



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, February 25, 2026

Day 26

The Honourable Ric McIver, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

Second Session

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Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
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Brar, Gurtej Singh, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP)
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Party standings:

United Conservative: 47

New Democrat: 38

Progressive Tory: 1

Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, February 25, 2026

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: First up we have Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Merci, M. le Président. J'ai le plaisir de vous présenter 31 élèves de sixième année de l'école Laurier avec leur professeur Shaylee Boucher. J'invite mes invités à se lever et recevoir l'accueil traditionnel de l'Assemblée.

The Speaker: Next up we have the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Mr. Hunter: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise and introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly the senior high class of Senator Gershaw school from my riding of Taber-Warner. I had the pleasure of speaking with these students and their teachers just earlier today. I invite them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Member Batten: Mr. Speaker, to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly I want to recognize Keith Guinn, seated in the gallery. Keith is my life partner and quite literally the person who keeps me going so that I can serve the constituents of Calgary-Acadia. Keith, if you could rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize two strong champions of skilled trades and workforce development, the Hon. Monte McNaughton, former Ontario Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, and Terry Parker, executive director of the Building Trades of Alberta. Both have been tireless advocates for apprenticeship, worker safety, and growing opportunities in the skilled trades. Please join me in offering the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to introduce to you and through you Vladimir Babrouski, who's joining us in the gallery today. Vladimir immigrated to Canada from Belarus at just 10 years old. Like so many newcomers, Vlad and his family came here seeking freedom, opportunity, and a better future. If you could please rise, and we'll give him the warm welcome of the Legislature.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Gursharan Singh

Sidhu, a human rights activist and 12-year member of Unifor through his work as a diesel mechanic with Canadian Pacific Railway. He serves as an executive member of the Unifor Prairie Regional Council and as a human rights educator nationally. I ask that he rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Deol: Thank you, sir. Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you one of my brilliant constituents and a U of A student, Moneek Sandhu. She's part of a Maansik group. The group is working to educate, raise awareness, and promote mental health and well-being in the community. She is here to observe democracy in action. I ask Moneek to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The first member's statement belongs to the Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Physician Supply

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Across the country many families are worried about not being able to find a family doctor or a primary care provider in their community. For decades there has been a national doctor shortage. This is not just an Alberta issue. This is a country-wide issue, but while others talk about the problem, Alberta continues to take action.

Earlier this week our government announced that, if passed, Budget 2026 would invest a record-breaking \$7.7 billion in physicians next year, which is a remarkable 22 per cent increase from last year. This includes more than \$7.3 billion for physician services and compensation to ensure we have a robust and sustainable workforce. Whether you live in downtown Calgary, a mid-size city, or rural and remote communities, this investment helps ensure that all Albertans can get the care they need when and where they need it. In fact, our efforts to attract, train, and recruit doctors is producing real results. Last year alone Alberta added 796 physicians, a 6.5 per cent increase that brought growth in every zone of the province.

Today, Mr. Speaker, 6,362 family physicians are registered in the province; the highest number in Alberta's history and a 33 per cent increase over the past decade. That's more than 3,000 new doctors added over the past decade, and let's not forget the contrast under the NDP when their disastrous policies drove thousands of skilled professionals out of the province.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the recent national OurCare Survey showed that 87 per cent of Albertans report having a regular primary care provider, one of the highest rates in Canada. To take things one step further, Alberta's government and Primary Care Alberta recently launched albertafindaprovider.ca to assist Albertans in locating nearby family physicians, nurse practitioners, registered midwives, and clinics accepting new patients.

Mr. Speaker, there's more work to do, but through critical investments and key initiatives, we are ensuring that all Albertans can access the care they need when and where they need it. Thank you.

Emergency Medical Services

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, on December 22 Prashant Sreekumar, a 44-year-old father of three, died in the waiting room of Edmonton's Grey Nuns hospital after waiting nearly eight hours with chest pains. He died waiting for care that should have been there. Last

month emergency physicians reported that at least six more Albertans may have suffered preventable deaths after excessive wait times. For months Albertans have been crying out about the deepening crisis in our health care system. Even before these tragedies, 1 in 5 patients visiting emergency departments were leaving without being seen by a doctor after waiting hours and hours.

Mr. Speaker, people are losing faith, people are losing hope, and in the most heartbreaking cases they are losing their lives. Mr. Sreekumar trusted the system. Like every Albertan, he trusted that when he walked into that hospital, help would come. He trusted that this Legislature will act when the system showed signs of breaking.

What is profoundly disappointing is that this government refused to allow an emergency debate on the state of our health care system. When faced with preventable deaths, with overcrowded emergency rooms, this government chooses not to confront the crisis in an open and urgent debate in the people's House.

Mr. Speaker, the minister stated yesterday that the crisis is not enough of an emergency to disrupt the regular business of the House. How can lives lost in waiting rooms not warrant urgency? How can grieving families not compel immediate discussion? Like every member of this Assembly, hundreds of my constituents have written to my office demanding immediate action. The refusal to even debate signals that their fear, their loss, and . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Electric Power System

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every day something pretty remarkable happens: Albertans wake up, roll out of bed to a warm home, and flip on the lights. We often take those simple acts for granted, that the lights will turn on and the furnace will kick in when we need it most. But that was put at risk a couple of years ago. The reliability of our grid was destroyed when the NDP chose to irresponsibly phase out coal and instead focus only on renewables. The sun doesn't always shine and the wind doesn't always blow. This left us with a lack of reliable, dispatchable, baseload power to meet the needs of Albertans, resulting in the grid alerts we saw in 2024.

In December our province set a new peak demand record of nearly 12,800 megawatts. Despite prolonged extreme cold temperatures and record-setting demand, our grid held strong. This winter has shown that.

While there still might be dads telling their kids to turn off the lights and keep the door closed because they aren't paying to heat the entire neighbourhood – that's going to continue to be tradition – parents, grandparents, kids, single moms, and people across our province are going to be able to turn their lights and computers on without fear of blackouts because our UCP government took action to restore the reliability of the grid.

1:40

Through the recent MOUs signed with Ottawa, the clean electricity regulations, which would have made our electricity grid 100 times less reliable and driven power prices up 35 per cent, were suspended. Now, this is also unlocking about \$18 billion of new natural gas investments that will ensure the future reliability and affordability of our power grid for generations to come. What once was an incredible weakness brought on by irresponsible planning by the prior NDP government, our government has turned our electrical grid into a growing strength for households and the major industry to be able to expand with reliable power needs across Alberta.

While there is more to do with energy bills, this progress is something every Albertan can be proud of. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Health Care System

Dr. Metz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'll say it again because we need immediate action: people are dying in our emergency rooms. Mr. Sreekumar died at the age of 44 when the crisis in our hospitals left him waiting in the emergency department.

The Premier and this UCP government have been warned for years that Alberta does not have the capacity to provide emergency care, especially during a heavy flu season. What this means is that the hallways in our hospital wards are full, turning our emergency departments into parking lots. Admitted patients wait in emergency room hallways. There is nowhere to assess the people who are writhing in pain, left in waiting room chairs or even lying on the floor. Meanwhile critically ill patients languish in recliner chairs as they wait to be moved to a hallway or maybe a closet. I've heard too many stories of deaths that should not have happened. My heart breaks for them.

The chaos in the health care system has left physician leaders powerless, unable to speak out because of fear of retribution. They feel nobody is in charge that has the power to make the system changes that are needed to save lives. For example, all newborns in southern Alberta born under 28 weeks must be in specialized neonatal ICUs, the one at Foothills hospital. Yet only a handful of beds are available for the mothers to receive the specialized care they need to keep them safe and try to delay the birth. Admissions are delayed, putting two lives at risk every day.

The UCP government should be doing its job to fix health care, but it seems only separatists have their ear. Mr. Speaker, health care is in a crisis, and there are solutions. It just takes political will to lead. On this side of the House we are ready.

The Speaker: Lacombe-Ponoka.

Lacombe Research and Development Centre

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In January the federal government announced its plans to close the Lacombe Research and Development Centre. This facility is one of Alberta's oldest and most important agricultural institutions. For nearly 120 years this centre has supported western Canadian farmers with practical research. The feds think they're going to save a few dollars in the short term with this decision, but we know that every dollar invested into agriculture yields \$20 to \$40, maybe \$63 back in return. In the long term it's a massive blow to the future innovation on the prairies.

This decision puts more than a hundred researchers and staff out of work, and the province loses an essential source of local expertise. Mr. Speaker, this centre has been a staple for research specifically tailored to the prairies and our unique needs. From developing robust crop varieties to improving livestock feed, the work done here is designed for local producers, not offices in downtown Ottawa. This station has produced the Lacombe pig, top five in Canada, which now feeds Albertans, Canadians, and people world-wide. It is the only federally inspected abattoir, which ensures that we are producing the highest quality meat that we all enjoy.

Mr. Speaker, our scientists were the developers and early adopters of the technology now used to predict marbling, framing a path to value-based grading and branding of Alberta beef. When

that kind of knowledge disappears, it's not easily replaced. Today it hosts more than \$5 million in active provincial research projects focused on practical solutions that are improving livestock production, developing disease-resistant, drought-tolerant crops, optimizing soil and forage management, and supporting sustainable farming practices. Cutting this centre jeopardizes the very tools and expertise that keep western Canadian agriculture competitive, resilient, and on the cutting edge of innovation so that we can continue feeding the world. The message is clear: agriculture cannot thrive without strong, locally grounded research.

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

UCP Government Record

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's talk numbers, shall we? Folks like to compare the UCP to the NDP, so let's talk about it. The NDP governed during a historic oil price crash, the WTI falling below \$30 U.S. a barrel. Alberta's revenue base evaporated. The UCP cannot point to that global recession or to a commodity collapse. Today the UCP enjoys oil prices more than double what the NDP had to work with, yet the UCP is projecting a deficit anyway.

What they can point to, though, are their own decisions, their own waste, and their own wrong priorities. The government's chaotic health care restructuring has created administrative chaos, wasteful transition costs, and instability at a time when Albertans need reliability. They scared away billions of investments and undermined economic diversification when they cancelled good jobs in the green energy sector, not to mention the hundreds of millions of dollars wasted on health care scandals, all these raising serious concerns about transparency and competence.

The UCP has failed to meaningfully address the affordability crisis hitting households. In fact, their decisions have made life more expensive. Insurance premiums are climbing. Utility costs remain volatile at best. Cuts and clawbacks to programs meant to help families have left them abandoned.

This is not fiscal discipline. This is not steady management. These are the consequences of wrong choices, choices that have increased costs for families while delivering a deficit in a period of strong oil prices. What does it say when deficits appear under a government with every economic advantage the NDP never had? If the standard is red ink equals mismanagement, then the UCP's records demand the same scrutiny.

The UCP has a record that shows they're just bad with money. On the eve of their second massive deficit in a row it's clear. From the waste, the corruption, the scandals, and the poor fiscal management, the UCP cannot avoid the hard reality and the scrutiny that they would quickly throw at anybody else but themselves.

Introduction of Bills

Bill 16

Traveller Protection and Destination Development Act

Mr. Boitchenko: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce my first bill, Bill 16, the Traveller Protection and Destination Development Act.

Alberta's government has been working tirelessly to implement our bold tourism strategy, and we are already seeing great results. In 2025 Alberta generated over \$15 billion in visitor spending, shattering records for the second year in a row and leading the country in growth. If passed, this new legislation will help to ensure that this success continues. The Traveller Protection and Destination Development Act will protect consumers from hidden

and misleading fees while ensuring visitors pay their fair share to support the growth of Alberta's economy.

This proposed legislation amends the Consumer Protection Act to require accommodation providers to disclose the full price of overnight stays at the time of booking. No surprise at checkout; no hidden fees. If passed, the new Traveller Protection and Destination Development Act will also protect consumers by closing loopholes for misleading fees, ensuring that destination marketing fees are used as advertised.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a first time]

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The first question today goes to the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Accessibility

Mr. Nenshi: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the government chose not to debate health care in this House. The minister argued that it wasn't an emergency and it wasn't important enough. Instead, they adjourned the House early and took the afternoon off. Meanwhile 1 million Albertans don't have a family doctor. Meanwhile the minister admitted yesterday that those triage physicians that he announced with great fanfare are never coming and that his only solution for ERs is for fewer people to get sick. So a simple question for the Premier: is health care in a crisis?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely, health care is under pressure, and that's part of the reason why we've made historic investments in health care in all aspects of it, and it's working. We've seen an increase in family doctors. We've gone up from 5,376 to 6,362. We've had a total of 2,000 doctors. We've got 11,737 more registered nurses, 2,734 more LPNs, 45 more midwives, and 10,496 more health care aides. This is a sign of a system attracting workers, which is going to address the issue.

Mr. Nenshi: The Premier loves to tout those doctor numbers, but what she doesn't tell us is that they include people who have semiretired, who have retired, who are not accepting patients, who have slimmed down their practices, nor does she ever remind us that the number of doctors per person has declined significantly since the UCP took power. Here's the reality. For more than a year not a single family doctor has been accepting new patients in the city of Lethbridge, and that story repeats across the province. People without a family doctor can't get referred to her for-profit private surgical facilities. What exactly has the Premier done to recruit family . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member.
The Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that we did is we created more avenues for people to be able to get primary care. We have pharmacies who are able to provide a greater scope of practice than anywhere else. We have nurse practitioners who are able to have their own practices. We have 90. We're going up to 100, and other provinces are looking at following suit. We also have created a historic new doctor pay system that has increased the number of people on an alternative payment plan. We now have more than 700 doctors that are accepting new patients in multiple different municipalities. We're going to continue to do more to attract to rural municipalities.

Mr. Nenshi: Well, I'm glad to hear I can go for a physical at my local Shoppers Drug Mart now.

The fact is that those rural physician programs are great, but they're going to be six years before we actually get any doctors out of them. The only way to get doctors in the meantime is to recruit them here, but the Premier keeps telling folks she doesn't want any more immigrants. So those immigrant doctors with their immigrant families are hearing that we don't want immigrants in Alberta. Can the Premier square the circle here? What doctor would want to come to Alberta given her anti-immigrant rhetoric?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite seems to have a hard time differentiating between guest workers and immigrants who are on a pathway to permanent citizenship. We are reaching out into the international community to attract doctors so that they can become a permanent part of our community. I'm delighted to say that I recently met an international doctor who had just recently been recruited to Brooks as a result of the new program we put in place so that other doctors other than AHS are allowed to recruit locally, and we're seeing success all across the province. Hundreds of doctors are coming to the province, and hundreds more will.

The Speaker: The second set of questions goes to the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Nenshi: Oh, I'd love to talk about guest workers and tourists and all the other phrases that the Premier makes up to demonize immigrants.

Alberta Separatism

Mr. Nenshi: That said, let's say that yesterday the Premier couldn't bring herself to say that she denounces separatism. Neither could a single member of the caucus opposite. But in a rare moment of candour last summer the Premier admitted why she's been pandering to the separatists. It wasn't to get a better deal for Alberta; it was because she was scared that if she didn't, they'd create a new party and she wouldn't be the Premier anymore. Does the Premier really believe that saving her political skin is worth risking the country?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe in listening to Albertans and even, you know, listening to union leadership . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. I heard the question just fine. I'd like to hear the answer, too, if you don't mind.

Ms Smith: . . . who for some time have been concerned about the issue of guest workers crowding out Alberta workers. I'll quote Gil McGowan.

The evidence is clear that the [temporary foreign worker] program, along with other exploitative guest worker programs like the International Mobility program . . . has suppressed wages and is contributing to the unprecedented youth unemployment crisis that is currently gripping our country.

Now, that is a leader who is normally aligned with the folks on the other side of the aisle, but it just shows you how offside they are with the general public that they don't even agree with him. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Let's hear the question and the answer.

Mr. Nenshi: Yet more word salad but missing three words, "I denounce separatism," which she is too scared to say.

On national television she said that she loves the separatists because they'll keep her her job, but in reality she thinks she's like David Cameron. David Cameron, though, never said the quiet part out loud. She didn't make it to the end of the Brexit book, though, it seems, because this is uncontrollable. I'm going to ask the Premier a simple question. What's the Premier's plan if the secession referendum passes?

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My plan is to give Albertans hope again after the 10 years of devastating policy caused by the Liberal-NDP coalition in Ottawa that created economic devastation in our province. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Take another 10 seconds. Finish your answer.

Ms Smith: We are now turning the page on that. We've got a historic MOU with the federal government that undoes eight of the nine terrible laws that were backed by the federal NDP. We are addressing the pressures of immigration that went out of control under the Trudeau Liberals, and we're also going to be addressing some of the other issues that have caused tension in the province. We think we'll give Albertans hope again. That's what my objective is.

Mr. Nenshi: I'm sure Albertans are looking forward to that hope, and they know they're not getting it from this government. The Alberta Chambers of Commerce, in fact, have already said that new investment in Alberta ever since the Premier started pandering to separatists has ground to a halt. No, don't tell me about Dow and WestJet. That was before all of this. Since then nothing. The unemployment rate is significantly higher now than it was when this Premier took power. Does the Premier understand that this is not about immigrants at all? It's about her policies scaring away investment and costing Albertans jobs.

Ms Smith: You know, I wish the member opposite had been a lot more concerned about scaring away investment when he was backing his buddy Justin Trudeau, who was imposing economic sanctions on our province, who was refusing and continuing to interfere in our ability to develop our resources, who cancelled the Northern Gateway pipeline, which they supported, who didn't act on our behalf with the Keystone XL pipeline, which they also supported and has now fortunately been resurrected. Mr. Speaker, if we were so concerned about investment, then we would have looked in the rear-view mirror of the past 10 years and said that we're not going to replicate it over the next 10 years.

The Speaker: The third set of questions goes to the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Nenshi: Thanks to the Premier for reminding us the Conservatives have gotten exactly zero miles of pipeline built to tidewater while the NDP got one built.

Government Policies and Population Growth

Mr. Nenshi: Now, the Premier often says contradictory things. She says those 10 years of bad policies . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Take an extra 10 seconds. Get your question in.

Mr. Nenshi: . . . cost Alberta growth, but at the same time Alberta was dealing with extraordinary growth in the same 10 years. Let's

actually figure this out. Let's just get to some facts. A simple question for the Premier: could she please tell us exactly Alberta's average annual population growth between 2015 and 2025 and how it compared historically?

Ms Smith: Well, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that we had 600,000 people come within the last five years, and it was about that same amount that had taken place over the previous 10 or 15 years. That's an extraordinary amount of population growth in such a short period of time. It's put pressure on all of our social services, pressure on our schools, pressure on our hospitals, pressure on family doctors, pressure on housing, pressure on the cost of living. That's the reason why we have to moderate that growth. We've got to go back to the kind of sensible immigration policy that we had before, where people come here as economic migrants first, find good jobs since we seem to be the only province in the country creating good, private-sector jobs, and that's going to be the success for . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Nenshi: It's pretty amazing that someone who talks about this all the time doesn't actually have the numbers at her fingertips. I will actually share those numbers with you. Between 2015 and 2025 the average annual population growth in Alberta was 1.93 per cent, which is below what it was for each of the previous two decades. Other Premiers and other governments have been able to manage this. They've been able to run a government without blaming immigrants. Why is this government so overwhelmed, and why are they so unable to simply do their job? [interjections]

The Speaker: Okay. Both sides are a little loud.
Premier, go ahead.

2:00

Ms Smith: Oh, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite cracks me up. He's mixing the five-year period when the NDP drove investment and drove people out of the province with the five-year period in which we attracted people into the province. That's why you have to split those things up. In the last five years 600,000 people have come into the province, which is a historically high level. There is no other jurisdiction in the world save Sudan that has had such a high population growth, and they were under the burden of a civil war. This is the reason that we have to moderate the amount of population growth.

Mr. Nenshi: I'm so happy that the Premier mentioned that the growth happened in two or three years post-COVID, where – it's true – the federal government took their eye off the ball, but what was this Premier doing in those two or three years? This Premier was calling for Alberta to have 10 million people. She was calling for Red Deer to grow by 10 times. She was paying people 5,000 bucks to move here, which she's still doing. Can the Premier confirm that the reason she changed her mind on immigration is because she read about it on Twitter? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. All right. Order. We're having a good time now, but let's hear the question and let's hear the answer.
Go ahead.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Finally, Gil McGowan is getting through to get his talking points on the Official Opposition Leader's desk.

Mr. Speaker, my position is the same today as it's always been, which is that we need to have a Quebec-style immigration agreement so that we have more control over economic migrants.

We have a large number of people who want to be able to work here who match the needs of our economy, the high-skilled workers, but here's the point. The first opportunity for a job should go to Albertans, and then the economic migrants should be able to fill the gaps that we can. That is a sensible immigration policy. That's what we've always stood for. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

I think we all want to hear the question and the answer, starting with Edmonton-Whitemud.

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Ms Pancholi: The UCP has achieved what no other government in Alberta's history has. They've blown a resource boom during the boom. It takes remarkable financial mismanagement to have the highest real per capita resource revenue in decades and still deliver a ballooning multibillion-dollar deficit. The UCP will end this fiscal year with six times the resource revenue Rachel Notley had but with a larger deficit, and tomorrow the UCP will deliver another multibillion-dollar deficit, truly an unbelievable achievement. Is it getting awkward for the Minister of Finance to still describe his government as fiscally responsible with a straight face?

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just remind everybody that we have to stay embargoed until the budget tomorrow. I know everyone is very excited, and we'll all get into those numbers and have lots of time to talk about it.

But I would say this. Alberta has seen a little different circumstance this time. This is the first time that you've seen a population boom without a corresponding economic boom that caused it. The reason we saw a population surge this time is because we're more affordable than everywhere else. It takes the system a little time to catch up.

Mr. Nenshi: So it wasn't Trudeau, then?

The Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, you had lots of turns.

Ms Pancholi: This Premier increased government spending by 41 per cent from the last Alberta NDP budget and at double the pace, so Albertans should have received better public services with that spending, right? Right? Well, now we know that's not true, and it's not the fault of the newcomers the Premier invited to Alberta. The UCP intentionally and proudly funded below population growth and cost of living for seven years. They weren't delivering the schools, hospitals, or public services to the Albertans who were already here before they launched the Alberta Is Calling campaign. To the Minister of Finance: if it didn't go to support Albertans, where did the money go?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, part of the plan for the future is to manage the deficits, manage the bad years, and do the right thing in the good years. Show me another jurisdiction in the world that took the time to pay down \$15 billion in debt like Alberta did. There are challenges all across this country, and when you look at Alberta, we have the best balance sheet in the country. We put deposits from surplus cash in the heritage fund to grow that for the future to help take our kids and grandkids off this roller coaster.

Ms Pancholi: Well, Albertans know where the money went. The UCP wasted it on inflated contracts to friends of the cabinet ministers, on payouts to coal companies, on Turkish Tylenol, on the

largest and most ineffective cabinet in history, four health ministers, and it's going to continue to be wasted on more of the Premier's pet projects: separatism, endless divisive and misleading referenda, a provincial police force, provincial pension plan, provincial income tax collection. None of these things are what Albertans care about the most, so why doesn't it bother the Finance minister to spend so much yet deliver so little to Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, this budget: like I said, you're going to have to wait until tomorrow, but it is going to be about focusing on what matters for Albertans. You know, we still have the youngest population in the country, but we're getting oldest the fastest. Health care is costing more. Government infrastructure construction costs have gone up well over 25 per cent in just the last four years. It's costing us more to do the same things that we used to. We will continue to keep our eye on the prize. We will put the money away in the good years. We will weather the bad. Our balance sheet is stronger than that of many Albertans.

The Speaker: Okay. Now we're at the point where there are no preambles after the first question.

Budget 2026

Member Ellingson: Albertans are holding their breath with the provincial budget being dropped tomorrow, and there's a lot on people's minds. Albertans want to see the government make their lives more affordable, not jack up costs, but if, instead of addressing these cost pressures, the minister gave car insurance companies the freedom to force drivers to pay hundreds of dollars more just to insure the same vehicle they already have, will the Finance minister be making life more affordable tomorrow, starting with reducing the costs for auto insurance?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the member well knows the timeline for our auto insurance reform. We're in a transition period right now where we're protecting Alberta drivers through the good-driver rate cap. That is a stopgap measure until we can land the new care-first auto insurance system, which will be January 1, 2027, which will show a lot more stability for Alberta drivers. It'll take the most impactful lever we have by taking the legal costs out of the system.

Member Ellingson: Given that last year the government couldn't balance the books, resulting in massive cuts, furthering chaos in our health care system, and even sprinkling in corruption, which has resulted in an RCMP investigation, given that last year they chose the wrong priorities, they didn't build hospitals or local schools, and they failed to address the rising cost of living, will the Finance minister table another giant deficit that once again fails to address the priorities of Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, we're a growing province. We just finished giving the public sector large raises that were largely overdue. They'd been held stagnant for many years. We know we need to recruit and retain more of these folks because we've grown so dramatically. I don't know how you can say that we're not building schools when we've accelerated that program to grow them faster than ever. You'll have to wait until tomorrow and see how many new schools are going into the education minister's budget, but we're in a time of growth, and we're meeting the challenge.

Member Ellingson: Given that the UCP government estimated to collect \$17 billion in resource royalties last year, given that oil production is set at record-high levels, given that with those

revenues the deficit still exceeded \$6 billion, given that the NDP managed the province with fewer than \$3 billion in royalties, and given that separatism threatens business investment decisions, stalls job growth and economic diversification, will the minister admit that this government has no ability to manage the budget, attract investment, or deliver on the right priorities for Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's a challenge for that member to make comparisons from their time in government to ours. They were busy driving people out of the province and the investment that came with it. We're in a period of growth in a big way because of the policies of this government. We're cutting red tape. We're open for business. We're creating more jobs than any other place in the country consistently. We have people coming here for affordability reasons because the houses in Calgary and Edmonton cost much less than Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. We're a beacon of hope across this country for our open business policies.

The Speaker: The next question belongs to Chestermere-Strathmore.

2:10 Funding for Physicians

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans want to know what concrete action their government is taking to improve access to finding a family doctor or primary care provider. From urban centres to rural and remote communities, all Albertans need access to reliable health care services when and where they need them. Can the Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services explain how Budget 2026's historic proposed investment in physicians will improve access to care for Albertans across the province?

Ms Hoffman: It's embargoed.

The Speaker: Oh, I thought you were the minister for a minute there.

Minister, go ahead.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government is taking decisive action to help attract, retain, and grow our physician workforce. If passed, Budget 2026 will invest \$7.7 billion in physicians, which is a 22 per cent increase in a single year and the largest investment in Alberta's history. We are committed to increasing access to primary care services so that every Albertan can find a primary care provider. This historic investment further strengthens recruitment, stabilizes our workforce, and ensures more Albertans can access care when and where they need it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Speaker and to the minister for that response. Given the size of this historic \$7.7 billion investment and further given that my neighbours and all Albertans want to know how this funding impacts their communities directly and given that recruitment and retention of doctors is critical across the province, can the minister provide more detail on how this record funding is allocated and how it supports recruitment, training, and stability in Alberta's physician workforce?

The Speaker: The minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Of the \$7.7 billion investment I'm pleased to share that more than \$7.3 billion is dedicated directly to physician services, ensuring doctors are compensated fairly for the care they provide to Albertans every day; \$450 million is focused specifically on recruitment and education, supporting training seats, attracting

new physicians to Alberta, and expanding opportunities for medical learners. Lastly, \$15 million supports other physician workforce initiatives that strengthen and improve overall system stability.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Speaker and to the minister for her work on this file. Given that Albertans are looking for easy ways to find available doctors in their communities and further given that many Albertans would like to know what tools are available to help them access primary care providers, can the minister please share how residents of my constituency and across the province can find doctors and primary care providers who are currently accepting patients and how we can help Albertans know their options for receiving primary care?

The Speaker: The minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to share that in partnership with Primary Care Alberta we have launched an albertafindaprovider.ca website, a redesigned website that helps Albertans locate nearby family doctors, nurse practitioners, registered midwives, and clinics accepting new patients. With expanded search features and a more intuitive layout, the updated site helps Albertans connect with primary care providers closer to home. I'm happy to say that in Calgary alone there are over 400 doctors accepting new patients.

Judicial Independence

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, an independent judiciary is essential to preserving the rule of law and democracy. The UCP's Bill 14 would have stopped ongoing proceedings under the Citizen Initiative Act in an attempt to silence the court. Thankfully, the court ruled before the bill passed and clearly stated that the government's actions were political interference and violated the rule of law. Why does the UCP government believe it's their role to interfere in judicial decision-making?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I assume that the hon. member is referring to our Referendum Act, and we believe on this side of the Assembly that referendums are the purest form of democracy. The referendum questions that are being put forward by this government and by citizens all across this province will allow Albertans – not politicians, not media, certainly not the out-of-touch NDP – to set the mandate for the course of our future. We believe that Albertans can make decisions on their own, that they will be able to trust those decisions, that they will lead our mandate going forward into the future. We trust Albertans. That's the simple answer. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. [interjections] No. Remember that order part, hon. members?

Mr. Sabir: Given that in its decision Justice Feasby made it clear that a referendum proposal on Alberta's separation would violate treaties and therefore would be unconstitutional and given that government still clearly believes that unconstitutional referendum proposals should go to the ballot and given that the UCP government is not above the law, why is the government planning to allow an unconstitutional referendum question that doesn't respect the courts, the Constitution, and treaties with First Nations?

The Speaker: Minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you. Once again, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is incorrect. Alberta's government has always been and is absolutely committed to protecting, to upholding, and honouring the inherent rights of First Nations people here in Alberta. Any citizen initiative referendum question must be constitutional. In fact, the Referendum Act specifically states so. It says that no question that violates constitutional rights of our First Nations peoples, Métis, or Inuit will be upheld.

Mr. Sabir: Given that many lawyers, their professional organizations, as well as the three Chief Justices of Alberta Court have raised concerns about the government's disregard for the rule of law and the Premier's threat to withhold judicial funds and given that retired Justice Adèle Kent said, "threatening to withhold this funding is not only unconstitutional, but also undermines the administrative autonomy of the courts, which is a core institutional safeguard of judicial independence," why is the government undermining the administrative autonomy of the courts and their independence?

The Speaker: Minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Constitution is absolutely clear. It states that judges in Alberta are appointed by either the provincial or federal governments depending on that level.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier proposed a very common-sense solution, a collaborative one that involved engagement with our federal counterparts to allow two representatives from Alberta, two representatives from the federal government to jointly create a list of lawyers that would be recommended to the bench. In this province we have a great line of sight and binders upon binders of remarkable lawyers that deserve to be elevated to the courts in this province. We think that's . . .

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

Health Care System

Member Batten: Albertans are going to emergency rooms in severe pain only to sit for hours in crowded waiting rooms, unsure when or if they'll be seen. Seniors, parents with young children, and people in acute distress are waiting far longer than is safe or reasonable. Emergency care is not optional. When someone walks through those doors, time matters. To the minister: the health care system is in crisis, so when will the government recognize the damage they're doing and call for a state of emergency?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of hospitals.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our system is indeed under pressure. This has been communicated by Albertans and the front-line health care professionals, and what they've requested is more acute-care capacity and more health care professionals. That's exactly what we're doing. We've announced major builds of acute-care capacity here in Edmonton at the Grey Nuns and Misericordia hospitals, two bed towers that will add a net 700 new acute-care spaces, another bed tower in Calgary at the South Health Campus, which will be another 400 spaces. We're also hiring doctors in record numbers, 3,000 over the last five years, and we've added over 5,000 RNs, LPNs, and health care aides also over the last five years.

Member Batten: Given that plans are not actually spaces and given that rates of respiratory infections remain high in the province and

given that nearly a million Albertans lack access to a family doctor for preventative care, given that vaccines are proven to reduce severe illness and ease pressure on emergency rooms and given that a responsible public health approach relies on science and prevention, will the minister explain why this government didn't take stronger steps to keep Albertans healthy and out of the emergency room in the first place?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we have taken those steps. We have increased the number of family physicians across this province so that we have additional resources for individuals to go to. We have in fact a very strong, robust immunization program. Where measles was a concern, we made sure to get into those communities that were undervaccinated or not vaccinated and have those conversations with those individuals, and it's been successful.

Member Batten: Given that Alberta has some of the best health care workers in the world but given that even the most skilled professional cannot overcome six years of intentional underfunding and strain on a public system and given that we are at a tipping point where emergency rooms are overwhelmed and Albertans are waiting far too long for urgent care, will the minister move beyond the scripted responses, acknowledge that our public health care system is in crisis, and commit to an emergency debate to find solutions now?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of hospitals.

2:20

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad the member opposite raised urgent care centres. We're actually in the process of building another nine of those across Alberta to alleviate pressures on our emergency departments. A couple of these urgent care centres will be in the Edmonton area. There will be one in Calgary, one in Cold Lake, and Fort McMurray. We're going to look at leveraging urgent care centres to provide greater access for Albertans but also to alleviate some of the pressures on our major urban centre emergency departments. Of course, those buildings will come with new staff, which we're hiring in record numbers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Agricultural Trade

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's government is strengthening relationships around the world and expanding trade to support economic growth. By staying connected to sharing ideas and keeping goods and services moving efficiently, we create the conditions for long-term success. Our agriculture sector plays a major role in this with strong resources, expertise, and the capacity to meet rising global demand. Alberta is well positioned to drive that growth. To the Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation: how does pursuing new trade deals and investment opportunities positively impact Alberta farmers?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, Mr. Speaker, countries like the UAE and India are looking for reliable suppliers of high-quality food products, and Alberta farmers deliver exactly that. By strengthening these partnerships, we create new demand for our world-class beef, pork, canola, grains, pulses, and value-added products. It's due to this work that we've attracted nearly \$5 billion in agriprocessing investment in the last four years, an absolute record, creating

thousands of jobs and a long-term economic growth for all of rural Alberta.

The Speaker: Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. Given that the United Arab Emirates and India through conversations and ongoing meetings have expressed their interest in working with Alberta to address their food security needs and given that population growth and urbanization in those countries is driving a significant increase in demand for food products, to the same minister: can you please explain how a trade deal supplying our vast amounts of resources with the United Arab Emirates and India will benefit Albertans?

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is uniquely positioned to deliver on the food security goals of countries like the UAE and India. During my recent trade mission to Dubai I heard directly from industry leaders who wanted dependable partners, and Alberta fits that bill. Supplying these fast-growing markets with our high-quality agricultural products supports jobs here at home, attracts new investment, and strengthens Alberta's reputation as a trusted global supplier of so many agricultural products.

The Speaker: Member.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the minister for that answer. Given that our government has gone abroad to meet with partners who can significantly benefit from Alberta's agriculture sectors and given there are many other places around the world that could also benefit from the strength of our industry, to the same minister: what opportunities could Alberta's agriculture sector gain as the province expands trade and investment partnerships, especially with countries like the UAE, India, and other international markets?

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, as Alberta expands trade and investment partnerships in the Middle East and beyond, the opportunities are unlimited. We just recently announced a new direct flight between Calgary and Abu Dhabi, which is more than just a travel route. It's a trade corridor. It improves access for investment, speeds up business development, opens doors for agriculture and agrifood export. This ensures Alberta producers can compete and succeed and open up new doors and new markets in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Government Policies

Member Miyashiro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When we're at home speaking with our constituents, they're very concerned about affordability and the cost of living. It comes up on every door we knock. They're worried about putting food on the table and paying their bills and rent and sometimes struggle in having to choose between food and rent. So will the Premier answer my constituent's question? Why does this government avoid dealing with the high cost of living, and when will it be a priority for this government?

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great question, and that's why I'm proud to be part of a government that puts Albertans first every single day. That's why we stand behind our Finance minister when he brings forward a tax cut to help Albertans save \$750 per person or \$1,500 per year as long as that's in place. That's

why we're working on lowering car insurance. That's why we're working on lowering utility bills. That's why every single minister and every single member of this government puts Albertans first and stands up to Ottawa so we don't put in those harmful taxes that the NDP continue to support like the methane tax or the carbon tax that they brought in that failed all Albertans . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Let's hear the question and the answer, starting with Lethbridge-West.

Member Miyashiro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that when the Alberta NDP was in government child poverty was cut in half from 10 per cent to 5 per cent and given that by 2022 under the UCP that rate almost quadrupled to over 18 per cent and is increasing every year and given that poverty touches on every social determinant of health, meaning Albertans stuck in poverty struggle with leading healthy lives, will the Premier explain why this government has no plan to address child poverty or poverty in general?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, this government has been working tirelessly to bring in policies that make life more affordable for Albertans. The hon. member was just talking about rent as an example. I'm happy to report to this House that rent is down 4.3 per cent below the national average because of the work that has been done by this government. What we don't do is what the NDP leader did when he was the mayor of Calgary, which was raise taxes by 81 per cent. That doesn't make life affordable for anybody, including the children of this province.

Member Miyashiro: Well, given that Alberta municipalities have had so many expectations downloaded to them from the province and given that municipalities are left to handle the crisis of poverty in their communities without support, resulting in property tax increases, and given that this support has been cut by 35 per cent by this government since 2019, causing property taxes to rise, how is the government going to lower Albertans' cost of living when the UCP's bad decision-making results in higher property taxes?

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

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted – we were so close – at 2:28.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, the truth is that we fund to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars the LGFF every single year in partnership with municipalities for their capital costs, which we know are high. We partner with them continually. The expectation of every ratepayer and taxpayer across this province is that they use those dollars wisely, that when they pay, for example, into perhaps a utility system like water delivery, those tax dollars are going to exactly that. I suggest every municipality focus on core services, get away from woke DEI and environmental education and instead focus on the core services that every single ratepayer expects municipalities to deliver. When they do that . . .

The Speaker: Minister.

When I stand up, Minister, that's a cue.

Family Violence Court Liaison Program

Mr. Rowswell: Mr. Speaker, navigating the court system is stressful and navigating multiple court matters because of family violence only increases that stress. It's essential that a government do everything possible to provide as much support as possible to these Albertans. The launching of the court liaison program shows

this government's commitment to protecting survivors. To the Minister of Justice: could you please elaborate on what steps the liaison program will take to ensure that victims of family violence are properly supported?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for bringing up a very important topic. This program began accepting referrals in September and launched in Calgary and Edmonton. The program connects Albertans to community services and the courts to better support survivors of family violence through a number of wraparound services. This includes safety screening and direct referrals to community resources. The court liaisons also offer legal information to ensure survivors can navigate the court processes confidently. I'm very excited about this project, the support of this project, and the members.

2:30

The Speaker: Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the family violence court liaison pilot program provides wraparound support to help survivors manage multiple court proceedings such as safety screenings, co-ordinated referrals, or simply providing information to survivors and given that this program is a key component of Alberta's 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence, to the same minister: since referrals started in September of 2025, how successful has this program been, and which aspects of the program should be prioritized to ensure progress continues to grow?

Mr. Amery: Once again, Mr. Speaker, the program receives referrals from the Law Society of Alberta, from emergency shelters, from law enforcement, and other community agencies, and many families have already begun accessing these programs thus far. I'm pleased to report to the Assembly that 100 per cent of the survey respondents who have gone through the program said that it helped them feel safer and supported during their court processes, and they have a better understanding of their court experiences. I'm pleased with the feedback thus far to enhance safety and reduce stress in our communities.

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

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for those answers. Given that collaboration with community services and the courts can be complex and given that the family violence court liaison pilot program has been operational for nearly four months, which means that there's been some time to judge its performance, can the minister please share what changes, if any, could be made to improve consistency in the program and ensure it continues to run smoothly and serve the Albertans who rely on it?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the member's advocacy. Of course, we'll continue to monitor the process and the success of this program, and we'll evaluate to see if any changes need to be made. This program is part of this government's 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence and the broader family justice strategy. I'm pleased to report to this Assembly and to Albertans that thus far we've invested more than \$11 million in total on the family justice strategy since 2023 at Alberta Justice. Ensuring that Albertans can resolve their family matters efficiently is of absolute priority to me.

Supports for Seniors

Ms Sigurdson: Because of the UCP's bad decisions Alberta seniors are now paying more just to get by. They kicked 40,000 Albertans off the seniors drug insurance program in 2019. They cut coverage for drivers' medical exams, costing seniors another \$150 when renewing their licences. They deindexed financial programs and cut grants to seniors' programs while slashing affordable housing, and now they've increased the copay for required medications. Will the minister of assisted living explain to seniors why this government is attacking them at every turn, especially when we are in an affordability crisis?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, this government is investing about \$3.6 billion in senior services inside our province, and we continue to increase several different areas to be able to provide support to seniors in Alberta. Unfortunately, we saw underneath the NDP's regime when they were in charge and underneath Alberta Health Services, where investments were not being put into things like continuing care, into facilities. This government has reversed that, has brought in the largest capital investment when it comes to continuing care spaces. All that combined together has resulted in a reduction of 65 per cent of seniors waiting in hospital for continuing care.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that seniors living in Alberta's continuing care know the system is in crisis, given that seniors pay a lot for their care but do not receive the minimum standard of care that they deserve and given that far too often they live with issues of uncleanliness, unresolved odours, rodent droppings, inadequate personal hygiene support, and even issues with unhealthy food and unchecked outbreaks of mould in commercial kitchens, why is the minister not ensuring seniors paying for quality continuing care are living in healthy environments within our system?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you what did not help seniors in Alberta is when the Leader of the Opposition, when he was the mayor of our largest city, increased their taxes by 81 per cent. That certainly did not help fixed-income seniors. This side of the House, though, when it comes to standards inside our continuing care facilities, takes it seriously. Unfortunately, when that hon. member was the minister of seniors, she did not. I was proud to be part of this government when we brought forward legislation at the start of this term to triple the amount of staff and supports that have to be around our seniors inside continuing care facilities. Mr. Speaker, through you to her, why didn't she do it when she was here?

Ms Sigurdson: Given that the UCP is clearly not to be trusted to care for seniors, most obvious by the chronic issues identified, and given the UCP closed the office of the Seniors Advocate back in 2019 and given that the office staff were champions for seniors and strong advocates for them to receive appropriate services that are clearly being eroded and eliminated by the UCP and given that seniors cannot afford to find external advocates to give voice to their concerns, when will the minister reinstate the office of the Seniors Advocate so that seniors have the support that the UCP is clearly not providing?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, the Seniors Advocate still exists within government. It's been merged into the Health Advocate office, making sure that this government is receiving strong advice on how to care for our seniors, and because of their hard work and other advocates, that's why you see things like increased investments from the Conservative government in caring for our seniors. Again, what is making life unaffordable for seniors, particularly in our

largest city, was the Leader of the Official Opposition raising their property taxes on fixed-income seniors, not building the continuing care facilities that they need, and not investing in the hard-working men and women who built this great province.

The Speaker: Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Hospitals in Edmonton

Mr. Gurtej Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents asked me why the UCP government abandoned the south Edmonton hospital despite years of planning and millions spent on design. My constituents face dangerously long emergency waits. Can the minister of hospitals explain how he can claim to fix the crisis that this government created as the budget shows no commitment dollars for new hospitals to tackle the 1,500 bed shortage in Edmonton?

The Speaker: The minister of hospitals.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are building capacity in Edmonton. As I've highlighted already in this question period, we're planning bed towers at the Misericordia and Grey Nuns hospital, and those will add more beds, 700 beds, at a fraction of the cost of the proposed south Edmonton hospital. This project was going to be a massive cost overrun, probably north of \$5 billion. There are far better ways to build specialized facilities while adding hospital bed towers to our existing hospital sites, and we'll have more acute-care capacity added for fewer dollars.

Thank you.

Mr. Gurtej Brar: Given that the project is listed as cancelled in 2024 on the province's major projects registry with no new funding or timeline provided, given that this government hasn't taken any concrete step to restart or replace this vital facility for an increasing population, can the minister tell what his plans are to build the south Edmonton hospital before more families face impossible access to emergency and acute care?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In addition to the bed towers at the Misericordia and Grey Nuns, which will add about 700 acute-care spaces, more than the proposed south Edmonton hospital, we're also going to be building urgent care centres across Alberta, nine of them. Two of them are planned for the Edmonton area. These will again provide greater access to Edmonton residents so that they can hopefully access care closer to home at a more appropriate setting for less urgent calls. Of course, they can always go to an emergency department room, which will, in the case of the Grey Nuns and the Misericordia, have significantly greater capacity in a few years.

Mr. Gurtej Brar: Given that this government is unable to justify why he has excluded Edmonton-Ellerslie and southeast Edmonton from having a dedicated new hospital, given that they failed to commit specific capital funding in the budget to close a 1,500-bed gap that threatens even worsening overcrowding hospitals, longer emergency waits, and preventable deaths, to the minister: can you commit today that you will build the south Edmonton hospital? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've already talked about the new bed towers for Edmonton and urgent care centres. What we

didn't touch on is another exciting project, the stand-alone Stollery hospital. When we build that, we're going to be able to backfill where it currently resides with adult acute-care capacity, so there's actually going to be even more acute-care capacity being added to the system. We also know that there's work to do in other major Edmonton hospitals. The Royal Alex hospital has been the focus of initiatives to increase patient flow and expand capacity, and through Budget 2026 we're going to be doing some work on that facility as well.

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

2:40 Health Care Workforce

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Health care is one of the most important services delivered by the provincial government. All Albertans across the province depend on reliable, efficient services when they need it the most. I know this is an issue and a priority for this government, and that's why we're continuing to work to make that system better. To the Minister of Primary and Preventive Health Services: what is the government doing to improve and reinforce our health care system?

The Speaker: The minister of health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're building up our health workforce first and foremost. We're adding doctors, we're adding nurses, and we're adding other health care professionals literally by the thousands. Since 2019 we've added over 3,000 doctors, 12,000 nurses, 3,400 LPNs, 1,300 paramedics, and over 12,000 health care aides. We're recruiting health care professionals in record numbers, expanding our training programs, keeping the workforce growing into the future, and we're retaining people with collective agreements that are the best in the country.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for the answer. Given that some of my constituents in Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland are having to drive to the city to receive a certain number of services and further given this government has also been at the forefront of doctor and specialist recruitment across the country, to the minister: can you tell me and the Assembly how many doctors and specialists have been hired and are now practising in the province and how this will help my constituents and all Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to. Currently we have over 800 family physicians and nurse practitioners right across the province taking new patients. That is because we are experiencing a record high growth in physician workforce. We have over 13,000 practising physicians as of December 2025, including 6,326 family physicians. There was an outstanding increase of 796 physicians in 2025 alone. Based on recent study, about 88 per cent of Albertans report having a regular primary care provider. That's among the highest in Canada, something to be proud of.

The Speaker: Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the minister. Given that the government is committed to supporting our hard-working front-line staff and our hospitals across the province and further given that our hospitals and primary care systems need to be well staffed in highly trained nurses and nurse practitioners to

function properly and efficiently, to the same minister: how many nurses and nurse practitioners have been hired and will be working in the hospitals across Alberta?

Member LaGrange: Once again, Mr. Speaker, we have record high numbers in both areas. We have over 50,000 registered nurses as of December 2025, which is a 32 per cent increase more than in 2019, and we have over 1,100 nurse practitioners as of December as well. That's an incredible 74 per cent increase over 2019. Alberta's registered nurses are the highest paid in the country, and our government continues to recruit at record levels. We have even added over 44 per cent in nurse practitioner workforce growth just in 2021. Since 2021 . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds we will continue with the daily Routine.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: I have Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am so happy to share these tablings with the House today. I have four. Canmore is the home of Olympians, and I'm very proud of everybody on Team Canada. My first article is from the *Rocky Mountain Outlook* about a Canmore skier grabbing top 20 in 50 kilometres mass start with a time of 2:15:07, a personal best.

My second tabling is about the Canada men's cross-country ski team coming in sixth, including Canmore local Xavier McKeever.

My third tabling is about the Canmore Olympic cross-country ski relay, who rewrote history when they came in fifth, including Xavier McKeever.

And, of course, my last article is about the next generation of Bow valley athletes who won 24 medals at the 2026 Alberta Winter Games. I'm so proud of all of our athletes, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much. [some applause]

The Speaker: Hon. member, normally I would have cut you off sooner, but when you have the other side applauding, I wasn't going to possibly do that. That's really something. Well done.

Ms Renaud: Mr. Speaker, I have an article from the *Lethbridge Herald*, February 25, 2026, and it reads: Motion Passed to Request Paused Implementation of ADAP Program.

The Speaker: Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have the requisite five copies of an article entitled Putin's Pursuit of War Has Come at a Huge Cost; nearly 40 per cent of Russia's federal budget is now devoted to military security, which tells us it's more important to . . .

The Speaker: Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table three more of the hundreds of e-mails that our side of the House has received. These are from Anne, Jean, and Scott. The letters are directed to the Premier, calling out her strategy on immigration and referenda.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise with five requisite copies of a *Globe and Mail* article titled Canadians are Hitting a Breaking Point When it Comes to the Cost of Insuring Their Vehicles, showing that this is a problem clear across the country . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of hon. Mr. Williams, Minister of Municipal Affairs, pursuant to the Government Organization Act, Alberta Boilers Safety Association 2025 annual report.

On behalf of hon. Mr. McIver, Member for Calgary-Hays, a copy of a petition to outlaw forced organ harvesting.

The Speaker: I think the only point of order was at 2:28 today.

Point of Order Supplementary Questions

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did call a point of order at 2:28. At the time the Member for Lethbridge-West was speaking. He asked three questions, rather one question and two supplementals. I thought the first and second supplemental were completely unrelated to the first question. A supplemental is by definition to supplement the initial question, but when your first question is on affordability and cost of living, your first supplemental is on child poverty, and your second supplemental is on defunding Alberta municipalities, I don't think that those are related.

Now, Mr. Speaker, *Beauchesne's* 414 says, "The extent to which supplementary questions may be asked is in the discretion of the Speaker." Also, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* chapter 11 says:

Speakers historically had used their discretion to insist that a supplementary question be on the same subject and as a general rule be asked to the same Minister. However, at the beginning of the Thirty-Sixth Parliament in 1997, Speaker Parent allowed the practice to be modified by not insisting that an additional question be, strictly speaking, supplementary to the main question. He indicated that he would find it acceptable for a party to split a round of questioning between two Members, with each one asking a different question to a different Minister. This practice remains in effect today. There is no longer any distinction.

Mr. Speaker, being that it is in your discretion, I believe that if we continue to allow supplementary questions to deviate far from the initial question, we would be setting a difficult precedence that members on the government side are more than happy to engage in but I think would actually defeat the purpose and the spirit of questions in this Chamber, which is to ask multiple questions on the same issue to the same minister.

Now, this is not the first time the Member for Lethbridge-West is guilty of this offence. I do think it's commonplace, and he plays fast and loose with the precedents of this Chamber, which I think is, generally speaking, disrespectful of the practices that we've adhered to for quite some time. What I would say is to ask the member to do better in question period, ensure that his questions are germane to each other, at least to the first one. That would be in regular practice with how we've operated for a very long time.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, it is always in your very capable hands, and I'll end my remarks with that.

The Speaker: The deputy House leader.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to start off by saying that language like "guilty of offence" is not helpful. Also, a point of order is not the opportunity to take shots at other members, their past questions, or anything like that.

2:50

Coming to the point, I have all three questions spread out in front of me. The first question was about the high cost of living. For the Government House Leader to suggest that child poverty is somehow not related to the cost of living boggles my mind. That's a direct result of the cost of living. That's why we have child poverty, and that's the most, I guess, basic, fundamental thing. The third question: when the government continues downloading costs on to municipalities, local resident taxes will get increased and the cost of living becomes an issue for them. Again, the question is: how will the government lower Albertans' cost of living when they continue to download costs on to the municipalities? These questions are squarely tied to each other, to the cost of living, and are about government policy, what they will do to address that cost of living.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, first of all, let me say, deputy House leader, you were right when you said that points of order aren't a good time to take shots at other members, and both you and the Government House Leader did that just now. So I'll give a warning to both of you that this is a bad time to take shots at members of the other side, when you're arguing points of order, and we'll look for better from all sides on that.

Listen, I think you tied the first two questions together with your argument pretty well, but the third one – I would just warn the Member for Lethbridge-West that I think you need to make a greater effort to tie your second and third questions into your main question in the future. I'm going to stop short of calling it a point of order, but in the future I probably will. Now you've been warned, and I will hope that you will make an effort to do better.

Member Miyashiro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Okay. That concludes this matter, which takes us to the next matter.

Statement by the Speaker

Amendments to Standing Orders

The Speaker: Hon. members, following the amendments made to standing orders yesterday by Government Motion 28, replacement pages for your Standing Orders printed on green paper have been placed on each of your desks. Please note that these green sheets contain only the amendments that came into force yesterday.

Some of the standing order amendments agreed to yesterday come into force on March 16. For example – this is probably the most important example although they're all important – Thursday sitting hours, that change, is not in full force this week, not in full force until March 16. So please note that the Assembly will sit tomorrow from 1:30 to 4:30. I just hope not to have a bunch of people lined up outside the doors at 10 a.m., not to get in, and I certainly want everybody to stick around till 4:30 that has business here.

The updated Standing Orders will be distributed to all of you soon.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 15

Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to move second reading of Bill 15, Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026.

I ask this House to consider the fundamental principle of this proposed legislation to strengthen the safety, the security, and the integrity of our communities by providing our law enforcement services the clear, modern legal tools that they need to protect Albertans.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Bill 15 creates a practical, common-sense pathway for these highly skilled individuals to transition into the ASPSP without disrupting law enforcement operations or, of course, compromising public safety. This is essential because policing services are an essential service and cannot – I repeat cannot – and must never be disrupted. Our commitment to maintaining an unbroken chain of public safety is nonnegotiable.

The Alberta Sheriffs Police Service will be used to augment and support all law enforcement in the province because, Mr. Speaker, when someone in the province calls 911, I expect someone in uniform to answer those calls. I do not care what the uniform is; I just want someone to show up for Albertans in their time of need.

Now, let me be clear. The current contract service provider is failing to provide those boots on the ground that Albertans are paying for. For those across the way who may not understand this, that means that the authorized positions are sitting empty – empty, empty – which is leaving rural Albertans vulnerable and unsafe. For years I have travelled from Coaldale to Peace River, listening to mayors, listening to Reeves, families who are worried, and their message is the same. They're tired of being told to wait by the contract service provider. This is unacceptable and is creating a crisis of confidence in public safety.

It's not because of a lack of will from the great men and women who are on the front lines. I have to continue to say this, and I will say this again. They are doing the best that they can. Across this country we're hearing the same laundry list of complaints. In almost every province that relies on the RCMP, we're seeing vacancy rates of anywhere from 20 to 30 per cent. In Alberta alone we have hundreds of authorized positions – those are boots on the ground – that we are paying for that just simply do not exist. They're not out there taking those needed calls to service. They are empty chairs. They are unanswered calls.

When a farmer in rural Alberta calls for help at 2 o'clock in the morning, they do not want to hear about recruiting issues or, in fact, that maybe nobody is even working on the night shift, Mr. Speaker. I have heard from the community of Spruce Grove – Spruce Grove – that between certain hours on a night shift nobody is working. So when somebody is calling 911, either nobody is coming or they're going to have to find somebody who might be working in another jurisdiction. That's not acceptable. Not acceptable. We're not going to tolerate that.

Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, I tabled Bill 15. This isn't just another piece of paper. It's vital for Albertans' public safety. We have 1,200 highly skilled Alberta sheriffs, some of whom are already doing the work, patrolling our highways, apprehending fugitives, and keeping our communities safe. We've identified that for 600 of these officers, approximately, there is only a minimal training gap between where they are and where they can become fully fledged police officers.

Now, let's talk about the training, which the members opposite seem to already have a problem with. I know they are already ready to complain about that. It's funny to hear. You know, for a party that was the Defund the Police Party to all of a sudden become the

greatest advocates for law enforcement in rural Alberta: I find that quite ironic. Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the hypocrisy on that is extremely thick. If the members opposite certainly want to oppose Bill 15, then they are in fact defending the gap in the service. That's the 20 to 30 per cent vacancy rates that, quite frankly, we see here in Alberta with also the accountability and the oversight issues. We are trying to fix that. We want more accountability, and we want more oversight.

Today we have hundreds of empty chairs in these rural detachments, consistent with other provinces in Canada. This is not unique to Alberta, Mr. Speaker. But we aren't just filling those chairs with anyone. We're filling them with officers that meet and/or exceed the double-ACP standards. Alberta will train these officers to the standards which will be second to none.

Now let's talk about those training standards. The ASPSP will have three streams of training. Number one, Mr. Speaker, is the standard police recruit training. Those are the fresh applicants for the ASPSP that will be accepted in the near future. The recruit training for these fresh police officers – those are known as recruits – will match or exceed the training currently provided for rookie police officers right across the province.

The Public Safety and Emergency Services Training Academy has been preparing for this training for over a year. These professionals have been working with the ASPSP implementation team and have benchmarked the ASPSP training with the recruit training delivered by CPS, EPS, and other municipal agencies within Alberta. All training will conform with the double-ACP training standards and will meet or exceed the training for any police officer currently serving in Alberta in any police agency. Furthermore, the training will be provided by subject matter experts in all categories of training. In preparation for this the academy will be using experienced police officers selected specifically to deliver this training.

3:00

Now let's go to number two, those who will be known as direct-entry police officers, experienced police officers from other jurisdictions. Mr. Speaker, the ASPSP has already received numerous inquiries from current serving police officers all throughout Canada, and that should be applauded. In a process very similar to our municipal partners in Alberta and across the country each of these officers will undergo a rigorous assessment process. The best and most qualified will be hired, but all will still be required to go through transition training, training that will focus on learning Alberta statutes, ASPSP policies, and will also include qualifying in the use of force, arrest control techniques, particularly focused on de-escalation strategies, again, consistent with every police service in the province.

Significant emphasis will be placed on the philosophy of community-based policing, including useful strategies and processes for engaging the citizens within the communities which they will all be serving. Special training will also be given to all ASPSP officers on Alberta's unique recovery-oriented system of care, where police officers play a vital role in assisting communities and families in helping provide people with mental health and addiction supports that so many people, unfortunately, are seeking. Now, Mr. Speaker, I helped build that system to make it a role model, quite frankly, for folks in Canada and North America. All of this training will meet or exceed the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police training standards.

Now let's go to number three, Mr. Speaker. That's the transition training for Alberta peace officers to ASPSP police officers. The ASPSP will be a modern, two-tiered police service. The Alberta sheriff peace officer functions were evaluated, and not all met the

threshold of performing those policelike functions, as I have stated many times before. Certain identified functions within ASPS will continue to be performed by peace officers. Those are jobs such as prisoner transport, court security, just to name a few. However, all of the 1,200 sheriffs will have the opportunity to apply to become ASPS police officers, testing to police officer standards, and they will be rigorous and it will be thorough. As minister I have made it very clear that no one will be able to say that the police service took any shortcuts in selecting, hiring, or training those officers.

Because Alberta sheriffs provide a variety of policelike services – highway patrol, SCAN, fugitive apprehension surveillance – all internal applicants will be assessed on police competencies, and it should be noted that Alberta sheriffs peace officers' basic training is set at approximately 15 weeks for many years, Mr. Speaker. Again, I have to stress: peace officers. Much of that training – for example, arrest and control techniques, use of force, which are all consistent, again, with double-ACP standards – are of the same quality as that provided by municipal services within the province. In addition, many of these sheriffs have been trained through the rural Alberta provincial integrated defence, known as RAPID. This advanced, four-week course was designed to elevate skills of sheriffs in such areas as enhanced legal investigative training, responding to incidents of intimate partner violence, crime scene management, advanced immediate action rapid deployment with a focus on house clearing and barricaded subjects, addictions and mental health.

Again, all of this is consistent with the double-ACP standards. The 15-week basic training course with the four weeks of RAPID gives an average sheriff who patrols approximately 19 weeks of training equivalent to that received by police officers on the same subject matter. Over and above this 19-week training, the average highway patrol officer has approximately eight years of experience on the road, and as any police officer will tell you, including the sheriffs, training enforcement forces you to handle impaired drivers, drug enforcement, dealing with difficult people appearing in court, dealing with difficult and agitated people, de-escalating situations, emergency first aid, search and rescue. As a police officer will tell you, the ability to deal effectively with these people is the bread and butter of your everyday work. Literally hundreds of our current allotment of the 1,200 sheriffs have spent eight years honing those skills. These are skills that cannot be taught. It is what we call, in the conservative circles, real-world experience, Mr. Speaker.

Now, as we speak to the planners and the trainers, the management of the current sheriffs, Mr. Speaker, led by Chief Parhar, is continuing to work with professionals at the Public Safety and Emergency Services Training Academy to satisfy themselves that all potential training deficiencies are addressed. Currently, depending on the functional experience of that sheriff – i.e., you know, highway patrol, SCAN, et cetera – the transition training is gauged to be an additional six to eight weeks, so a grand total of 25 to 27 weeks, which is equivalent to what a police officer gets in their training and, again, something that would be consistent with the double-ACP.

Mr. Speaker, upon completing the enhanced training, we are looking to deploy these ASPS officers into busy urban areas for four weeks. What does that mean? That's where I got the bulk of my training, which is in downtown Calgary, and they'll be going to work in downtown Calgary and downtown Edmonton, again, augmenting and supporting police services, getting that real-world experience. It's no different than what I got when I was a new recruit and I was sent down to downtown Calgary right out of recruit class.

The plan would be to augment and support the police of jurisdiction while being exposed to a variety of different calls to become familiar with the multitude of help agencies that exist in the larger urban areas so that when those folks in rural Alberta need help, these folks will be exposed to all the help agencies and they will know how to help people that might be in a mental health and addictions crisis. The vision is to graduate the best trained police officers in the province bar none and be the shining example for the rest of Canada because, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is a leader in this country.

Clearly, the government is firmly committed to fielding a police service that will be viewed to be a role model for Canada, Mr. Speaker. The government firmly believes that communities are demanding police services that are firmly committed to community-based policing. The ASPS will be built on the premise and trained to listen to the needs of the community and respond accordingly. Professionalism and competency will be a commitment. For now the members opposite can, you know, throw stones, and I hope they don't, but understand that I am very excited and I am committed to the prospect of delivering our promise to have a police service that is not – and I'm going to be clear, is not – an arm of the state but instead an extension of the community and a reflection of the communities that they serve.

There's something else that needs to be said, Mr. Speaker. I listen very intently to the folks opposite – the self-professed labour party, as an example – and I have to wonder where their advocacy is for the hard-working Alberta sheriffs, who, again, have been doing the job of a police officer but not getting paid as a police officer. I don't know why on this side of the House we believe in equal pay for equal work, but for some reason we don't have unanimity when it comes to that in this Chamber.

You know, I've always said that the sheriffs on the front lines: they have been doing a remarkable job through fugitive apprehension, the patrolling of the highways, and keeping communities safe, and at times even though they've been doing the work of police officers, they have felt like second-class citizens. I can tell you that they're not second-class citizens. They are hard-working people that have been doing more with less, who've been getting paid less, who've been treated like second-class citizens, but that is going to end, Mr. Speaker. These folks are going to be trained up, we are going to deploy them, and we are going to augment and support every police service in this province to make sure that we have effective policing and consistent policing that every single Albertan, regardless of where you live in this province, needs and, quite frankly, deserves.

3:10

I will just conclude by saying that Bill 15 is really about ensuring that we are supporting what will hopefully be front-line police officers in the future, again, whether we're helping, as we did a few weeks ago, the folks in Calgary as they had a big project that they were dealing with social and civil disorder, whether we're assisting the folks in Edmonton, or whether we're assisting our folks in the RCMP, which we have done and continue to do. There are numerous stories of traffic stops that have been done in rural Alberta and the sheriffs and, quite frankly, the RCMP members, those great constables and corporals that are out there doing the hard work on those dirt roads. They are doing the hard work and working with those Alberta sheriffs, and that is something that is going to continue.

All this bill is is taking the current budget that is existing in the Alberta sheriffs or the current money and taking those people and lifting it and shifting it over into the Crown corporation that currently exists. It's making sure that, again, from a labour

perspective the AUPE, as an example, will be able to have that smooth transition for those who are not police officers but, again, those who are civilian or those that are maybe in the peace officer realm, that when they transition over into that new area, they could be represented by the AUPE. Again, organically, if somebody wishes to choose and go down a different path, that is entirely up to them, but what we are providing is that smooth transition from Alberta government into this Crown corporation.

I'm certainly proud of the work that everybody, quite frankly, has done and the hard work that is being done by the folks on the new executive team for the Alberta sheriffs. I had the opportunity to meet them. I can tell you that despite what people may or may not believe, I'm very proud that a deputy chief has been hired. A former assistant deputy commissioner of the RCMP is proud to have joined our team, and she is going to be a deputy chief within the Alberta sheriffs. I don't want to say the name, but I'm very proud to have her onboard. I'm also proud to invite, who has also joined the team, a former high-ranking member, another female police officer with the Edmonton Police Service who has now joined as a deputy chief within the Alberta sheriffs, the great group of people that have joined us who are experienced, police officers from Calgary and Edmonton who are going to be involved in the training and the recruiting, Mr. Speaker.

We have an HR person, a lovely lady that has come from Ontario, that is excited to make sure that we have, again, a top-quality HR department within that new organization, Mr. Speaker.

I'm proud of each and every one of them. I'm excited to make sure that this is going to be a police service that, again, is going to be the role model for not just here in Alberta but, quite frankly, for the rest of Canada.

Again, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for this time. I know I said that I move second reading of the bill. I move second reading of Bill 15. Thank you, sir. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak? The Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 15. I want to thank the minister. What we just heard is the most information he has given to anybody in this province about his planned Alberta Sheriffs Police Service in two years. Seriously. Now, the minister, you know, was upset about speculation about training, about the other aspects of the work he's doing, but the fact is that he has left Albertans in an information vacuum.

When I say Albertans, Mr. Speaker, I mean everybody involved on this file: the municipalities who are his supposed customers, the Alberta sheriffs who are going to be staffing his Sheriffs Police Service, the Albertans who are paying for it. Everybody who has been involved in this has been waiting with bated breath for this minister to tell them how this is actually going to function. There has been no business plan. There's been no budget. There has been no costing. There have been multiple pieces of legislation. There have been grand political announcements for political advantage, all while this government has been planning and barrelling towards creating an Alberta provincial police force. Indeed, we know that the Premier sent herself a report, because the Premier was the chair of the Alberta Next Panel that went around talking about this last year. She as the chair wrote a report and sent it to herself telling herself to create an Alberta provincial police service with no consultation, no referendum, no support from Albertans.

So the minister can act all offended, and he can perform his umbrage here in the House about people speculating about what he was building, but the fact is that he chose to create that. At least

now we have something substantive on the record about how he intends to approach this. I will say this. Yes, if everything the minister shared here today, then that training does begin to approach the 26 weeks that are spent by the RCMP, the 28 weeks that are given to Edmonton Police Service officers. What the minister is outlining does move towards that. So thank you to him for finally providing a bit of clarity and information to Albertans.

On this, just to be clear, Mr. Speaker, it's not just me talking about this here. Again, I've quoted her often: the president of Rural Municipalities of Alberta, Ms Kara Westerlund, talking about the lack of information that they have received from this minister and this government. She said, you know, that their previous announcement caught them off guard. They were unaware of the changes that were going to be announced and that are still happening. She said: at this point we haven't heard or seen anything different in the announcements that have been made. Now, interestingly, she goes on and talks about what the minister was just talking about in terms of the RCMP. The minister, again, is saying that he has to do this because the RCMP are failing in their duty; they are not providing the service that is being paid for; they're not filling positions. Ms Westerlund says: in the opening comments you hear the minister talk about the RCMP or policing services not being used in the municipalities or those calls going unanswered; it's interesting because we have seen no plans, no concrete information or data about how they're going to recruit officers, how they're going to deploy the officers. This is just after their announcement of a new chief last year.

Again, if people have doubts and skepticism, it's because this minister has refused to consult, has refused to talk to Albertans, has refused to provide any information about this multimillion enterprise that he's looking to set up. Albertans are right to have questions. I can tell you, especially around training, Mr. Speaker, that I've been talking with folks in the security industry for a number of months now who raised multiple concerns about this minister's lack of oversight and refusal to update training curriculum for security officers in this province that's over a decade old. It took bringing members of the security industry into this House to shame the minister into meeting with them to get any action on that actually going. So the minister, again, can act all offended in the House, but the fact is that it is his own reputation and his own decisions of himself and this government that have led people to doubt him.

Speaking of which, Mr. Speaker, you know, playing around with statistics, shall we say, is another great way to lose trust and credibility with Albertans and with the folks that the minister actually needs the support of for this service to be useful and to work. Now, the minister stood here today and he talked about the fact that he has to use Bill 15. This whole transition, all these pieces are about setting up the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, as the minister himself said, in order to supplement because, he said, the RCMP are not doing their job. I noticed that he used to attack them quite openly in the House. He is now calling them the contract provider, taking a step back, a little distance.

I will just note, when we are talking about the actual numbers – we got the numbers in July of last year. In July 2025 the RCMP had 124 unfilled positions and 182 officers on leave. Now, the minister was making a big show about how much he supports labour rights. I'm certain he doesn't begrudge, then, if he's such a supporter of working people, those officers that are taking maternity leave or paternity leave or on illness or all the other reasons that you have officers on leave. I will just say again that we had 124 unfilled, 182 officers on leave, a vacancy rate of 17.3 per cent.

We had a FOIP, Mr. Speaker. Now, I asked the minister this directly at estimates last year. How many officers did he have? How

many were on leave? He could not provide those numbers and did not provide those numbers afterwards. But we did have a FOIP in July of last year that did provide those numbers and showed us that at that time, for one example, the highway patrol, which is one of the areas that the minister specifically wants to transfer sheriffs out of to move into the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, had a soft vacancy rate, so folks on leave, of 6.7 per cent and a hard vacancy rate of 22.5 per cent. So, in fact, the Alberta sheriffs highway patrol had a higher vacancy rate than the RCMP. They had 22 and a half per cent; the RCMP had 17.3 per cent.

3:20

The minister, again, can grandstand. The minister can pontificate in the House. But the fact is that the numbers do not bear out his claims, and if he is so offended by the RCMP failing to keep themselves staffed, then he should be asking himself why he is failing to keep things staffed within Alberta sheriffs. How is that going to bode, then, when we move these folks over? Again, what we are talking about, Mr. Speaker, is that this minister wants to move 600 sheriffs from the Alberta sheriffs to the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service. Now, these are sheriffs that are working in a number of different areas, including the highway patrol, and the minister says that by doing this, he is going to create more boots on the ground. Moving 600 people from one place to another does not create more officers.

Now, of course, we've seen the government try to play this kind of trickery before, shuffling people around from one place to another. We've seen them do this in the health care system, Mr. Speaker, where they claim that they were going to address the issue with EMS being caught up in emergency rooms. They made some tweaks to policy that brought down the numbers, yes, for the EMS, got them out faster, but it is part of what is driving the crisis in emergency rooms now. EMS are now back to the same kinds of problems they had before because this is a government that does not actually plan, does not actually come up with strategies or real solutions. They come up with short-term fixes for political gain.

Now, the minister did talk about the fact that he is looking to recruit officers from some other provinces and that he's got things lined up and others, and we will see if the proof is in the pudding on that, Mr. Speaker. But what I can say is that if the minister wants to be supplemented by other police services across the province of Alberta by recruiting more folks into the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, I'm not sure how it helps other police services by creating competition for the same officers they'd like to hire. The fact is that if there are gaps in other police services across the province, they are also working to recruit, and they're looking to recruit from the same pool of officers.

The other thing I will note, Mr. Speaker: you know, the minister talked about wanting to ensure that when someone called 911, someone showed up and they had someone there on the ground to be able to help them. He talked about RCMP failing to provide those boots on the ground, failing to be able to show up and support folks when they need it and particularly in rural communities. Now, the fact is that I don't think you're going to find a single person in rural Alberta who says that in the seven years that this government has been in power they have seen an improvement in their access to health care in rural areas, something that is directly under the control of this government.

The minister talked about the fact – he criticized the RCMP in Spruce Grove, saying: how could it be that in the middle of the night there's not an officer available for someone to respond to a call? You know how many communities across this province, how many weeks a year a rural Albertan cannot visit their local emergency room? It's closed. They have to drive to the next town over. We've

heard of near misses. We know there have likely been lives lost. This is something directly under the control of this government for seven years, and it has only gotten worse. So I think Albertans have good reason to be skeptical when a government that has yet to take any service that it provides to Albertans and improve it in seven years is suddenly going to stand up a brand new police service that's going to automatically fix everything.

Now, speaking of the health care system, Mr. Speaker, what we did see in the health care system is this government quadruple bureaucracy, create an entirely new set of structures, and then, as we were talking about Bill 15 and the transfer of employees, employed similar tactics. Health care workers were given no information about what was happening or where things were going to go until the government made its announcements about its grand reorganization of the system. Very similar here to this minister for the past two years talking big talk about what he was setting up, providing no information, no detail to anybody about what he was doing. What we saw is, again, the health care workers were left in the dark up until the last minute, then suddenly told: "Okay. This is what's going to happen. You'll find out where you're going, but it's just going to be transfer."

What we have in Bill 15 is that the minister has the power to simply transfer any Alberta sheriff from Alberta sheriffs to the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service. That's the power he is granting himself there. Now, again, yes, we need to have proper transition, and we need to have all of the rules and stuff in place. Certainly, that is what I think the folks at AUPE are looking forward to negotiating with the minister and talking about, how all that's going to take place. That is appropriate, and that's what should happen, but the fact is, again, all of these individuals have been left in the dark up until now.

The minister talks about how much he supports Alberta sheriffs and how regrettable it is that we don't. Mr. Speaker, I've had multiple sheriffs come up to me and thank me for bringing their concerns forward in this place about the lack of consultation, about the minister's failure to give them clarity about what their future was going to be.

Now let's talk about the cost, Mr. Speaker. You know, the minister went on a little bit about cost today. Certainly, he went on at length at his press conference yesterday talking about Bill 15. As we discuss these pieces that are around transferring sheriffs from one side to the other, this is part of it. There are going to be costs involved. The minister spoke at length about, well, he's hearing from all these municipalities that are complaining to him about the increase in cost for policing. He's blaming that all, he says, on the RCMP, who, yes, in fact, have increased their costs for policing because, well, the minister said: equal pay for equal work. He is such a strong supporter of labour rights.

RCMP officers, Mr. Speaker, were being underpaid compared to other police officers across Canada, so they rightly and appropriately negotiated a salary increase, which, yes, has increased the cost of contract policing for the RCMP commensurate with the increase in policing costs in other areas. Every police service in this province: costs have gone up. In fact, this minister has been very dogged, and previous UCP ministers before him, in saying that municipalities should be giving police services every dollar they ask for. In some cases, yes, that is appropriate because it is increasing the wages of those police officers. But when it comes to the RCMP, he's got a complaint.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, what he is hearing from municipalities right now, their complaints, their concerns, is about his new police funding formula, which is a black box. The minister has simply been sending out these notices to municipalities telling them what their costs are going to increase by over the next five years. He

talked about how concerned he is for these small jurisdictions. I understand he handed the town of Mayerthorpe a form saying they can expect to pay 300 per cent more in their policing costs in five years. Three hundred per cent. Now, here's the thing. Did policing costs for the RCMP go up? Yes, they did. How much? We don't know because the minister didn't send the town of Mayerthorpe an itemized bill. He didn't send them an invoice that says: this much is for the RCMP; this much is for administration; here's how it all breaks down. There was no transparency.

So here's the thing. This minister, essentially, has a monopoly. He gets to be the sole broker for policing in the province. So, yes, municipalities have a choice about which one they're going to buy. They don't get a choice about who they're going to buy it from if they're below a certain level, right? If they're above a certain size, they get to contract directly with the federal government themselves. Smaller municipalities have to buy their services through the minister, so the minister gets to have the choice of telling. He gets the bill from the RCMP, then he gives a bill to the municipality, and we don't know what might get added in between.

And we know this is a government, as my colleague from Lethbridge-West ably noted, that loves to download costs on to municipalities. They've done this repeatedly and all over the place. Particularly, they love making municipalities raise their property taxes for them because then, hey, they get to pretend it's those bad, bad city councillors that are costing people more money and not have to take the blame for doing that themselves.

But the fact is, Mr. Speaker, we don't know how much of that new police funding formula – we don't know how it's calculated. The minister isn't putting out what that formula is or how he's breaking it down. The thing is the minister says that he swears his new Alberta Sheriffs Police Service is going to be cheaper. Well, he's in a convenient position, Mr. Speaker. He can choose to charge whatever he wants because, again, we don't have transparency.

3:30

The minister did give us some great information now today about police training. That is wonderful. That was detailed and it was appreciated. What would be also appreciated is that same level of detail on how he's calculating his police funding formula and how he's going to calculate what the costs are then for municipalities that want to have an Alberta sheriffs detachment so that they can actually compare and contrast: what is the actual cost from the RCMP, how much is being added by the provincial government, how much of this is being calculated and moved over, and is the minister perhaps choosing to subsidize the Alberta Sheriff's Police Service when he sends a detachment there? That is what this government has done in so many other areas.

When it comes to health care and surgeries, they gave bloated contracts to private surgical centres, gave them better deals, and used that to undermine the public system. We've seen it in education, where they have increased funding for private schools while they have throttled funding and resources for public schools. This government has a track record of putting a thumb on the scale for the things that they prefer ideologically and politically.

When we look at Bill 15, again, successorship rights: important thing. That is the right thing to do for sheriffs. We need a bit more clarity around that. It would have been nice if the minister would have engaged in any of these conversations before he was already across the starting line, but the fact is that the concerns around this are that we still have an incredible lack of detail. We have an incredible lack of support. Again, the minister talks about the complaints he gets about the RCMP, but he also did not tell you that yet the vast majority of municipalities want to keep the RCMP. They have concerns, they have issues, but they still prefer the

RCMP over the minister's proposed plan. That has been steady over two years under this government and this minister. It has been steady for the four to five years before that, but again this is not a government that listens to what Albertans want. This is a government that goes about using Albertans' tax money to force on them and to sell to them what this government wants.

It is for these reasons, Mr. Speaker, that we have difficulty with Bill 15 and indeed we continue to have real concerns. Certainly, I will be looking forward to the budget and business plan tomorrow because, again, perhaps for the first time we're going to see this minister actually put some numbers on the table. I know that I and a whole lot of municipal leaders are going to be watching with bated breath to finally have an idea of how this government is intending to set up this structure and what it's going to cost.

Frankly, Albertans deserve a lot better, Mr. Speaker. They deserve a lot more transparency. They deserve far better than they are getting from this government, but I know that I and my colleagues are here to help ensure they get it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: I recognize the Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Bill 15: imagine, if you will, executing an idea that costs taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, that no one wants, and that won't solve the stated problem. Now imagine doing it while strangling health care and education while Albertans are dying, according to emergency room physicians, in our emergency rooms for lack of investment. If governing was a profession, Mr. Speaker, this would be malpractice.

This bill is one in a long series of bills very slowly implementing a provincial police force. I'm not sure which one it is now: six, seven, something like that, Mr. Speaker. It's like the minister is trying to sneak attack Albertans. It's like he thought to himself: maybe if I move very, very slowly, no one will notice that I did the thing they didn't want. But it's, like, *Hamburglar*-level bad. Does anyone remember that? The McDonald's character that used to always be, like, badly sneaking and stealing cheeseburgers? That's what this bill feels like. This minister has been implementing this in slow stages without admitting that he's implementing it for years now – he really ought to get himself a *Hamburglar* costume – and Albertans continue to oppose it despite the government's best efforts.

The government put out a survey, apparently having taken lessons from their Alberta pension plan survey, and by lessons, I don't mean good ones. They tried to skew that survey to prevent people from coming out against, but boy were Albertans smarter than them, and they sure managed anyway. They managed so effectively that the government, knowing how counter to their position the pension plan surveys were, resisted the Information and Privacy Commissioner releasing that information, which belongs to Albertans, for 21 months.

Having decided that they don't want to find themselves in a position again where they give Albertans any opportunity to state their actual opinions, the viewer is required first to sit through a four-minute misinformation video. Then they're forced to answer the question: why do you support this proposal? Mr. Speaker, there's no, "I don't support this proposal," or "There's no good reason for it." There are four answers, all of which are untrue, so the taker of the survey is essentially required to make a statement which they know to be untrue if they're paying any sort of attention before they're allowed to proceed onwards, presumably in the hopes of being able to present skewed data that suggests that

Albertans are in favour of this. What it is, is just a piece of this whole ridiculous separatist rhetoric from this government.

While Albertans struggle with real issues, this government spends their time trying to bring in these little things, that Albertans have been incredibly clear they don't want, to move down the path to separatism. And they keep trying to sell them. They keep coming up with more of them – Alberta pension plan, Alberta police force, separatist referendum – and every time Albertans stand in opposition, but for some reason they just keep trying. Meanwhile, the things that the government is meant to do – action on cost-of-living, on health care, on our overcrowded emergency rooms, on classrooms that are crumbling, on building schools in a timely fashion – none of that is happening. This is a government who, I mean, just doesn't care what the population of this province thinks. They just don't. They don't care what Albertans' priorities are. This is what they're focused on.

In specific, this particular bill deals with the labour relations implications of moving the sheriffs to the sheriff police force. Basically it's, as I've said, one more step in the most slowly executed transfer in the history of the universe. The first thing to note, Mr. Speaker, is it absolutely will not solve the problem that the minister claims it will solve, that is, response time.

It's not just me saying it; it's people who live in these communities. It's municipal councillors who represent these communities, who are far closer to the ground than the minister, and they have been asking, "How is this going to work? What is it going to solve? How much is it going to cost?" and crickets from this government. No response at all. They don't even think they owe these folks an explanation because they're talking to a certain subset of the population. Again, a subset who likes to run separatist referendums, and they don't care what anyone else thinks. Rural, urban, man, woman: doesn't matter. So it won't solve the problem.

3:40

The only problem this arguably solves is a problem of the UCP's own making, which is the issue around equal pay for equal work. The minister loves to cry: oh, these poor officers who aren't receiving equal pay for equal work. Wait. Who created that problem again? Who was it that did that rapid force thing? I'm pretty sure that it was the UCP that created that problem. It was the minister. It was the UCP that chose to deploy those officers, doing the work of police officers, without increasing their pay, and they have left them in that situation for years: six years, seven years now. Now they cry: oh, the NDP doesn't want these poor folks to get equal pay for equal work. Well, no. You're the one who set that up. The UCP created that problem.

Just while we're on the subject, the idea of the UCP crying, "Equal pay for equal work," after I proposed legislation that would provide equal pay for equal work to young people and they laughed at it and called it dramatic: so apparently equal pay for equal work but not like that. Some people have rights and other people don't.

The minister has also said – and I turn to slightly more serious aspects of the bill now – that there will be additional training for the officers choosing to move over. I find this incredibly confusing. Mr. Speaker, because the legislation makes it clear that there is no choice. There is no choice for these officers. So I would ask the minister to answer for why it is that his statements in the House, that these officers will be choosing, differ from the bill. Section 33.99 – this is what happens when you amend a bill too many times – talks about essentially removing the right to severance. So it's entitled "No entitlement to severance."

Notwithstanding the Employment Standards Code or any other enactment or the terms of any employment contract, no employee transferred by a transfer order is entitled to severance pay,

termination pay, termination notice, pay in lieu of notice or other compensation, including . . . the common law as a result of . . .

And then it specifies the ways in which the employees could be transferred.

Essentially, what this says is that if the minister designates you, you go or you're fired without termination pay. The idea that this is a choice for folks to move over – it also, like, really undercuts the minister's rhetoric that people are begging for this, that these employees are begging for this. Telling employees, "We are going to cut off not just your rights under the collective agreement, not just your rights under legislation but your rights at common law to be entitled to reasonable notice or pay in lieu thereof" is not giving people a choice. I really think an explanation is required for why the minister would suggest that, like, they can take additional training if they choose to move over, because that's sure not what the bill sounds like.

I also have some questions about the SCAN unit being moved. This is an incredibly important unit, Mr. Speaker. Essentially it deals with the shutting down of houses where they are known to be creating drugs or selling drugs. Whether they're meth labs or grow ops or various things, essentially members of community who notice sort of suspicious behaviour, if you will, around these places can kind of write in, and surveillance is done and ultimately the houses are shut down. It's a pretty popular project, right? Like, this was one of the very first things I was lobbied on when I became minister, the incredible importance of this for making communities feel like they are safe, for making them feel like they have a voice.

Members of community care but also municipal councillors. I'm very curious what consultation the minister has done with those people because I wouldn't want to see this happening without appropriate consultation. I mean, the rest of this bill all seems to have happened without appropriate consultation, so perhaps I'm overly optimistic here. But I would love to know what consultation with municipal elected officials has occurred around this piece of the bill because I think it's a very important piece.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also just like to address some of the minister's comments on this bill. I mean, first off, when you have to say that this is not an arm of the state explicitly, I don't even know what to do with that. If you have to say that it's not an arm of the state, that raises some serious concerns for me that this is exactly what we say it is, which is to say, the UCP's own personal police force. But, you know, at least he spelled the word "empty" for us in case we were confused.

I also would appreciate it if the minister could amend his tone. I mean, I realize this is a thing that is likely to be taken under advisement, but I just feel the need to put it on the record that there are RCMP officers throughout this province doing an incredible job every single day, and I don't particularly like the way the minister talks about them. I think it is disrespectful, and I think it is unfair, and I think that from his position of power he should really reconsider that.

I also don't particularly like the sort of continual misinformation being put out around vacancy rates. Vacancy rates in police services are high across the board. There's a recruitment problem. It's not specific to the RCMP. The minister is or should be well aware of that. In fact, there is a similar recruitment problem with the sheriffs. There is a similar recruitment problem everywhere. This is why this was attempted in B.C. There was an attempt made to move away from the RCMP because: oh, well, we'll be able to fill all our vacancies. And do you know what happened? It failed because, despite a \$20,000 signing bonus, they weren't able to get enough officers to move over. Now, of course, the minister is going to force the folks he has currently to move over, but that's, like, wildly insufficient to achieve what he is saying.

I will close my comments in saying that I oppose this bill strongly, not because, I mean, from a labour relations point of view this is the correct thing to do – you want to extend the bargaining rights – but because we shouldn't be moving to an Alberta provincial police force. The minister keeps saying: this is supplementing; this is supplementing. The discourse has changed wildly over time, but we know what it is, and it's nothing that anybody wants. It's going to cost hundreds of millions of dollars at a time when this government is saying to doctors and nurses and teachers, "There isn't enough money to support you to do your job properly," at a time when they are saying to Albertans: there isn't enough money to fund our ERs so that your loved ones aren't dying for lack of care. This is governance malpractice, Mr. Speaker, and I oppose it strongly.

The Acting Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also rise to speak to Bill 15, and I speak against this bill. Both my colleagues the MLA for Edmonton-City Centre and the MLA for Calgary-Mountain View have talked about the bill, the background, and also what the minister talked about in this bill. I think ever since the UCP became government, from the Fair Deal Panel, they have been musing about creating their own police force. Instead of focusing on public safety, instead of making our communities safe, they are more stuck in this ideological program that they want to create this force and have completely ignored the safety needs of Albertans, be those Albertans in rural communities or urban communities.

3:50

I live in northeast Calgary, and just earlier this week shots were fired on a couple of homes in Saddle Ridge and Savanna in broad daylight, and we didn't hear anything from the minister. Yet the minister will go on to insult the present contract provider who is failing to provide service. That present contract provider, if anybody doesn't know, is the RCMP that the minister was referring to. These are not just people in uniform; they are our neighbours. They live in these communities. They work in these communities. Their kids go to school in these communities. They are Albertan. They are part of this province. They are not some persons that are flown in by Ottawa every day to do some work and then they go back to Ottawa. These are people, part of our communities.

Closer to the 2023 election, the UCP took that project out of the mandate of the Justice minister. The Premier, during the campaign, said that they won't be talking about it and gave Albertans the impression that they're no longer moving ahead with this project because it was deeply unpopular in rural communities, in urban centres, with Alberta Municipalities, with Rural Municipalities of Alberta. More than 70 organizations wrote once to this government opposing the dismantling of the RCMP, yet this government refuses to listen.

As I said, instead of focusing on social determinants of justice, social determinants of crime and addressing the crime and its root causes, they think that by creating their own police force, somehow crime rates, somehow public safety will improve all of a sudden. If we look at studies like social determinants of justice, employment, access to health care and mental health supports, access to housing, quality education: those are the things that this government needs to focus on if they are really wanting to make our communities safe.

But when we look at these indicators, this government for the last six, seven years has been intentionally dismantling Alberta's public health care. They have been underfunding the health system so much so that people have even died waiting for the necessary care in emergency rooms. When it comes to housing, we have not seen

more houselessness in this province than what we are seeing today under this government's watch. When it comes to funding education, Alberta is funding K to 12 education at the lowest rate in the entire country. So those are the things that this government needs to focus on, but no. They are now passing this bill so that they can create their own police force.

What this bill does: this bill gives the minister sweeping authority to transfer employees from one force to another, and that provision says, notwithstanding the term of an employment contract, that the minister may by order transfer "an employee or a class of employees of the Crown in right of Alberta to the successor employer." The minister is giving himself carte blanche that by order he can transfer an employee or a class of employee to a successor employer without their consent, without asking them. That's fairly draconian power that the minister is granting himself.

Then they are saying that notwithstanding anything in the employment code or any other enactment these transfer employees will not be entitled to severance or their entitlements, termination pay. That is deeply, deeply concerning. These are not willing Albertan personnel who want to move to another force. That force can only be created because the minister is giving himself these powers and, if passed, he will be able to dictate and move sheriffs from one organization to that new entity. That is fairly heavy handed. When we ask the government about consultation, as my colleague mentioned: zero consultations. That's the most that the minister has talked about what this force will look like, what the training will look like. But still he has not mentioned a word about how much it will cost Albertans.

Again, just creating a new force from an existing pool of employees, pool of law enforcement officers, doesn't put new boots on the ground. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the minister of health would say. Nothing could be further from it. You're just moving some sheriffs from one organization into a new organization, a UCP police force. That will not make our communities safe overnight. That training doesn't happen overnight.

When Premier Kenney asked PWC to look into this transition from RCMP, that report is public and that report clearly stated that creating a new police force would cost Albertans in a number of ways. The cost estimate was that you need \$366 million. That was the number from that report just for transition. There was a subsidy from the federal government, the grant that the government gives to the RCMP. That was almost 30 per cent of the policing cost. You would lose that. Over a five-year period or a six-year period the cost was over a billion dollars, and that's not including the loss of institutional knowledge, the loss of the existing collaborative relationship of RCMP with other law enforcement agencies across the province.

It is a costly exercise. Albertans are not asking for it. They are opposed to it, but this government wants to plow ahead because that helps appease their separatist base. One thing, Mr. Speaker: in a democratic society, parties, when they campaign, campaign on a platform. They talk about it. They inform Albertan voters about it and then seek a mandate from them. Then they try to do things that they got a mandate from their electorate, from Albertans.

4:00

In this case they deliberately didn't talk about this. They didn't get any mandate from Albertans to create a new police force or dismantle the RCMP, yet we're seeing that the government is now moving full speed ahead with the creation of the new police force.

If they are so much interested in having their own police force, if they are so much interested in having their own pension plan, if they are so much interested in separating Alberta from Canada, that they

have been doing for the last little while, they could easily call an election and seek a mandate from Albertans, in no uncertain terms, that we want to create our own police force, we want to create our own pension plan, and we might as well want to separate this province from the rest of Canada, and let's see how Albertans respond. But that's not what they are doing. They are just using brute force to force employees from one organization to join another organization so that they can create an Alberta police force.

The minister also talked about vacancy rates, empty chairs, and unanswered calls with respect to the RCMP. Quite frankly, the way the minister talked about the RCMP is very disrespectful. It's extremely disrespectful to those people in uniform who are on the front lines day in and day out and doing their best with the available resources. As my colleagues indicated, vacancy rates among law enforcement agencies are not unique to Alberta. That's a demanding job. That's a difficult job. In the RCMP it currently stands at 17.3 per cent, which is far less than the vacancy rate of Alberta sheriffs, which is at 22 per cent.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The RCMP serves rural communities like communities that are far from city centres. When we look at even the Calgary Police Service, the Calgary Police Service has a 19 per cent vacancy in terms of leave or accommodation due to mental or physical injuries. It can be difficult to find a full complement in cities, and I'm sure it's much more difficult to find people in rural communities. Instead of creating these kinds of narratives that vacancies are just exclusive to RCMP, the government needs . . .

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

Ms Wright: Thank you, Madam Speaker. On the question of Bill 15 let's talk successor rights for a moment. At their best successor rights within labour relations do something that could be seen as both simple as well as profound. They prevent union-busting by corporate or administrative sleight of hand. In effect, they stop a shell game in which a business is sold or a corporate structure is changed and, presto, the union is gone, the collective agreement discarded, and the rights of workers treated as an afterthought.

Successorship and the laws surrounding it matter for both workers as well as employers, and there is indeed a well-established framework, a set of criteria that labour boards use to determine whether a transfer is valid. Those criteria exist to protect workers, and the principle, Madam Speaker, is straightforward. Employers cannot unilaterally change structures to evade a certified union. If the activities change hands but the work is essentially the same, then successor rights attach. The union continues to have bargaining rights; the employees keep their protections.

That indeed is some of what we see in Bill 15. Some of what we see in Bill 15. Successor rights follow the work, and that's a crucial safeguard during corporate or administrative change like we're seeing. It's not controversial, it's not new, and in fact it is the law. Protecting collective bargaining is good. It's stabilizing. It's how we retain skilled people in very demanding roles. In some measure I'm pleased to see those provisions in Bill 15 which deal with this issue. However, there are some difficulties.

While the government has acknowledged successorship and taken steps that appear to clear a pathway for those transfers – and they've certainly authorized the Labour Relations Board to address consequential issues that might arise in the course of a transfer. For instance, where there might be grievances or allegations of unfair bargaining, the union and collective agreement continue. The employment start date is carried forward to the new employer.

That's helpful and, on its face, consistent with standard successorship principles. So some positives, as I said, but there are issues with what is not in this bill along with what is included in this bill, the provisions that we see before us.

Surrounding all of those, too, is a question both myself and my colleagues have often asked in this House: what consultation has actually occurred thus far with either the workers themselves or with those who represent them? A change of this scale, which affects public safety rules, classifications, scope of duties, wages and benefits, pensions, and postings throughout the province, should not and cannot be handled as a simple internal administrative edit. It demands active engagement with AUPE and with the officers themselves. It demands something beyond the bare legal requirements. The legislation might allow for transfer, Madam Speaker, but the process must guarantee meaningful input. In short, we need another level of consultation up front and ongoing. That's crucial. As we know, with the history of this UCP government that has not exactly been the pattern thus far.

Secondly, there is ministerial discretion seen in this bill – you've heard my colleagues talk about this today – and that is where the real pitfalls and where the guardrails kind of drop off. Section 33.97(1) raises a real red flag for me, Madam Speaker, because it empowers the minister, without consultation, to simply move employees at will from one place to another place. It's alarming, and as a result many central questions are unanswered. Who gets transferred? Will there be options for those employees? We heard the minister today in this House indicate that current sheriffs will have an opportunity to apply, but this provision doesn't in fact guarantee that at all. There's that issue of: is it "I volunteer" in the sense that I am applying for this job, or is it simply mandatory? That is, in effect, what this bill says.

Can the minister designate an entire cluster, whether they want to or not, as employees of a new entity? Again, this legislation seems to say that he can. This is where clarity and those guardrails, those safeguards, Madam Speaker, are essential. Will the number of positions in the classifications doing the transferring be negotiated in advance with the union? Well, clearly, they haven't been negotiated in advance, but at least a heads-up would have been helpful. Will there be transparent criteria? Should the minister determine a particular section or sector of current shares be transferred over en masse, is there scope for those employees to opt out? Again, it's troubling that this bill does not seem to offer that option.

There are questions, too, with respect to the current existing collective agreement, particularly where that issue of transfer is concerned. Were there letters of understanding between the government and AUPE during the most recent rounds of bargaining? If so, how does that interact with this bill's provisions? How might the scope of work for employees change, Madam Speaker? What would that mean in terms of classifications? The minister today, I believe, if I've got it right, talked about, essentially, two different levels of police officers, talked about those who have additional training and those who kind of walk on over. They might be highway patrol, that sort of a thing. That's two different tiers that require different training, two different tiers that may indeed require a different bargaining agent and will certainly require different terms to whatever their collective agreement ends up being.

These are details, again, Madam Speaker, that should and must be worked out with the union now and not after the fact. When you change an employer, even under successorship, things are going to happen. That's just the way life goes. They might not always be big-ticket items that you see but little things that make a job sustainable for an employee: terms and conditions, grey areas

where an employer may feel free to tweak assignments, things having to do maybe with scheduling or yearly training allocations, internal posting rules.

4:10

Internal posting is an important thing, Madam Speaker. These folks are now being moved from an entity where they are able to apply on a number of different posts, and they're moving over to a Crown corporation. But if there are only two levels, that means two jobs. Those little things accumulate. They decide whether an employee can safely do the job, support their family, and plan for their future.

There are also some really big-ticket questions, too, for workers and should also be for this government as well, things like pension impacts. Will their pensions actually be adequately and sufficiently secured?

Again, those changes in job scope and classification, and I'm thinking particularly of those who might be moving from peace officer roles to newly defined functions: are these sorts of things clear right now? Despite the fact that the minister did indeed give us some additional information today on training, this is certainly not clear for me.

That issue of geographic relocation: you're talking about something throughout the province. You're talking about a completely new entity, a new Crown corporation. Where in the province will these new folks who are moving from one place to another be located? Will they have a choice, or will they simply have to go where they're being told to go?

Opportunities for advancement or just their first assignment: will they expand, or will they narrow?

Pay and benefits: we're told there may be a raise commensurate with training and the new job. In fact, the minister went on at great length today to talk to us about the inadequacy of pay as it is right now for sheriffs. We heard that it's simply moving the money from what already exists to this new entity, but we also heard that members doing policelike functions are not currently being paid adequately even given the increase in their scope of practice right now, so I'm assuming then that we're actually going to see a commensurate rise in the budget tomorrow to ensure that these folks are indeed fairly compensated.

Are there guarantees of no reduction in pay or benefits? Legally, a reduction could be a violation of a current collective agreement, which is, of course, what successor rights are about. It's about making sure that the current agreement is sustained. The spectre of unfair bargaining could be raised if that isn't, and that's a problem for this government. If employees are reclassified, particularly if that shifts in closer to that police designation, will they then lose the right to strike?

It really is that issue of ministerial power, 33.97(1). Normally when a transfer occurs, employees are offered a choice. We've certainly seen that with AHS, though we know it has not been without issue. Employees can move, they can take a severance, they can pursue other opportunities, or some might choose in fact to stay with their current employer. But here, again, that doesn't seem to be an option. That's the normal way successorship respects both continuity as well as employee agency. In other words, it puts the employees, the workers, at the centre. But 33.99 essentially says that employees caught in this sort of a transfer, one where the minister gets to decide who will be working in this new agency, will simply have to accept the transfer or they will have to quit. But if they do quit, then there's no provision for termination pay, for notice, pay in lieu of notice. It does not even clearly say that they can quit. The result is, effectively: move or leave with nothing. Madam Speaker, that isn't a choice. That's antithetical to the values

this government claims to celebrate: choice, respect, and fair treatment.

In a CBC article from today AUPE notes that they've got a few unanswered questions about whether anyone working in sheriff roles, including conservation officers, would remain with the government or be transferred en masse over to the new agency. They wonder how ASPS will deal with employees who do not want to become police officers, and as AUPE noted, some of them are looking forward to an opportunity to pursue a career as a police officer, but some of them are not. That's not what they signed up for. And the spectre of taking 600 people who were doing a particular role like a peace officer role or a highway patrol role and saying, "Okay; all of you, all 600, are moving now from here to there," again, takes away their agency simply as people, as Albertans. That's disruptive. That's punitive. That means that workers who might for family reasons, obligations, pension planning, health, geography: they just aren't interested at the moment. They don't want to transfer, but under this clause, 33.99, the message is: take it or lose everything. There doesn't seem to be an option. That kind of forced transfer erodes trust, damages morale, and undermines the very stability that successorship is supposed to secure.

Again, that does indeed go to the broader criticism, that of the minister's ability to move people around at will. Certainly, over the last number of months we've seen this sort of pattern emerge as well where decisions that might have been taken even with cabinet, for instance, are now just laid at the minister's desk, the minister's discretion, where that power, that decision-making ability isn't with a group. It rests with an individual. This isn't minor. This is a massive change, something that wasn't campaigned on, clearly not consulted on either with Albertans, officers, or their union, yet this UCP government has decided to forge ahead.

With that, Madam Speaker, we need some guarantees that the government will actively consult and work with AUPE. The line that the new agency will respect the bargaining process at this point isn't enough. There need to be clear assurances. Will AUPE have a binding role in designing the transfer process? Will the number and classification of transferred positions be negotiated? Will the employees themselves have an option to remain in their current position and with their current collective agreement intact? Will there be severance or notice for those who choose not to move? Again, right now the provision does not seem to provide that. These are essential to making sure that this transfer is fair for the employees who should be at the centre of all of these decisions.

One other aspect, too, is that if there are people – and the minister has talked about civilian roles moving over, but of course civilian roles can come from other agencies, including federal agencies, Madam Speaker. If there are RCMP staff, for example, who might be interested in moving to this new Crown agency, the situation of course becomes much more complicated because you're dealing with federal to provincial transitions and different legal frameworks. Successorship should apply, but it doesn't necessarily apply. I'm hopeful that the government has considered that.

In terms of what a responsible and lawful transfer process requires beyond the bare minimum, we should be seeing codified, mandatory consultation with AUPE and all affected employees before, during, and after any transfer decision. There should be transparent criteria for who is transferred, when, and why with the union at that table. There should be voluntary pathways wherever possible, clear options – and this is not clear at all, Madam Speaker – for those who do not wish to move, whether that's severance or notice or remaining with the current employer, consistent with whatever happens to be in the current collective bargaining agreement. There should be binding guarantees of no reduction in

pay or benefits and protection of classification until negotiations have finished with the union.

Again, there should be clarity in terms of that reclassification of roles. If roles become police, acknowledge some of those implications, like a potential right to strike or representation concerns. There should be a detailed training plan, and like my colleagues, I was happy to hear that there is training and that we get . . .

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

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to speak to these bills and speak to Bill 15. I think there are a lot of questions that the government hasn't really answered in regard to this specific piece of legislation but also the five or six bills that have come before this piece of legislation in regard to this very clear direction that the government has chosen to take in regard to policing in the province. I would say that it is a bit confusing for Albertans to understand what is actually going on when they have continuously been asked the question, really: do you want to keep the RCMP, or would you like a provincial police force? They were asked in 2020. The Fair Deal Panel actually went around . . . [interjection]

I appreciate that the minister wants to engage in the conversation, and I think that's fine, but I would appreciate that he could stand up at some point and do that maybe.

4:20

Right now I'm speaking to the fact that in 2020 the UCP went out and they asked Albertans – they did it with their Fair Deal Panel – and they said: “Hey, we have this idea. We're thinking about getting rid of the RCMP. We're going to create our own police. What do you think?” And the response they got back is that Albertans didn't want it. Okay, so that was 2020. Albertans have then been asked a few more times since then and actually as recent as last year the question was put forward to Albertans again. When that poll came out, only 31 per cent of Albertans said that they wanted to replace the RCMP. Only 31 per cent. So I find it really interesting that we are continuing to have this conversation. And what I also find really interesting is that the government actually has stood in this House even today and said: we believe that Albertans should tell us as the government what they want. The Minister of Justice even stood up and said: we're going to create referendum questions. The Premier has said this: “We're going to do a referendum. We're going to do 13 questions. We're going to have a referendum in October, and those referendums are going to be so that Albertans can tell us the direction that we want to take in regard to all of these things.” [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt. It's not you. It's everyone else in this Chamber right now who are having conversations that don't need to be happening in this Chamber.

Perhaps you can leave and have them elsewhere so that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning can have her time on the floor.

Please continue.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Chair. I mean, I appreciate when everybody wants to come in and listen. It's great.

Again, as I was saying, I find it really interesting that we continuously see the government bringing in legislation to create this police force, and they haven't put the question to Albertans and, like, actually have them vote on the question. They'll put a whole bunch of other questions forward, and they will say: well, these are the things and then when those questions are answered, we will act on those questions and we will implement whatever Albertans tell

us they want. Yet in 2020 Albertans said: no, we don't want this. Again, six months ago Albertans came forward and said, “No, we don't want this,” yet the government is going ahead. There's like this really awesome contradiction. [interjections]

When I hear the ministers continuously trying to talk to me, it tells me that I'm right, because it really bugs them and they keep talking.

The reality of it is that the government is actually contradicting themselves because they stand up and they try to do this whole, like: “We're going to let Albertans have their voice. We're going to do referendums, and it's because Albertans need to give us our mandate. Unless it's a question we know they don't want, and then we're just not going to ask that one. We're just going to refuse to engage in that because we know Albertans don't agree with us. Heaven forbid we actually get the mandate that says, ‘No, we want to keep the RCMP,’ so let's just not talk about it. Let's just keep doing it, and eventually it will just be done, and whether or not Albertans wanted it or not doesn't really matter because we've already built the infrastructure and spent millions and millions of dollars doing all of this stuff. And we've messed up the system, very similar to the health care restructuring system, and we're just going to do it.” Or we could wait till the election, right?

The government could wait till the election and say: hey, we're going to run on this. They actually didn't do it in the last election either. They asked the question, and the answer was, “No, Albertans don't want it,” and then they're like, “Well, we just won't talk about it again, and then we'll get re-elected and we'll just do it anyway,” and that's exactly what happened, and here we are.

It's really interesting that this is where we're at. Look, the problem is that not only have they gone ahead and done this but the government hasn't communicated it out. So the very people who are being impacted haven't even been asked: are you interested in this? What we're hearing from the government minister is he's saying that there are people that are interested in it, right? They want to move into a new role. They want to have different experiences. Fine. Okay. But how come the majority of people don't know what this actually means then? If the question is that he's gone out and he's asked, the government's gone out and asked, then how come when we speak to people who are actually working in this field, they don't seem to understand what's happening and they haven't actually been walked through the process? I find that part really interesting.

I would love to see the government come forward and say: look, out of the current employees that we have that are working underneath these classifications, we know this percentage of them want to move into this specialization or want to do this work, but we also know that this part of the population that's working in this area doesn't actually want to and they just want to stay within the role that they currently hold. I would love that information. It would be open, and it would be transparent, and it would also make sure that the conversation that's happening ensures that the workers that are doing the work actually know what their options are.

I think part of the struggle is that – like, one of the arguments the government keeps bringing forward is that we have a lack of RCMP officers in rural Alberta and rural crime is a problem. Fair. Totally fair discussion. Don't disagree. Last year we had the most applicants to the Alberta RCMP than we have had historically in I think the last, like, 10 years. I think there were 3,000 people that applied for 150 jobs or something in Alberta. That's pretty significant. That's a pretty strong indication that people want to work in Alberta, but they also want to be an RCMP officer in Alberta. It doesn't actually answer the question that the minister is saying, which is that we can't recruit and we can't retain people to

be RCMP officers. We had 3,000 applicants last year. They do exist, and they do want to work here.

The opposite of that end of that discussion is that if you start saying that we're no longer going to have the RCMP in Alberta, people who want to continue to be RCMP officers because maybe it makes sense for them, whether they're, like, at the back end of their career and they want to hold on to their pension and they want to look at all of their retirement options and it doesn't make sense to transition to a different agency: they're not going to stay here. Then we're going to have a bigger void because you can't hire up as fast as people can leave. It's easier to leave a job than it is to replace someone who's left.

The issue that hasn't been addressed by the government is this. How are you going to ensure that if these vacancies happen and people decide: "You know what? I'm going to finish my career in my last five years as an RCMP officer in B.C. I want to retire there anyway. I want to go live on the island. I'm going to go try" or maybe go back to, like, some of the prairie provinces or even the east coast because that's where they're from – they may decide that they're going to look at that.

How do we make sure that we have people who are trained and hired up and ready to go in time for all of that transition to happen? We don't have that information, so my fear is that the very issue that the government is trying to solve – governments are very good at trying to solve issues and then creating more problems when they try to solve them – is that they're actually going to create a higher deficit of RCMP officers and/or policing officers while they're in this transition. I think we need a little bit of a guarantee from the government that this isn't actually going to create a bigger deficit and actually create more of a problem than what currently already exists.

Again, I don't think there's any member in this House that doesn't acknowledge that we need to support people in rural Alberta to have access to police services. Like, there's nobody in this Chamber that is disputing that fact. I do think that the comment from my colleague from Edmonton-City Centre was pretty valid, though. The government is using the argument of, "Well, we need to make sure that we improve this and that there's an availability in rural Alberta around policing services, and that's why we have to totally redo this and create chaos without telling anybody what's going on," but the same argument around health care and making sure emergency service is available for health care and that ERs are open in rural Alberta isn't the same urgency or conversation. Again, it goes back to an ideology of: well, we just want to do this, so we're going to do it.

What Albertans are saying and part of the argument is that on the priority list that they currently have right now this is not the one. Their health care is a priority. Education and their children having access to classrooms in rural Alberta is a number one priority. Not having kids on buses for, like, an hour and a half to two hours to get to school in the morning is a priority for parents. Figuring out how they're going to put food on the table is a priority for parents and for people in rural Alberta. Making sure that there are good-paying

jobs in rural Alberta is also a priority. Out of all of those things I've listed, the government has not come forward with a solution to any of them. In fact, I would say that rural jobs in Alberta that had a significant opportunity and potential around green energy, for example – you know, we could have seen a huge boom in that. Opportunity lost. In fact, the government went opposite to that.

4:30

If we want to talk more about rural Alberta, it's about: how do we keep people in rural communities? Policing is a solution to that. Absolutely. So is investing in municipalities in rural communities so they can build communities that people want to stay in and have access to. It's ensuring that kids have access to schools. It's ensuring hospitals are open, and it's also diversifying our economy and making sure that people have opportunities to diversify in the economy. [interjection] I don't want to, so I'm just going to keep talking because it's my time. I think that there are lots of things that this government has chosen to ignore. [interjection] I'm not giving way to the minister.

Again, Madam Speaker, the part that I love about this is that the ministers keep standing up and they're like: please let me speak, Heather, or Member, me. I withdraw my name. [interjections] I withdrew it. They want to speak so badly, and it's because what I'm saying is true and it really bothers them when I say facts. I feel like the government has really missed having the opportunity to speak because they haven't been, which is kind of the status quo when it comes to not wanting to talk about the things that they know Albertans don't like, so they choose to not say anything. Then when I start talking about the things that they know are accurate, they feel this desire to stand up and try to defend themselves.

Again, they could just call the election and Albertans will decide, and away we go. They can defend their record, and that would be awesome. I'm ready, so let's just do that. We'll get this bill out of the way, and we'll have a great election that will have all of the questions that the government really wants to ask Albertans to answer. We'll do it as a general instead of a referendum, and then we'll see what actually happens.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate on Bill 15 in second reading?

Seeing none, I will call the question on Bill 15 as moved by the hon. Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services.

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I move that the Assembly be adjourned until tomorrow, February 26, 2026, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:33 p.m.]

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