outside forces. I have grave concerns that this status will change if we don't make changes here in this country.

Mr. Speaker, who is better equipped to lead Canada than Canadians themselves? Simple answer: no one. With the federal election approaching in 2025 – still hoping for a Christmas miracle – Canadians need to trust that our democratic processes are secure. Unfortunately, given the federal government's track record, many are skeptical.

I want to tell Albertans that are here in our province that we understand the importance of sovereignty both as a province and as a nation. Our ministers are working tirelessly to defend the interests of Albertans. There's been no Premier that has done better nation building for the province of Alberta inside of Canada than the Premier of the province right now.

We will defend Albertans and our interests, whether defending or promoting our reliable energy sector, advocating for agricultural industries, or standing up for human rights on the global stage. Alberta cannot do this alone. We're trying, and we're moving the needle quite a bit, but Ottawa has to do better. How does Ottawa get to decide to leave Alberta out of the conversation in responsible energy production? They need to do better, and this isn't just about politics. It's about protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of every Canadian.

Imagine the power that Canada would have if we could fully unleash the things that we're doing here in the province of Alberta. Our economy as a nation would be on fire. We wouldn't be having these petty conversations about a minimum wage that are never going to meet the needs. We keep kicking ourselves in the foot with punishing taxes like the carbon tax, a tax on a tax on a tax on a tax. You don't think for a second, Mr. Speaker, that this is affecting the affordability issues almost single-handedly on every single Canadian in this country? Yet we defend it. We still have members of this House stand up and support a carbon tax that's punishing those that they claim to protect, stand up for the most.

Our government is urging the federal government to strengthen our safeguards against foreign interference. We'll stand up against those that are fighting against us here in this country. Proactive measures are needed to ensure Canada's decision-making processes remain firmly in Canadian hands. That's what Canadians expect. That's what Albertans expect for us to be doing here in this Chamber, standing up for the interests of Alberta no matter what side of the aisle we're on.

Foreign interference infiltrates our immigration system, clearly, our supply chains, clearly, and critical infrastructure. I can assure you that other countries aren't as nice and as kind to us as we are to them, especially when we're allowing them into our space. They're not here to lift us up. There are fraudulent visa applications. There's misuse of student visas and other abuses that are eroding our country away.

The time to act is now. Alberta values fairness, integrity, security, and as Alberta MLAs it's our duty to not only advocate for our province's interests but for the interests of all Albertans and all Canadians. We matter so much to this country. I wish Ottawa understood that. Soon they will.

Mr. Speaker, this isn't a partisan issue. This is about protecting what makes Canada strong. Part of what makes Canada strong, a big part, is Alberta, our democracy, our sovereignty, our people. Albertans and Canadians deserve to know that their leaders are taking this threat seriously. They deserve a government that acts in their best interests, free from the influence of foreign powers.

Let's send a clear message. Canada's decision-making processes belong to Canadians. We will not tolerate foreign interference. We will defend Canadian sovereignty, we will defend Alberta sovereignty, and we will stand for the strong and the free. We are privileged to serve all of them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge has the call.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We support safeguarding our democracy and agree with the motion. However, the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul keeps asking, "Where is Canada?" Why doesn't he ask his big boss in Ottawa, Mr. Poilievre, why he doesn't get a security clearance? Instead of playing a blame game, playing dirty games, why doesn't he get a security clearance? Why doesn't he work for the betterment of Canada, for the sovereignty of Canada, for the sovereignty of our own people? [interjections] Again, the same blame game.

5:30

The NDP, we on this side, stress the importance of addressing all forms of foreign interference, not just those that fit in a specific political narrative. We emphasize the need for fair, free elections without foreign interference so that Albertans' democracy is protected. We advocate for robust measures to safeguard Alberta, our people from any kind of foreign influence, be it in the elections.

We have seen in the past that we do have proof and we have evidence of who is involved, who is helping those foreign governments. Now, this morning we got the news about the foreign interference, especially from Russian influence, in Alberta, with right-wing media figures, which has been highlighted. We also demand that the federal government must implement comprehensive protective measures and ensure transparency. Their leader, Mr. Poilievre, should support them.

My background: I came from India. I'm from a visible minority, practising Sikh. I do get targeted as well.

Now, we recently, last year, have seen the allegations of foreign interference, including attempts to influence Canadian politicians and media, allegations that India, China attempted to influence the 2015, '19, 2021 federal elections. It's sad to see, sad to hear that sometimes we have noticed that they do interfere in the nominations as well. People do have ties with them. There should be a proper investigation about those members, and there should be transparency even at the Alberta level as well. From the Justice minister, from the safety minister: they should take it seriously.

In 2023 the allegation of India's potential involvement in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Canadian Sikh citizen leader in British Columbia, who was murdered: all of the authorities said that there was an involvement from the Indian government. But our members opposite haven't condemned it or said a single word about it. When it happened, my community, myself, my family lived in fear as well. If they're targeting them, they're killing them, next could be us.

Now, in 2024 a U.S. indictment revealed Russian efforts to influence Canadian media and political narratives, including targeting Alberta audiences. What is this government doing to try to protect us? How should people trust this government if they are not saying a single word condemning, taking an action, and taking the community into trust?

The 2019 public inquiry into anti-Alberta energy campaigns found that foreign funding targeted Alberta's energy sector but found no illegal actions. Alberta's vulnerability to foreign interference is linked to its resource-rich economy, strategic importance, and large diaspora communities. It's just to target those communities and influence them, lie to them, and try to bring over to get the votes for themselves.

The public inquiry into foreign interference was established in 2023 with the phases examining foreign interference in federal elections and the capacity of the government to counter such efforts. The commission's final report is due by December 31, but members on the opposite side: they should talk to their boss, Mr. Poilievre, to get a security clearance and work for the betterment of Canada.

We know the Canadian Conservative leader didn't get a security clearance, which has raised questions about his access to sensitive information. The denial heightens concerns over foreign interference in Canadian politics, how Albertans and we can't trust this government, whose friend in Ottawa, their leader, won't get security clearance to get the report on foreign interference.

He's playing a game to release a name which everyone knows, which a member on the opposite side knows they can't do that. Why does Poilievre want to risk the investigation and national security by releasing the names publicly, why won't he do his part to protect the Canadians, and why won't the UCP hold him accountable? We have seen that the families of Canadians like Hardeep Singh Nijjar don't trust this government. Albertans don't trust this government.

Again, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there are others? The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to stand in support of Motion 517, and I am pleased to support my friend the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul. He is an individual who I respect. I respect individuals who seek to act in principled ways and to do what is right. Motion 517 states:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government of Canada to

- (a) recognize the importance of preventing foreign entities from interfering with or influencing the decision-making of governments in Canada; and
- (b) take all the necessary steps to protect governments in Canada from foreign interference by strengthening safeguards that protect Canadian sovereignty.

Mr. Speaker, the world is in commotion, and governments are making it worse. They are a danger and a threat to our freedom and prosperity, and that is very sad. There are some very bad foreign governments, or entities, as described in this motion. For example, the Communist Party of China is a very bad foreign entity. There was a federal public inquiry into foreign interference, and its report found that China stands out as a main perpetrator of such interference. The

inquiry investigated meddling in Canada's last two general elections, in 2019 and 2021. But what makes it bad, Mr. Speaker? One, because these entities are not seeking our interest – in fact, they are seeking their interest to the detriment of ours – and because these entities lie.

There are some very disturbing vulnerabilities that are emerging. One example is deepfakes. AI images of people doing things they never did, audio of them saying things they never said, or fake, lying videos can threaten democracy and make it difficult for a voter to know what is real and what is a deepfake. China has and is developing technology which it will not hesitate to use in foreign interference for their gain if they can get away with it. Mr. Speaker, we do not want to see misrepresentation of candidates or other members in the electoral process through manipulation of their voice or image, regardless of whether they are friend or foe.

5:40

It is a lie to use deepfakes or other artificially created content seeking to deceive members of the public. I don't want to see anyone lied about. I hate lies, Mr. Speaker, and there is too much lying. Since I have become an MLA, I have never seen so much lying. Lying takes many forms. Sometimes it is a misrepresentation with the use of half-truths to make a false assertion. Sometimes this is accompanied by fearmongering. Sometimes it is through the use of personal attacks. Personal attacks fail to recognize that often these individuals have families, spouses and children, that are impacted by lies. I have seen lying for character assassinations, and it is not right. The public perceives lies, and where there are lies, there is a loss of trust. There is a loss of trust in government institutions. There is a loss of civility. There is too much polarization. There is less ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

Sometimes foreign entities will seek to extort or bribe elected officials. An elected individual who seeks to be honest and to live with integrity should be more immune from foreign influence that is in opposition to freedom and prosperity of Canadians.

Another area of concern is the risk of hacking into computer data. Some foreign governments, like China, like to hack. For example, we do not want to see tabulators hacked into and computer data changed into false election outcomes. It is vital that there is integrity of the vote. The vote must be fair, and it must be seen to be fair. In my experience, I like elections. I like seeing men and women, neighbours, voting according to their conscience. I like seeing ballot boxes that are visible to all regardless of political preference. I like seeing the counting of ballots by election officials in the presence of scrutineers from competing candidates. That is very good, Mr. Speaker; transparency is very good. There is more unity when we can unite around a vote where there is integrity.

But what about leading by example? Does the Prime Minister lead with integrity? No, Mr. Speaker, he does not lead with integrity. This Prime Minister does not lead his caucus with integrity or moral authority. He seeks to control his caucus with sticks, casting them out of caucus or not signing their nominations, and carrots: bribes, postings, and positions into his echo chamber inner circle. There is no federal recall legislation to get rid of this Prime Minister, and this Liberal caucus was negligent and did not adopt the federal Reform Act, which provides a usable check and balance to protect Canadians from bad leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Canada is under the occupation of a hostile and incompetent Prime Minister, the worst Prime Minister in the history of Canada. While Canada has the potential to be the most free and prosperous nation in the world, by objective measures it is not. Many Canadians are watching our national standard of living getting destroyed yet feel helpless to do anything to stop it. Why? Because our democratic system is failing us, with insufficient checks and balances to stop an out-of-control, narcissistic leader

unilaterally putting his pride and hubris, his selfish interests ahead of the interests of the nation.

Some Liberal MPs, fearing for their jobs, are now asking for a leadership vote by secret ballot. Not surprisingly, leaders like this Prime Minister, who do not lead with moral authority but with sticks and fear and coercion as tools, fear and reject secret ballots. Canada is too top-down, concentrating too much power in the hands of leaders vulnerable to abuses of power, and we are worse off for it.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, we do not want to see lies in any manner whatever from foreign entities seeking to interfere, mask, or distort the truth, but we do not want to see any lies in any manner from an enemy within seeking to interfere, mask, or distort the truth. Unfortunately, this current government is an enemy from within. Now, trust can be restored where there is more truth. We can trust in the truth unconditionally as our nation and province seeks to align itself with truth, rejecting lies from either within or from without. We will be more free and prosperous.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul to close debate.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate this opportunity to be able to speak before you in this House. When it comes to making sure that our country is really moving in the right direction, I believe a motion from Alberta a lot of times needs to be communicated to our federal cousins: “You know what? It’s time to pick up your socks.” In Justin Trudeau’s case they’re very colourful socks.

We’ll go to Edmonton-City Centre in his first speech. You know, he started talking about conspiracy theories, and really it goes to misinformation, fake news, hate speech. What happens is that we can see regularly that a concern gets brought out by the public that we are failing – that we are failing – and you know what the response by the federal government is? Exactly what Edmonton-City Centre had said: conspiracy theories. Then when these things turn out to be true, you’re all shocked. It’s two or three years later where you’re like: “Whoa. Well, why didn’t we investigate that when the concerns have been brought forward?” I will say that some of it is maybe a little out there, but when it comes down to it, what we do need to be asking ourselves is: some of it’s reasonable.

Let’s use the ballots, because it seems like the NDP are very focused on this. I can tell you that in my election, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, the tabulators completely failed. They completely failed. During my election for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul we actually had the NDP ahead in my constituency for, I would say, about 1 or 2 o’clock in the morning. You’re wondering: how can that be when the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul took 76 per cent of the vote? That was a complete failure. You know, what was happening was that the machine themselves were clearly not working right, and they needed to make it somehow – somehow – make any sense, and it didn’t. This was a failure in Alberta.

5:50

Now, what happens is – I’m not saying that’s foreign interference. I’m not saying that. I am saying that the machines are not infallible. There are things about these tabulators that we need to say: “Okay. You know what? Let’s take a step back. Let’s go back to hand counting. Let’s bring confidence back to our elections.” It is something that the NDP and the Liberals seem to undermine. I don’t understand it. You know what? When we look at elections down south, I can tell you it seems like they’re caught up in the partisan politics of the Republicans and Democrats instead of actually focusing on Canada and Alberta.

I want to see an election in Alberta done within a reasonable time frame, not weeks, to be able to find an answer, just like what we’ve seen in B.C. We need to bring confidence back to our elections. I can tell you that when it comes to foreign interference into it, it makes it all that much more complex, and our federal government is doing nothing, nothing but eroding our confidence. Canadians are sick of it, Albertans are sick of it, and I would hope that everybody in this Chamber would support my motion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 517 carried]

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and congratulations to the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul for another job well done.

Mr. Speaker, I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 26, 2024.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:52 p.m.]

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For inquiries contact:

Editor

Alberta Hansard

3rd Floor, 9820 – 107 St

EDMONTON, AB T5K 1E7

Telephone: 780.427.1875

E-mail: AlbertaHansard@assembly.ab.ca