



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 31, 2026

Day 41

The Honourable Ric McIver, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

Second Session

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

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Boitchenko, Hon. Andrew, ECA, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
Brar, Gurinder, Calgary-North East (NDP)
Brar, Gurtej Singh, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP)
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Hunter, Hon. Grant R., ECA, Taber-Warner (UC)
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LaGrange, Hon. Adriana, ECA, Red Deer-North (UC)
Loewen, Hon. Todd, ECA, Central Peace-Notley (UC)
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Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
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McDougall, Hon. Myles, ECA, Calgary-Fish Creek (UC)
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Miyashiro, Rob, Lethbridge-West (NDP)
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(UC)
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Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
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Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC),
Deputy Government Whip
Yaseen, Hon. Muhammad, ECA, Calgary-North (UC)

Party standings:

United Conservative: 47

New Democrat: 38

Progressive Tory: 1

Independent: 1

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Myles McDougall	Minister of Advanced Education
Dale Nally	Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction
Nathan Neudorf	Minister of Affordability and Utilities
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Searle Turton	Minister of Children and Family Services
Dan Williams	Minister of Municipal Affairs
Rick Wilson	Minister of Mental Health and Addiction
Muhammad Yaseen	Associate Minister of Multiculturalism

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Shane Getson	Parliamentary Secretary for Economic Corridor Development
Chelsae Petrovic	Parliamentary Secretary for Health Workforce Engagement
Jason Stephan	Parliamentary Secretary for Constitutional Affairs
Ron Wiebe	Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Health (North)
Justin Wright	Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Health (South)
Tany Yao	Parliamentary Secretary for Small Business and Northern Development

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

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Armstrong-Homeniuk
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Ip
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Rowswell
Yao

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 31, 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 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, please keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all. Amen.

Hon. members please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: No school groups today.

Members, sitting in my gallery are families of the red tape reduction minister, Dale Nally. Oops. Shouldn't have said that. I apologize and withdraw.

Sitting in the gallery today are members of the minister of red tape reduction: the minister's fiancée, Jocelyn, and her daughter Amira. I ask that you please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you a wonderful trans advocate by the name of Hestia Drury. Hestia has been in the gallery alone many days, and it's very special to see her here today on the Trans Day of Visibility. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Boitchenko: Mr. Speaker, it is my honour and pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you two wonderful friends of mine, a very talented videographer for our caucus and a special visitor all the way from the beautiful country of Mexico. I would like to ask Alexa and Emiliano Mondragon to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Ms Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, I have two introductions today. To you and through you to all members of the Assembly, I have the great honour of introducing Donna Hamar. Donna devoted her career to serving vulnerable families in Alberta's ministry of children's services. Donna was my manager when I, too, served those same families. She was my mentor and a registered social worker par excellence. Donna, please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The Associate Minister of Multiculturalism.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to rise to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly Noreen Khan, Zergoona Mahmood, and Razia Butt from Pakistani Proud Women Association. Their amazing volunteer work focuses on capacity building, language services, and leadership. They are uplifting women and families across communities and supporting newcomers. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second introduction is also an amazing woman. Erica Bullwinkle has dedicated her life

to creating social justice in this province. She has led several successful campaigns to elect progressive women. I'm deeply grateful that she took me under her wing many years ago, and I have had the honour to represent the constituents of Edmonton-Riverview since 2015. Erica, please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you extraordinary volunteer and trans advocate Laura Penner, who will be accompanying many at the Trans Day of Visibility rally later. Please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly, Laura.

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you a group of incredible individuals representing Team Alberta Crops: Connie Phillips, Beverley Wieben, Kelly Chambers, Luke Lindholm, Gwen Young. On behalf of myself and all of my colleagues on this side of the House we'd like to thank them for what they do in supporting our farmers and ranchers. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my brother Kevin Bender, who's here from Sylvan Lake, Alberta. Please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. minister of education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to rise to introduce to the Assembly Mike McMann, president of the college of Alberta superintendents. Mike, thank you for being here. I ask him to stand and be recognized.

The Speaker: Are there more introductions? The hon. minister of red tape reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask members of the Alberta whisky industry as well as Alberta Grains – they are job creators; they're entrepreneurs; many of them are also my friends – to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

Members' Statements

Government Accountability

Ms Ganley: With great power comes great responsibility, or at least it should; not so much with the UCP. They love to tell us how they hold all the power, to wield it, to flaunt it, to use it to get more, to take fancy private jets from their friends, or rewrite the laws for them. But when it comes to responsibility, they're nowhere to be found. ER wait times dangerously high: nothing to do with them. Classrooms bursting at the seams: must be someone else's fault. Ask a UCP member, you would swear that the province has no jurisdiction at all over health care or education. Couldn't possibly be their area. Every day Albertans are struggling to pay rent, to buy groceries, but the UCP can't help. It's not their responsibility. Suddenly you'd swear they have no power at all until, of course, their friends come knocking. They couldn't possibly do anything to help Albertans with their shrinking groceries or growing prices, but they can rewrite the law three times to help their separatist friends get a referendum.

Responsibility, the proper exercise of power, is hard. It means rolling up your sleeves, not yelling at someone else, not blaming any and every convenient target. Real work. The UCP are not so into that kind of power. But they have plenty of power when it comes to picking on someone else. With a stroke of their mighty pen, they take away rights from teachers, from workers, from trans kids, from girls. There's plenty of power when it comes to changing the rules so that they can take private jets or receive golden cats. But when it comes to what Albertans want, suddenly nothing at all.

What the UCP forget is that that power was never really theirs. They borrow it from the people that they are supposed to serve. Every day more and more of those people are thinking that maybe it's time to take that power back.

The Speaker: The Member for Camrose.

Bill 22

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday our government took an important step forward in strengthening animal welfare across Alberta with the introduction of Bill 22, the Animal Protection Amendment Act, 2026. This marks the first comprehensive update to the legislation in more than 20 years, modernizing it to reflect today's expectations and ensuring that Alberta remains a leader in protecting animals from harm. If passed, the proposal will update outdated language and definitions, improve clarity, and provide peace officers with stronger tools to respond quickly and effectively when animals are in distress. These changes are about making sure enforcement time is consistent and focuses on preventing harm before it escalates. If passed, inspection authorities will be modernized and expanded to include businesses serving the public, like boarding and grooming facilities.

This legislation also takes a firm stance against those who mistreat animals on a repeated basis. Alberta is positioning itself as a national leader in addressing repeat offences by improving how and when court orders are issued and enforced. Importantly, these changes would make Alberta the first province in Canada to enable the enforcement of animal protection orders issued in other provinces, helping ensure that serious offenders cannot move here and continue harmful behaviour without consequences.

1:40

In addition, the proposed amendments would significantly increase the maximum fines for those convicted of animal abuse, increasing maximum penalties from \$20,000 to \$250,000 as well as introducing potential jail terms for up to 12 months for serious offences. These stronger penalties send a clear message. Animal cruelty will not be tolerated in Alberta, and those who commit these acts will face meaningful consequences.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans expect strong protections for animals and accountability for those who cause harm. This proposed legislation delivers on both by modernizing the act, strengthening enforcement, and cracking down on repeat offenders.

Lethbridge Fire and Emergency Services

Member Miyashiro: If you own a home in Alberta, you've likely received your property assessment. That assessment helps municipalities calculate property taxes once their budgets are passed. Unlike other levels of government, municipalities cannot run deficits. They must raise enough revenue, largely through property taxes, to fund essential services residents rely on every day.

In communities like Lethbridge, one of seven in Alberta with integrated fire and ambulance services, about one-third of municipal budgets are spent on police, fire, and emergency services. These aren't optional services. Not one of us would want to go a single day

without them. For more than a century Lethbridge fire and emergency services have delivered outstanding care through an integrated model where firefighters are also trained as paramedics.

That model is now under threat. On March 13 the MLA for Lethbridge-East and I received notice from Alberta emergency health services that the province intends to renegotiate Lethbridge's ambulance contracts. In addition to the other municipalities, the seven of us were told that unless they absorb additional costs, the province may move to a private contractor, and they only have a few weeks to decide what they want to do. For Lethbridge and its residents this uncertainty creates budget instability, increases the risk of higher property taxes, and puts a proven life-saving system at risk.

Our integrated model is a strength. When you call 911 in Lethbridge, trained paramedics respond, whether in an ambulance or a fire truck. Even when ambulances are fully deployed, care still arrives. In communities without this model red alerts happen, where no ambulance is available at all. Emergency medical care is not a bargain-bin service. No one calls 911 asking for the cheapest option or longer wait times. The provincial government created this situation, and Albertans need to speak up.

Police Funding

Mr. Cyr: Mr. Speaker, last week the Member for Edmonton-City Centre introduced Motion 508, or as the record will clearly show, the defund-the-police motion. This motion was a dangerous road map to emptying police cars across rural Alberta. It calls for the government to strip resources from law enforcement and to force social workers into roles they aren't trained for. In fact, the motion calls for 80 per cent of the funding to go to our major urban centres, leaving the rest of the province behind. Absolutely disgraceful. This is the same reckless big-city-first agenda that we've seen from the NDP before, prioritizing ideology over safety and headlines over real solutions.

Mr. Speaker, forcing social workers to do law enforcement is not just wrong, it's deadly. Defunding the police may be gospel for elite left-wing activists the NDP love to pander to but not so much for the rest of Alberta. It is certainly not popular with the good folks in Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul. Due to the Liberal-NDP bail changes, crime has become a rising problem throughout Canada. Front-line officers need our support, Mr. Speaker, not the NDP that continues to downplay the problem and push policies that will make their jobs even harder.

We invest in public safety with the creation of an Alberta Sheriffs Police Service to augment and support all law enforcement. This means more boots on the ground to keep communities safer. This defund-the-police motion was reckless and out of touch, yet in this Chamber the NDP voted unanimously to defund the police while the UCP voted it down, Mr. Speaker.

Let's stop playing games. Being soft on crime means being hard on victims. We will not defund the police. We will not pit Albertans against each other, and we will always back the men and women in blue.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Government Policies

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To call this UCP government entitled is, frankly, an understatement. Since this Premier was elected, she's done a complete 180 on everything she's told Albertans she'd do. Her public health guarantee: it's not worth the paper it's written on. Instead, Albertans are being force-fed for-profit, American-style health

care while their hard-earned taxpayers' dollars are being used to line the pockets of the Premier's friend Sam Mraiche.

Affordability: this UCP government just hammered homeowners across Calgary with a tax hike of more than \$340, all to help pay for the massive \$9.4 billion deficit budget that does absolutely nothing to help Albertans afford record-high gas and grocery prices.

This government has clearly shown Albertans that what it will run on and what it'll do are two very different things. It's beyond entitled, Mr. Speaker. This UCP government is teeing up a vote on an economically destructive separatist agenda this fall that no one – not one member of this House, not the Premier, not even the Member for Red Deer-South – has a mandate to hold but that is set to divide neighbourhoods and tear apart communities in this province. At least the separatists in Quebec – the separatists in Quebec – are honest to their voters and what they stand for. Not these guys. None of them ran on this, but here they are talking down our country as they encourage the breakup of this great nation.

Just last fall, when thousands of teachers took to the streets to protest seven years of UCP failures in education, this Premier was in Saudi Arabia living the life of luxury hotels and private jets on a Saudi prince's dime instead of getting teachers a fair deal. When Albertans send this Premier packing, I wonder if she'll miss the pricey red carpets that she billed them for, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Stephen Lewis

Mr. Nenshi: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the passing of one of the greatest Canadians. Stephen Lewis was a towering figure in Canadian public life, not just a giant in the New Democratic movement. His commitment to justice and human dignity spanned generations, shaped generations, and I've been inspired by him my whole life.

His resumé is long, and it barely requires repeating. He served as a member of the provincial Parliament in Ontario for 15 years, notably as Leader of the Official Opposition. He was then appointed by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to be Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, a role in which he served with great distinction, notably leading the fight against apartheid.

For me, though, his greatest accomplishment was the years he spent as the United Nations special envoy for HIV and AIDS. He spoke plainly. He spoke honestly. He spoke about real people. In so doing he stripped the stigma from that disease, and it is no exaggeration to say that he saved millions of lives. All of us in public service can only aspire to that level of service.

Now, my deputy leader will tell you that listening to Stephen Lewis once changed the course of her life, and she is certainly not alone. He is one of the greatest orators Canada has ever seen, and his words forever live in the hearts and minds of all of us.

Celebrating his life, celebrating his achievements and his contributions is easy, but grieving him is hard. I've heard in the last few days that Stephen Lewis's final wish was to see his own son take his next step in his own leadership journey, and he was able to do that. Our thoughts and our prayers are with his wife and his partner in everything, Michele Landsberg, his sister Janet, his daughters Ilana and Jenny, and, of course, with Avi, who I know is inspired by his dad every single day. Stephen Lewis was the best of us.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of Bill 26, Immigration Oversight Act, sponsored by the Minister of

Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration, and Bill 27, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2026, sponsored by the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Electoral Boundaries

Mr. Nenshi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The independent Electoral Boundaries Commission's work is in, and thank you so much to the thousands of Albertans who took the time to give their opinions. Now, both the Premier and the Minister of Justice in the past have said that they would respect the independence of the commission and they would accept its results, but yesterday the Justice minister said something different. He didn't commit to accepting the recommendations. In fact, he said that, quote, all options are on the table, unquote. Can the Premier commit that all options are not, in fact, on the table and she's not about to commit Trump-style gerrymandering?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We would also like to thank all of the Albertans and many members of this Assembly who contributed their thoughts and time and submissions to the process. We have received the report, and of course it's the Members of the Legislative Assembly who are going to need time to review it and its findings and recommendations. We also thank the Electoral Boundaries Commission for its work. We're making sure that we go through it, and we'll look forward to seeing what Members of the Legislative Assembly have to say about it.

Mr. Nenshi: To be clear, Mr. Speaker, there is one recommendation from the Electoral Boundaries Commission. It is the recommendation of the commission. The UCP-appointed members, having supported that recommendation, did a stunning about-face and, for the first time in Alberta history, issued a different report with different maps. This is obviously the result of political pressure from somewhere. Can the Premier do two things today: one, commit to accepting, at least putting before this House, the results; and two, admit that she did not have any influence on her commissioners?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, it's an independent process, and I did not have any influence on the commissioners. I think this is an issue for the Members of the Legislative Assembly to decide. This is not a decision for me. It's not a decision for government. It's going to be a decision for the hon. members in this Chamber.

Mr. Nenshi: That's an interesting way of putting it.

The Premier often says that the government can do whatever they want, but the Attorney General said in this House multiple times that, quote, the government does not draw electoral boundaries. That's right, that is correct, and that is the way Canadian democracy works. Yet this government appears to be so scared that they can only win the next election by cheating. This is precisely what the Premier's boss President Trump is trying to do in the United States, and no surprise they're trying it here, too. Can the Premier just clear the air and say that she will not gerrymander and she'll put those recommendations . . .

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: The recommendations will be put before the Legislative Assembly, and it's Members of the Legislative Assembly who will make the decision, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The second set of questions belongs to the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Nenshi: The Premier has just admitted that she wants the government to draw the maps. We'll have to see you in court if that's what happens, Mr. Speaker.

Alberta Separatism and Government Caucus

Mr. Nenshi: Yesterday the Minister of Municipal Affairs said something that no member of this caucus has been able to say in years. He said that he was a "proud Canadian" and he believed in a "united Canada," without the word salad and without the equivocation. Yet right behind him sits a member, the Premier's point man on constitutional affairs, who came out this weekend as a full-throated separatist. We know the Premier never likes dissent, so is she going to kick out the Member for Red Deer-South or kick out her minister?

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Private members have their own personal opinions. There's a whole range of personal opinions in the members opposite. I think the Leader of the Opposition understands that. What is different is the position of government and the position of our caucus. The position of government is that we support a strong Alberta within a united Canada. That means yes, Alberta stays a province, and we continue to work to ensure that our areas of jurisdiction are respected, like we just were able to announce today that our minister of agriculture has managed to secure strychnine for use on farmers' fields to make sure that our farmers' right to grow is protected.

Mr. Nenshi: Well, there's no diversity in opinion on this side of the House about an issue as important as the future of the country. We are all proud Canadians.

In his op-ed on the weekend the Member for Red Deer-South encouraged everyone to sign the petition. The Premier has continually changed her story here, from "None of my members signed the petition" to "I don't know if they signed the petition" to "I don't care if they signed the petition" to "Uh, we have a diversity of opinions." Did she ask the Member for Red Deer-South if he signed the petition, and how many other members of her caucus have?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the public wants to know what the government's position is. The government's position is that we are going to continue to respect the Constitution within a united Canada and ensure that our exclusive jurisdiction on a whole range of areas is protected. That's part of the reason why we have negotiated an MOU with the federal government in order to return our right to manage our own resources, why we are putting questions about immigration to the people in the fall, why we negotiated the strychnine deal, why we're going to continue to oppose the gun grab. These are the ways in which we demonstrate that we are going to pursue our independence within a united Canada.

Mr. Nenshi: The Premier is telling on herself again, Mr. Speaker. She needs to remember that she is not personally and solely the government. They are all the government, and Albertans deserve to have a government that governs on what they ran on. Not one of them ran as being a separatist, and none of them will tell their colleagues whether or not they're separatists, except for the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, who told Indigenous leaders he was a separatist, and the Member for Red Deer-South, who told people in an op-ed that he's a separatist. If the Premier's

not going to kick out the separatists, is she going to kick out the proud Canadians from her caucus?

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One more time, we passed legislation, my very first bill. It was the Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act, and it talked about the ways in which we were going to get the federal government to honour and respect the role of the provinces. That member opposite has done nothing. He's not picked up a phone to either talk to the Prime Minister or talk to the leaders of the NDP Party to try to support where we're going, which is to respect provincial jurisdiction. He could have an influence. He could, but he chooses not to. We are going to fight to make sure that Alberta is respected every single day.

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

Mr. Nenshi: I mean, I know the Premier really wants me to be the Premier, but she's using what powers she does have to try and divide and break down Canada, even within her own caucus.

Citizen-initiated Referendums

Mr. Nenshi: Every single day this government proves its disdain for democracy. One day the Premier is Captain Canada, performatively in her hockey jersey; the next she's pandering to separatists to save her own political skin. Now, on the weekend she said that if the separatist referendum proceeds and succeeds, she will not count the other referenda on the ballot. What a bizarre thing to say about direct democracy. Can she clarify what . . .

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, not true. What I said was that we are going to have separate ballots for each of the questions that we put forward as well as any of the ones that get affirmed by citizens' initiative and that the citizens' initiative questions will be counted first. That's what I said, and that's one of the policies that is coming forward because those, we believe, the ones that are advanced by citizens, are probably the ones that people are the most interested in seeing counted first. All of the votes will be counted, but you have to determine the order, and that was the order which our caucus and cabinet agreed to.

Mr. Nenshi: That's a helpful clarification. Perhaps she needs to go back on the podcast and clarify it because she very clearly said this weekend that those will be counted first and she will direct Elections Alberta not to count the others because they're moot.

Now the Premier's separatist supporters, of course, are doing an early victory dance because they think they've hit their target. Of course, the only reason they hit their target is because this government and this Premier lowered the target. Even her own parliamentary secretary for constitutional affairs called on Albertans to sign the petition. Is this the outcome the Premier always wanted, to let her separatist government tear down this country?

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know the members opposite don't trust Albertans. We know the members opposite don't believe in citizen-initiated referenda. We do on this side. There was legislation that has been at the municipal level for decades. There was legislation that was put forward before I came here. We looked at different models for how a citizen initiative takes place in different

jurisdictions. We have a higher bar than in California, where most of the propositions have gone forward. That's all that it was, making sure that we had a fair bar so that it was difficult to get the number of signatures but that it was a reasonable bar so it was attainable.

Mr. Nenshi: Well, there are certainly a few Albertans that I don't trust, and they sit on the government benches, because they run for one thing and they govern as something else entirely.

Now, the Premier has been planning for the success of her separatist friends while ignoring the proud Canadians who signed the Forever Canadian petition. She's willing to throw away her own precious referenda if the separatists succeed. This shows this entire thing is a charade. This entire thing is a performative fake, and it has been from the beginning. But this isn't fun and games. This has real complications on the economy and on people's lives. Is this what the Premier always wanted, or is she making it up as she goes?

2:00

The Speaker: Just a reminder that we need to stop when our 35 seconds are up.

Ms Smith: Well, speaking of making things up, I have already said very clearly that our nine questions will go ahead. The two questions that are in the process of getting citizens' initiative will also go ahead and be counted first if they are successful.

The committee is going to deal with the forever Canada question because the proponent seems to be changing his mind on whether he wants to go to a referendum or not on it. That's the reason, Mr. Speaker, why we struck the committee. They'll be starting their meetings on April 21. We look forward to hearing from them.

At the end of the day, these are decisions for Albertans to make, and we trust Albertans to make the right decisions.

Citizen-initiated Petition Requirements

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, word is that those pushing for a separation referendum may have reached the required number of signatures. Now, that's a lower number of signatures than the pro-Canada folks reached on their petition last summer, a petition the separatist UCP continues to ignore. The separatists needed a lower number of signatures because the Premier and her UCP government changed the rules in the separatists' favour. Will the Premier explain to Albertans why she's delayed action on the forever Canada petition while she changed the rules in favour of the separatists?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and keeper of the Great Seal.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think the Premier just answered that question.

The reality is that citizen initiatives are intended to be permissive. They're intended to be processes that allow citizens to engage in public discourse, public debate, and put important questions to the public. I'm not sure why the NDP members dislike direct democracy so much. What we've said every single time is that if a process, if an initiative meets the eligibility criteria and is properly vetted, Albertans will get to have their way on it.

Ms Gray: This government only believes in direct democracy when it suits their own views, and we see that in their actions. The separatist petition only hit their required number after the UCP Member for Red Deer-South asked Albertans to sign it. That's right. A member of the UCP government caucus is openly advocating for a damaging separation referendum, and the Premier has done nothing to punish that member. She and her team changed

the rules to help separatists. Why does this UCP Premier continue to allow separatists to sit in her caucus? Why does she aid their efforts? And does she understand that Albertans are seeing this as anti-Canadian?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, we are proud Canadians on this side of the House. The government's position is abundantly clear, that we love our country, we love our province, and we are proud Canadians. I hope members opposite are also proud Albertans. They have a track record of opposing Alberta every step of the way when they were in government. We on this side of the House believe in our province and our country together. The truth is that if you look at what the members opposite have done with their time, they took every chance they could to degrade the institutions and symbols of our country, and now they're trying to wrap themselves in the Canadian flag for political convenience.

The Speaker: A point of order was noted at 2:03.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, a real patriot wouldn't sit in a caucus with separatists working to remove Alberta from Canada. The Premier said, quote, let it play out by citizens and not participate in the process. End quote. But then she changed the rules in the middle of the game. The forever Canada team had already won, so the Premier ignored forever Canada. Then she changed the rules in favour of the separatists, and she let her separatist UCP members interfere despite the quote I started with. Will the Premier admit that she and her team have interfered in this process repeatedly? The UCP are clearly working towards separating Alberta from Canada.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, members opposite haven't just spent their time elected but a lifetime of degrading this country. They see no flags when it comes to the election of their new leader in Winnipeg. They see six months at length of keeping the flag down with them and their allies across this country. They continue to attack our country every chance they get, culturally and historically. We on this side of the House defend our country.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:04.

Physician Services Agreement

Ms Hoffman: The UCP would rather Americanize our health care system than get Albertans the right care in the right place at the right time, and as a result, too many Albertans are facing huge delays in their cancer surgeries. Yet today the UCP is risking even longer delays for these surgeries because hospitalists may withdraw their services tomorrow. Those doctors feel disrespected by this government's contract offer that reduces their pay to rates that are 25 years old. What does the minister have to say to patients worried that their cancer surgeries won't proceed in time?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of hospitals.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In actual fact, we're doing record numbers of cancer surgeries, and we're making record investments to Cancer Care Alberta to do even more in the years to come. As of April 1 there will be a change in how hospitalists are compensated. Today they make \$550,000 to \$750,000 through fee for service. As of April 1 they can continue on fee for service with POCP payments, or they can go to a clinical ARP with an after-hours modifier of \$600,000-plus. It's competitive across Canada, it's fair, and we expect the vast majority to take one of the two avenues.

Ms Hoffman: Given that I've been told that a deal last fall with other health care workers was reached hours before the strike started, but negotiators had to wait until the Premier woke up and agreed to it personally, given that this meant patient surgeries were cancelled that day, and given that doctors who were preparing to walk off the job right now – I've been trying to meet with the minister for over a month, but he's refused – will the Premier turn her ringer on this time, or is she okay telling patients and doctors to wait to see if they have their surgeries postponed until she's ready to wake up?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of hospitals.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Only a fraction of physicians currently earn stipends, which they've known were ending as of April 1 for some time: 700 of 13,000. These are not equitable payments, they're not transparent, and there's reasonable alternative compensation available as of April 1 through very strong clinical ARPs and fee for service. There's only 280 hospitalists in Edmonton that receive stipends. We've received only 14 formal notifications of some change in service delivery, and of course we'll manage those through associate physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, or alternative physicians.

Ms Hoffman: Given that the minister just said that he's fine with 280 doctors walking off the job this morning – that is ridiculous, Mr. Speaker. Those are patients that need their care in our hospitals. That is completely irresponsible. And given that we've just learned that surgeries at the Misericordia are being cancelled for tomorrow as well, that there's going to be more chaos because people won't be able to get their scheduled surgeries or emergency surgeries. Right now if you break your hip in west Edmonton – God forbid if that happened to anyone on that side of the House – you get brought to the Misericordia hospital for your surgery. Tomorrow there's going to be chaos, Mr. Speaker. Why won't the minister admit it, and why won't he do something to stop it?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we are doing record surgeries as well, including orthopaedic surgeries, and we're going to make sure that we fully utilize the OR time doing other orthopaedic surgeries or even cancer surgeries, urology, or spine. We have plans in place, as we do whenever there's any type of service disruption or medical practitioner not available, and we'll continue to do that to make sure Albertans do receive their procedure as quickly as possible, recognizing that it does have impacts on their lives.

The Speaker: The next question belongs to the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Bill 23

Mr. Wiebe: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans expect accountability from their government for those who are paid with public dollars. Transparency and compensation reporting is essential to maintaining that trust as public expectations for accountability continue to grow. The Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2026, lowers the disclosure threshold and strengthens public confidence in how taxpayer funds are used. To the Minister of Justice: how will this change, enhance transparency while ensuring consistent, accessible reporting across all publicly funded organizations?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member. Through Bill 23 we are taking important steps to improve transparency and accountability in public-sector salary disclosures. It's why Bill 23 will lower the threshold to \$130,000. This was a recommendation made by the Standing Committee on Families and Communities. We listened and we acted. Bill 23 will create the transparency that Albertans deserve.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that answer. Given that Albertans expect our democracy to be transparent, accountable, and accessible and that it is vital that these processes operate with integrity and given that the recall and citizen initiatives framework gives Albertans a direct voice in shaping their government, can the Minister of Justice explain how the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2026, improves the fairness and accountability of these democratic tools?

The Speaker: The Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. Fairness and accountability are at the forefront of Bill 23. I'm proud of the work that we've been doing to help create an environment for transparency in our election rules. The legislation improves the integrity of our democratic processes by allowing scrutineers to come in and oversee the process so that the interested parties have somebody overseeing it and can report and provide information about how that is going. These measures will of course create greater oversight, accountability, and ultimately public confidence, and that's what Bill 23 is all about.

2:10

The Speaker: Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the minister for that answer. Given that emerging technologies such as deepfakes pose growing risks to the integrity of elections by creating realistic but entirely fabricated depictions of candidates and given that these manipulations can mislead voters and undermine trust in our democratic system, can the same minister tell the House why prohibiting deepfakes may make Alberta elections more fair and truthful and worthy of public confidence?

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, Bill 23 protects the fairness and integrity of our elections by prohibiting the creation and distribution of deepfakes. Deepfakes are becoming increasingly realistic, and without appropriate safeguards they pose a real threat to public trust. We don't want anybody to create content that will mislead Albertans. Even the federal government has taken proactive steps to introduce a bill to ban deepfakes when it comes to elections and electoral candidates. By addressing this challenge now, Alberta will take a very proactive step in creating elections that are fair and honest.

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

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. An independent and impartial judiciary is the hallmark of a strong, functioning democracy, yet the UCP and Premier have repeatedly attacked the judiciary, labelling judges as unelected and activists while also expressing a desire to be able to direct them. The Premier has even threatened to withhold judicial funds until her demands are met. Does the Minister of Justice not recognize such threats constitute direct interference in judicial autonomy and undermine independence of the judiciary?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We absolutely respect the independence of the judiciary. At all levels, both at the federal level and at the provincial level, judicial candidates are vetted by independent committees. The Premier has been working hard to advocate for Alberta, and in that advocacy she's been asking for more input, more co-operation, and more collaboration in the federal judicial selection process. As I've said before time and again, we have a great line of sight on what is happening in this province. We'd like to contribute a little bit more.

Mr. Sabir: Given the Premier wants judicial decision-making to reflect "values and expectations of Albertans" and given the Premier also wants to be able to direct judges and judges' decisions to "appropriately reflect Alberta's distinct legal traditions," to the Minister of Justice: is it the government's position that sitting judges in Alberta lack the qualifications to hold judicial office, and will he be kind to name one distinct legal tradition he expects to be reflected in their decision-making? Just one.

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Nothing that member said was accurate. The quality of the judiciary here in this province is beyond reproach. We respect the men and women who are working day in and day out in our judiciary and doing a remarkable job. The member misunderstood the process that we're looking for. We're looking for greater oversight . . .

Ms Gray: Point of order.

Mr. Amery: . . . and we're looking for greater co-operation and greater co-operation with our federal counterparts. That is something that many provinces in this country are looking for as well. Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Quebec see it our way as well.

The Speaker: A point of order was noted at 2:13. [interjection] I wasn't looking for help right now.

Mr. Sabir: Given that Alberta's court system is already under-resourced and grappling with delays and Jordan delays and given that threatening to withhold judicial funds would only worsen the situation and given that yesterday the Justice minister reiterated at a news conference that withholding judicial funds is not off the table, to the minister: what will it take for this government to stop this nonsense and stop using judicial funding and judicial autonomy as pawns in its grievance politics?

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, here are the facts. We have no vacancies at the Court of Appeal. We have one vacancy at the Court of King's Bench. That is a fully funded position as well. They could never boast that record. We were able to take the proper steps and work with our federal counterparts to make sure that the Court of King's Bench and the Court of Appeal were fully staffed with a wonderful complement of judges. They talk about Jordan delays. Look at their record when it comes to Jordan delays and compare it to ours. I'll put that record up against that member's any day of the week.

Seniors' Benefit Eligibility

Ms Sigurdson: The 2026 budget does something the UCP declares it is not doing. It cuts services to seniors. During an affordability crisis seniors are being kicked off government programs at a time when these are needed more than ever. It is insulting, cruel, and devastating to seniors, who deserve to be treated with respect and

dignity. This is made worse by the UCP's budget message, saying that they're focused on what matters. Do seniors not matter to the UCP? Why is the minister cutting access to programs by decreasing the income threshold during an affordability crisis?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I think the NDP should take the Finance minister up on his offer to do a lesson on how to read a budget because nothing could be further from the truth. There are no cuts to senior benefits. In fact, senior benefits are increasing by millions of dollars. The senior benefit alone we will spend \$553 million on. That's about \$13 million more than the year previous. We're spending \$6.6 billion on seniors across all of our programs, and the department of social services has seen a billion-dollar increase in our budget because we are investing in where it matters with this budget. I hope the NDP learn.

Ms Sigurdson: Given the Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services was asked in estimates if this 9 per cent cut to the eligibility criteria would affect services regarding seniors' supplementary benefits and given she stated, "It does not affect any of the services that are provided under the seniors' drug and supplementary benefits," and given that, in contrast, my constituency staff were told that the decreased threshold applies to eligibility for these benefits, will the minister please clarify whether there are changes to access of these programs? The well-being of thousands of seniors depends on this.

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, there are no changes to the senior programs that the hon. member just referred to. Our senior benefit remains the same. What is changing is the threshold, but we remain the highest threshold in the country by a country mile, something that this government is committed to and at the same time is going to continue to be able to increase expenses in the areas where we need to be able to help our fast aging rates; for example, the largest continuing care capital investment in the history of the province. [interjections]

The Speaker: Okay. I like to hear people having fun, but maybe you could have some of the fun in the rooms in the back.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that at a time of record resource revenue the UCP has created a \$9.4 billion deficit and given the UCP declares it is focused on what matters and given the Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services is at best unclear about her own ministry's policy or at worst is purposefully confusing seniors and given that robust public programs that support vulnerable seniors during an affordability crisis are needed more than ever, why is the minister continuing with these cruel policies? When will he reverse them?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, I've said this before. One of the problems when you can only ask questions with notes is that you can't change your question based on already receiving an answer. The budget does not cut these programs. In fact, we're increasing investment in these programs. This budget does not cut the benefit amount in these programs. In fact, we've been increasing in most of these programs.

One of the reasons why we saw major challenges with affordability in this country and in this province is because of the NDP and their Liberal partners in Ottawa, Mr. Speaker, and, frankly, the Leader of the Opposition, who hurt more fixed-income seniors than anybody else by raising taxes 81 per cent when he was the mayor. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Road Construction in Lesser Slave Lake

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, given I'm no poet and I know it and I don't use \$5 words and given that I believe it was Aristotle or Socrates who

once said that there's no cause more noble in a democracy than thy acknowledgement that highway 88 is the most profitable and dangerous road in the province, maybe even the world, further given this is probably the 88th time I've asked this question, to the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors: can you please provide an update on the progress of highway 88?

2:20

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

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. I think Aristotle would agree with both of us that highway 88 is a very important road and it does need a lot of improvements. That's why I was happy to see that ISL Engineering was actually hired last year. Through the advocacy work of that member himself we actually worked on not just paving highway 88 and narrowing it but actually taking the time to widen it. There are three different sections of that highway that are well under way. Engineering is being done, and early construction work already started just last year.

Mr. Sinclair: Given I am not a road scholar; however, it might be fair to call me a highway apprentice or a pavement padawan by the time I'm done this job and given that completing the east-west connection between Fort Mac and Slave Lake would create a direct northern corridor with highway 686, further given highway 686 will become one of the busiest corridors in northern Alberta, to which I am grateful to this minister and government for this massive investment in the north, can the same minister provide an update or timelines on the highway 686 project?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we do have a Jedi on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, the JETI minister of jobs, economy, and trade, if he wants to be a padawan.

Highway 686, the more important part of this question, Mr. Speaker, is a very important project. There are 215 kilometres of a brand new road that would go from Fort McMurray all the way to Peerless Lake, essentially having an economic corridor connecting Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray. It's a great project. The First Nations along that corridor are supportive of it, and I'm very happy to see construction finally start in northern Alberta on this very important project.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Smith Bridge is a long-overdue piece of infrastructure built originally for World War II and is way past its expiration date and given I'm proud to support this budget and look forward to providing information to the constituents of Lesser Slave Lake on this project, could the minister please provide the people of Smith, the MD of Lesser Slave River, and our entire region any news on the Smith Bridge?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of transportation.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member is right. In 1945 the Smith Bridge was built, and it is in need of repair. That's why I'm happy to see that in Budget '26 there's \$67 million that is committed to build Smith Bridge. Not just the communities on the south side but the oil and gas facilities on the north are very important, and that's why we have to have this bridge being built. Engineering and design work is under way, and we're

hoping to see early work of the construction of the Smith Bridge happen this year.

Alberta Separatism and Government Caucus (continued)

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, the Member for Red Deer-South's separatist views are now out in the open. In response the Premier says that she welcomes diverse opinions from caucus members, yet this is clearly selective. She removed the Member for Lesser Slave Lake from caucus for standing up for his constituents on the budget. She removed the Member for Airdrie-Cochrane for calling out government corruption. To the Premier: why the double standard? Will she remove the Member for Red Deer-South from caucus? If not, why not?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, we are incredibly proud Canadians on this side of the House. We love our home. We love our province. We love our country. We are proud Canadians. To answer the member's question in particular, if any member votes against government in a budget, in a money matter, they're not to be kept in that caucus. That is a principle of the parliamentary Westminster system across the western world, hence why the member opposite is also not a member of our caucus, because he continues to vote against the budget, happily so. He can do that while we continue to govern on this side of the House.

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, given that in a parliamentary system the Premier wields enormous power to enforce caucus discipline, especially with her hand-picked parliamentary secretaries, and given that it is hard to believe the pro-separatist overtures from the Member for Red Deer-South this week weren't in part orchestrated from her office and with her consent, will the Premier admit that this is all a calculated appeal to the separatist party and separatist base the Premier needs to grasp onto power?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, we have said it dozens if not hundreds of times in this House. The Premier believes in a united Canada and a strong and sovereign Alberta within that. We believe that Alberta plays an important part in this country's Confederation, and Canada does not work unless it has partners across every different jurisdiction, every territory and province, that assert their constitutional rights and at the same time defend all Canada's interests. We love our home. We love our country on this side of the House, and that is why we are proud to be Canadians.

Mr. Ip: Given that all the bluster of this government cannot change the fact that the separatist views of the Premier's hand-picked parliamentary secretary are obviously very welcome in the UCP caucus and further given that the government is tweaking the rules once again about citizen-led initiatives, the same ones they've already changed just months ago to make the destruction of our country easier, why is the Premier making it easier for separatists and only the separatists to bring their referendum forward?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly the problem that every Albertan sees through the NDP and their patriotism of convenience. It's just bluster, according to the member opposite, to say that you love your home and you love your country. We deeply love our country. We continue to support it. We do not think that the flag should be lowered for six months nonstop while the members opposite continue to support the degradation of the institutions, symbols, and icons that are our country. This is not a patriotism of convenience or fair-weather friendship. This is a deep love of country, and it continues day in, day out, good weather or poor.

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

Mental Health Services for Men

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Men's Sheds are community-based initiatives operating across Alberta that bring men together to foster social connection, peer support, and meaningful engagement in a safe and welcoming environment. These programs help reduce social isolation and support men's mental health and well-being by encouraging connection, purpose, and early intervention outside of clinical settings. To the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction: how is the government supporting community-based initiatives like Men's Sheds that promote men's mental health, social connection, and overall well-being?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Mental Health and Addiction.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Community organizations play an important role in supporting mental health and are often the very first place for people to turn for help. Our ministry invests in a wide range of recovery-oriented programs delivered by trusted community organizations, helping Albertans access support early before challenges escalate. This includes funding for Counselling Alberta, which works with a strong network of partners to enhance front-line capacity and serve individuals and families. Counselling Alberta provides affordable counselling with no wait-list.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that Men's Sheds provide community-based spaces where men connect, reduce isolation, and support their mental health through peer connection and purposeful activity and given that organizations such as FearIsNotLove also offer important counselling and prevention supports, to the same minister: what supports is the ministry providing to strengthen Men's Sheds and similar community-based initiatives that support prevention and early mental health intervention across Alberta?

Mr. Wilson: Thank you again for the question. Alberta is lucky to have amazing community organizations delivering mental health and addiction care to people who need it. We're proud to support them as we work together to support all Albertans to be healthy and well. Budget 2026 is Mental Health and Addiction's largest budget to date, and this includes funding for community-based programs and services. Supporting mental wellness for Albertans continues to be a top priority under the Alberta recovery model.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that Men's Sheds support early intervention by fostering social connections, purpose, and peer support for men, contributing to improve mental well-being and reduce isolation, and given that community-based nonclinical supports play an important role in preventing mental health challenges from escalating, to the same minister: how is the ministry working to expand access to Men's Sheds and similar preventative supports so more Albertans can benefit from these community-based mental health initiatives?

Mr. Wilson: Mr. Speaker, our focus is on making mental health supports more accessible for everyone. We continue to invest in initiatives like 211 Alberta, which strengthens system navigation. Albertans can call or text 211 or visit ab.211.ca to help get support

and referrals to local services; 211 is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It's free and confidential and available in multiple languages. As we build the Alberta recovery model, we're making it easier for Albertans to know where to turn and get help, to get connected for support when they need it.

2:30

Provincial Fuel Tax

Ms Hayter: The UCP government's budget makes Albertans' lives more expensive and shows they wasted a boom during a boom. For the last seven years this has been the case because the cost of living just keeps going up. As the price at the pump skyrockets, they could make things more reasonable by pausing the provincial gas tax. Will the minister commit today to pause the gas tax like his government did before the 2023 provincial election, or was it really not about affordability?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I never expect the members opposite to let the truth get in the way of a good story, but I would expect them to be a little bit consistent when they criticize Budget 2026. I hear: spend more. I hear criticism over the size of the deficit. I hear things about a boom. There was a population boom . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Go ahead.

Mr. Horner: There certainly wasn't a nonrenewable revenue boom. We're at about half of a record high, yet what have we chosen to do? Focus on the priorities of the province: health care, education, strong social safety net.

Ms Hayter: Given that in 2023, the last time the gas tax was paused, the price of gas was at highest around \$1.45 a litre and given that today gas prices in my Calgary-Edgemont riding are as high as \$1.70 and given that the UCP were happy to pause this tax on the eve of an election, will the minister make the changes necessary today to pause the provincial gas tax?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, once again we are the only province that legislated fuel tax relief across this country, and we did that with the second-lowest fuel tax in the country, very close to Manitoba. What we have said is that we know that when oil is high, fuel will be high. We also know that we will bring in more royalties as a province, and it is easier to give that relief to Albertans. The beauty of our system is that – and these decisions have to be made on the quarter – once that decision is made, if we're in that position on July 1, even if oil then dropped, the tax would remain off. [interjections]

The Speaker: I'm just waiting for some quiet for you, hon. member. Go ahead.

Ms Hayter: Given it seems that this government only cares about affordability measures for Albertans when an election is looming and given that Albertans need relief as they've seen the prices that they have to pay, every time they fill up, spike in the range of \$1.60 to \$1.77 a litre at the pump and given that the price of oil is at historic highs and it's consumers who bear the brunt of higher inflation and it's a bigger hit on the family budgets with these high prices in gas, why won't the UCP government give people a break and pause the gas tax?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, if prices remain at these elevated levels, then Albertans can expect relief July 1. Then even if prices dropped on July 2, the tax would remain off for the entire quarter. That's how this system works. We're talking about 1 and half billion

dollars in revenue as outlined in Budget 2026 at a time when I'm hearing criticism over the size of the deficit while we're spending too much but also not spending enough everywhere. There's absolutely no consistency from the members opposite. We remain focused on Albertans.

Automobile Insurance Rates

Mr. Dach: Mr. Speaker, Albertans are struggling with the cost of living. It's tough to keep up with mounting costs and even to put food on the table. In the midst of this affordability crisis, this government has allowed car insurance rates to rise. Albertans are saying: thanks for nothing, Premier. Their new scheme will not reverse how out of control costs have become and will not even meet the rosy savings estimations they originally suggested. They'll take away drivers' rights as well. Albertans need affordable insurance to be able to meet their needs and the needs of their families. Why won't this government help them out?

Mr. Horner: I don't know where that member has been the last couple of years, Mr. Speaker. I've explained to this House how we're moving towards a care-first model that'll be operational January 1, 2027. I'm encouraged that the updated actuarial data still shows substantial savings for Albertans. We're moving towards that model, and I remind everyone else it's going to lead to much better care. We want people to recover to their highest level, and we want that to be faster. We don't think that you should have to lawyer up and use the court system to get what you deserve. That's where this system will take us.

The Speaker: Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that even with that actuarial updated data, Alberta remains one of the most expensive jurisdictions for auto insurance in the country and given that auto insurance premiums are rising here faster than anywhere else in Canada, leaving Albertans paying more year over year in the midst of rising inflation, and given the fact that Albertans are now dealing with the exploding cost of gasoline on top of already high insurance premiums, why does the new no-fault scheme take away drivers' rights while still allowing insurance prices to cost so much?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the system that we're in right now relies on tort access, court access. You have very minimal monetary payments that are available. If you need more than that or you require more care, you have to lawyer up and enter the courts. We're changing that. We're taking out the biggest cost lever that we have with this system change, and Albertans can expect better care and more sustainable, more affordable rates. We're about \$300 below Ontario, who has the highest in the land. They have a system that relies on the courts.

Mr. Dach: Given that this government's policies have allowed auto insurance rates to skyrocket so people are shocked when they get their premium notices and given that their no-fault scheme isn't guaranteed to make much of a difference when factoring in these years of increases caused by this UCP government in the first place and given they have no interest to help drivers with soaring gas prices and given they have instead put much more thought into increasing the speed on the QE II, a question for any of the ministers: what good is it being able to drive faster when nobody can afford to use their car?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it is kind of funny coming from the members opposite, I would remind everyone, that brought in a

carbon tax, helped legitimize a carbon tax for the country of Canada from this very Chamber with the intent of changing behaviour, saying: we want Albertans to drive less; we want you to take a bus. You know, that's what I heard from the members opposite. It's what actually encouraged a lot of us to run and take these roles in this place. They've never been about affordability for Albertans.

The Speaker: The next question belongs to the hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Wonder Valley AI Data Centre Project

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Greenview Industrial Gateway located near Grande Prairie is the proposed site of what could become the world's largest AI data centre industrial park, wonder valley. The opportunity for future growth in data centres with the help of this potential project in the Grande Prairie area is significant as it is expected to be up to a \$70 billion investment. Can the Minister of Technology and Innovation please share an update on this project and how data centres can provide an economic boom for Albertans as we move into the future?

The Speaker: The Minister of Technology and Innovation.

Mr. Glubish: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is right. Alberta is leading the way and we're doing so responsibly. We've put in place clear, straightforward, and fair rules so that everyone knows what to expect, and everybody plays by the rules, no cutting corners, no exceptions. That certainly, coupled with the other advantages that the member already mentioned, makes Alberta a very competitive jurisdiction. We continue to get serious inquiries from major players in the industry seeking access to secure compute resources, one of which could very well be wonder valley. Alberta has what the world needs. We're working hard to make sure that all Albertans benefit from this development.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and the minister for that answer. Given that many Indigenous communities are interested in expanding their self-sustainability and given that Alberta's government has the strongest consultation processes in Canada and those include with the nations in the Peace Country that may be around the wonder valley project, can the Minister of Indigenous Relations explain how the government has been working in partnership with Peace Country area nations such as Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation to ensure their perspectives are heard on the wonder valley project and as it potentially moves forward?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Indigenous Relations.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. Alberta's government understands the importance of meaningful consultation. The Aboriginal consultation office, or the ACO, ensures that proponents conduct meaningful, good-faith consultation with affected Indigenous communities. Last year the ACO processed nearly 8,400 consultation applications supporting over 11,000 activities on Crown land. That translates to roughly \$90 billion in GDP from Alberta's natural resource sector. This is proof that Alberta's consultation process is working.

The Speaker: Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that answer. Given that there must be a balance between economic prosperity and environmental stewardship and further given that our

government is expected to receive many more requests for projects like wonder valley, can the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas explain how future industrial zone projects will maintain Alberta's lush greenery and show Alberta can be a global leader in commingling industry with strong environmental standards?

2:40

The Speaker: The Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Alberta leads the way across Canada in protecting our pristine environment while growing the economy. We can do both, and we do it better than anyone else in the world. We will continue to make investments to support more reasonable development using industrial zones, all while protecting our water and environment for future generations. Facilities in the zone are expected to use the best technologies available to meet Alberta's high environmental standards. We will continue to work with partners across the province to support innovative solutions to protect the environment while also . . .

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

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 24 Alberta Whisky Act

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 24, the Alberta Whisky Act.

This act creates a path to generate economic opportunity for other industries like hospitality, liquor manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture. With that said, I hereby move first reading of Bill 24, the Alberta Whisky Act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Childcare.

Bill 25 An Act to Remove Politics and Ideology from Classrooms and Amend the Education Act, 2026

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I as well rise to request leave to introduce Bill 25, An Act to Remove Politics and Ideology from Classrooms and Amend the Education Act, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, this act will ensure education programming is fair, impartial, and free from personal bias and will further build on our efforts to improve early reading and math skills by ensuring timely intervention supports based on screening results.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of an e-mail from the lovely Hestia Drury, who happens to be in the gallery as well. Hestia has written a letter calling on the UCP to denounce their antitrans policies.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the recipe for the Kasawski family's favourite vinaigrette. Pour over any leafy green or UCP word salad and enjoy.

The Speaker: While that was fun, debate isn't really part of tablings. Calgary-Buffalo.

Member Ceci: Thank you. I'm tabling five copies of a letter from the president of the Canadian Historical Association distressed with the cuts to the heritage associations in this province. Thank you.

The Speaker: Any other tablings? I see none.

Oh, sorry. I didn't see, but it was there. Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of an editorial article from the Canadian Medical Association, and it is titled Privately Paid, Direct-to-consumer Diagnostic Testing, something that the buyers need to know.

The Speaker: Okay. We're at points of order, and the first one was called at or about 2:03 p.m. by the opposition side, the Deputy Opposition House Leader.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We can actually combine, I think, the two points of order that we had, this one and the next. They're both pertaining to the remarks that were made by the Deputy Government House Leader in response to questions from the Opposition House Leader.

So on both of these points I think we were speaking to 23(h), (i), and (j), particularly (j), "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." As I said, Mr. Speaker, in answer to questions from the Opposition House Leader, the Deputy Government House Leader said, according to the best that we could transcribe:

The truth is that if you look at what the members opposite have done with their time, they took every chance they could to degrade the institutions and symbols of [this] country, and now [they try] to wrap themselves in . . . [a] flag for political convenience.

Now, this is his second answer, Mr. Speaker.

Members opposite haven't just spent their time elected but a lifetime of [denigrating] this country . . . They continue to attack our country every chance they get culturally and historically. We on this . . . House defend our country.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure that the member who shotgunned a beer on the floor of this Assembly is in a place to lecture anyone else here about denigrating the institutions of our country. That is a clear action that is recorded in *Hansard*.

Now, what the member is making is a broad accusation for which he has no evidence. To be clear about the language we're talking about here, Mr. Speaker, from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, degrade means to lower the quality, rank, status, or moral character of something or someone. What the Deputy Government House Leader is claiming is that our members have lowered the quality, the rank, the status, or the moral character of the institutions of our country, the symbols of our country. Indeed, he referenced the flag of our country. And not just once, Mr. Speaker; he says we do so repeatedly and not just now. He took it to an extreme length. He stated that the members on our side of the House "haven't just spent their time elected but a lifetime of [denigrating] this country."

Mr. Speaker, that's obviously both an incredible exaggeration, a deep insult to every member on this side of the House that goes far beyond our work in this place and claims that even in our private lives, long before we entered public service, we spent our time, again to quote the member in his words, denigrating, which means to unfairly criticize, belittling or attacking the reputation of someone or something. It implies diminishing the value or importance of a person's efforts or character.

Mr. Speaker, this is an incredibly broad accusation that goes far beyond the work of this House, goes straight to the personal lives of every member on this side of the House. I would say that that absolutely qualifies as abusive or insulting language of a nature that absolutely will create disorder and will create a precedent of behaviour that I would say indeed would degrade the quality of this institution.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader on both points of order if you're able.

Mr. Williams: Happily, Mr. Speaker. Now, the Opposition House Leader said that what I said during question period goes far beyond the work of this House. I could not oppose that more strongly. It is exactly the work of this House as to whether or not we elevate or denigrate the institutions, the quality of life, and the future of our country, our province. These are the decisions we make here today.

Whether or not members opposite have denigrated or lowered the institutions of this province and this country is a matter of debate and is the purpose of a debating Chamber. Whether or not lowering the flag for six months of a year without any opposition, whether or not calling Canada or its institutions systemically racist, whether or not changing the language in our national anthem is good or bad, whether or not Albertans are the embarrassing cousins of Canada, whether or not the flag during the COVID protests is some sort of embarrassment or hate symbol, or whether or not John A. Macdonald was a good or a bad Prime Minister, and whether he ought to be vilified or lionized as a hero are all matters of debate. Those are all things that I think are important symbols, institutions, and icons of this country. Those are things that, as a Conservative, I believe deeply in, and I will continue to bring them up in this House. If members don't like that I do, they ought to stop denigrating them, and then I will not bring it up in the House.

2:50

Mr. Speaker, this is a matter of debate. That is the purpose of a debating Chamber. For this to be ruled out of order is to say that the Chamber itself has no purpose to address the biggest questions of our Legislature, of our society, and our country today, as there is a moment of amnesia as to what we are to be Canadian right now across this country. To talk about these issues here, if nowhere else, where we're protected from, you know, accusations of censorship and libel and defamation – here is the place I should. To limit that speech from the government, on behalf of the Government House Leader defending the patriotism of our members, is exactly the problem the members opposite have walked us into after over a decade, and, dare I say again, a lifetime of attacking the institutions and symbols of this country, and if that is debatable, it is. If it is reprehensible, that is a question of debate.

Members opposite are welcome to raise it all they like, and I will continue to make the case of why Canada matters, why institutions matter, and why continuing to reject what has been given to us in our inheritance and instead choosing for a little revolution, constantly throwing out what's been given, will be something I oppose.

The Speaker: Okay. Well, let me say that both sides managed to fit debate beyond the point of order into their comments. Congratulations. Not well done. Oftentimes both sides try to fit items that aren't part of the point of order into continuing debate here, and this is an example where both sides did just that. So not well done, but I noticed. It's not helpful on either side.

Here's what I have on the Blues, that the Blues say was said. The first one: "[If] you look at what the members opposite have done with their time, they took every chance they could to degrade the institutions and symbols of our country, and now they're trying to wrap themselves in the Canadian flag for political convenience." And the second piece is: "Members opposite haven't just spent their time elected but a lifetime of degrading this country."

Well, I would say that these are not helpful comments. If the comments were pointed at one member of the other side, they, I would say, almost certainly would be a point of order, or at least the chances of that would be a lot higher. That wasn't the case. Sadly, our state of affairs here is that both sides do their best to paint the other side in a negative light. These are two definitely strong examples of that. It's not helpful. I don't think it rises to a point of order today, but if these statements become a more regular feature of ongoing debate, it may well become a matter that creates disorder in the House. On the single matter today, I would say not, but don't take that as encouragement to go down this path. I hope my comments that it could become a matter of causing disruption are a discouragement on both sides, really, of not to debate the issues of the day but to paint the other side in a negative light. It's just not helpful.

Points of order 1 and 2 are now dealt with. Point of order number 3, also called by the opposition side at about 2:13 p.m.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Shepherd: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I do not have a record of that point. Does the other deputy House leader perhaps have that?

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to 23(h), (i), and (j). I do have a summary of what was said at that time. It was the question I was asking, and the Minister of Justice was responding. He essentially said something to the effect that I misunderstood the process or I am not understanding the process. It was something along those lines. I don't have the benefit of the Blues, but again he was essentially saying that I'm misrepresenting some process or misunderstanding some process, very directly to me. I think that's offside.

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Happy to address this. I don't have the benefit of the Blues either. However, I also have the record jotted down that the Minister of Justice and the keeper of the Great Seal said that the member opposite misunderstood, which is a very big and important gap between lying or misrepresenting intentionally. That is not the claim. The Minister of Justice didn't make that, as far as my records show. Had that been the case, it would be a different conversation. However, I leave it in your capable hands. We believe this was a clear-cut matter of debate where the Minister of Justice was clearly saying that the member opposite misunderstood, not ascribing some sort of intentional misleading or misrepresenting or lying.

The Speaker: The pertinent pieces of the Blues say, "Nothing that member said was accurate." It's not a point of order. Nobody was called a liar. It was just a disagreement on the facts. Moving further down the Blues, it says, "The member misunderstood the process that we're looking for." Again, I would agree with the Deputy Government House

Leader that no one was called a liar here, but it's also a practice of this House that you don't get to presume what's in someone else's mind and presume to place thoughts in somebody else's mind, including misunderstanding. This is, according to the rules of this place, a clear point of order which requires a withdrawal and an apology.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, I apologize and withdraw on behalf of the member.

The Speaker: Thank you. That deals with that item.

Orders of the Day Government Motions

Auditor General Appointment

35. Mr. Williams moved on behalf of Mr. Schow:
Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly concur in the report of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices tabled on March 26, 2026, Sessional Paper 433/2025-26, and recommend to the Lieutenant Governor in Council that Phillip D. Peters be appointed as Auditor General for the province of Alberta for a term of eight years, effective April 29, 2026.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Yes, Mr. Speaker. This time I do rise on Government Motions and apologize for the confusion earlier. I rise on behalf of the hon. Government House Leader to move Government Motion 35.

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. Deputy Government House Leader has moved Government Motion 35. That is a debatable motion. Is there any discussion on Government Motion 35? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do rise today to speak in support of the work of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices and its recommendation to appoint Phillip Peters as Alberta's next Auditor General. This is an important moment in our Legislature because it reminds us why independent officers of the Legislature matter and why the process to appoint them must be careful, fair, professional, and intentional.

The Auditor General plays a central role in Alberta's democracy, Mr. Speaker. This office exists to ensure that public money is spent properly, that government programs work as intended, and that Albertans can have confidence in how their tax dollars are being used. That responsibility does not belong to government. It belongs to the people of Alberta, and it is exercised through the independent office that reports directly to this Assembly. That is why the work of the search committee matters so much and also matters so much to this Assembly as well.

Over the past several months the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices carried out the task assigned to it by this Assembly. It followed the mandate set out in Government Motion 13. It struck a search subcommittee. It worked with professional human resource experts. It advertised the position publicly for a full month. It reviewed applications. It conducted interviews. It completed reference and background checks and deliberated carefully before reaching a final conclusion and recommendation. This was not rushed. It was not hidden. It was not informal. This was a thorough and structured process designed to find the best possible candidate for one of the most important accountability roles in our province here in Alberta.

On March 25, 2026, after completing that process, the committee voted to recommend Phillip Peters as Alberta's next Auditor General. The chair of the committee tabled the report the very next day, on March 26, 2026. Now it is up to this Assembly to debate and vote on this appointment. This is exactly how this process is supposed to work.

3:00

Mr. Peters is well qualified for this role. He brings both deep institutional knowledge and strong professional credentials. He holds a bachelor of commerce in accounting and a law degree from Osgoode Hall Law School. He has been a professional accountant for more than two decades. He began his career with a major international accounting firm. He has worked in audit. He has worked as a lawyer and as a senior adviser within government as well.

Most importantly, Mr. Peters has served within Alberta's office of the Auditor General since 2017. During that time he has taken on increased responsibility and leadership, including serving as general counsel and ethics officer for them. He understands the independence of the office, he understands its legislative mandate, and he understands the professional standards that guide its work.

This experience matters. At a time when the office of the Auditor General has significant ongoing files, including complex examinations that are of high interest to Albertans, the continuity and stability are not trivial considerations. By appointing someone already familiar with the office's system, the staff, the work, the committee has helped ensure a clean and seamless transition when the current Auditor General's term ends on April 28.

I also want to take a moment to just recognize the current Auditor General, Doug Wylie, whose eight-year contract as Auditor General is coming up. His office has produced important work over the past eight years, and we should be grateful for his service.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I want to address the issue of process directly. The search and appointment processes for offices of the Legislature must be shielded from politics as much as possible. This responsibility falls on us regardless of party. Committee members owe it to Albertans to assess candidates based on qualifications, based on experience, integrity, the ability to do the job, not based on partisan considerations. This committee worked with professional recruiters. It used public advertising, interviewed multiple candidates. It debated the recommendation and voted on this.

Now, Mr. Speaker, disagreement is acceptable, but I have to say that I am disappointed that members opposite have chosen, in my view, to politicize the work of the committee and cast doubt on the process simply because the outcome was not one they preferred. I truly wonder if there's any outcome that they would have been satisfied with.

I want to quote Don Braid in his recent article here just for a moment. "There's every reason to believe he'll take up the task smoothly when outgoing Auditor General Doug Wylie leaves April 28." And further down: "Phillip's qualifications and direct experience, in fact, are exactly what's needed for this job." Again, a little further: "At a crucial moment, the UCP made the right choice." Those are comments made in an article by Don Braid.

This approach of disagreement, opposing this, risks and undermines the confidence the public has in this appointment and in future appointments as well. It sends the wrong message to Canadians and Albertans who may consider serving in these roles. We can't allow a fair and professional process to be publicly criticized for political points, Mr. Speaker. We should be cautious about that.

Disagreement over the final recommendation does not invalidate the work that went into reaching it. The committee did its job. It fulfilled its mandate and it brought forward a qualified, capable, nonpartisan candidate for this Assembly's consideration.

With approval from this Assembly, Mr. Peters will be appointed to a standard eight-year term, which is the same time frame that the last several Auditor Generals have served over the last few decades, with compensation in line with other senior public officials as well. It respects the independence of the office and the expectations that come with it.

Ultimately, today's decision is about trust in the process. Supporting this recommendation is not about politics. It is about continuity. It is about credibility and confidence in our democratic institutions. It is about ensuring that the office of the Auditor General remains strong, remains independent and focused on serving Albertans.

For those reasons, I support the committee's recommendation. I commend all members who contributed to this work and wish Mr. Peters success as he prepares to take on this important responsibility and role.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also had the honour of serving on this committee. I have served on multiple search committees for multiple offices of the Legislature and had the opportunity to see how those processes unfolded. I will agree with the Member for Grande Prairie that indeed we must recognize the incredible importance of independent officers of the Legislature, why they matter, and indeed why the process used to appoint them is so important.

The member spoke at length about politicization of the process. I will say, Mr. Speaker, that what we have seen under this government is a level of politicization of almost every process, of appointments, of how what are supposed to be independent boards and agencies of this province operate. We've never seen a government so beloved of political interference; it's like breathing for them.

As we speak about the appointment of this candidate and the process by which we came to it, I will say that I absolutely agree, Mr. Speaker, that Mr. Peters has qualifications for the role, that he is capable, and I will not question in any way that he is a nonpartisan candidate who will serve with principle and integrity. There is no question of that.

There's no question that, in this work as Auditor General, I trust that he will continue the excellent work that is done by Doug Wylie, who was denied an extension by this government to complete that work. They may praise him, Mr. Speaker, but I sat with these members at committee and watched them accuse him of not doing his job. I watched the comments they had to make about him, so some of the words ring a bit hollow when I hear them now. But I thank Mr. Wylie for his good work and the good work I know he will do in his final weeks.

Speaking of the process, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Grande Prairie talked about working with HR experts, talked about working with a thorough and proper process. I've never seen the level of rejection of expertise of those human resource professionals that I saw throughout this process. The fact is that this process was conducted by a subcommittee entirely in camera and off the record. So I recognize Mr. Braid's opinions, looking at the result, but he had no line of sight on the process. He did not see the actions and the choices of government members throughout that process. It was for those reasons, those actions, those choices I saw, which were far from the normal practices I had seen in previous search committees I participated in, that we spoke about our concerns with that process.

Only the members of the committee had the opportunity to see the resumés that were put forward and to be at the seven interviews that were conducted. Only the members of the committee had the chance to see the qualifications of those candidates. Again, I recognize Mr.

Braid's opinion based on the final result, but the fact is, as someone who saw all of that material – Mr. Peters is absolutely qualified, capable, and nonpartisan – I would say that there were candidates who were more qualified, with more experience.

That does not mean that Mr. Peters is not going to be qualified, capable, and nonpartisan, that he will not do this work, I know, to the best of his ability with incredible integrity. But I also know that some of those other individuals who participated in that process are likely watching. I want to thank them for participating and putting their names forward as well. They would have also served this province incredibly admirably, as many of them already have.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that as we continue to see things like government-appointed members bringing forward an unprecedented minority report on something that is supposed to be independent and nonpartisan, with the Electoral Boundaries Commission, I would just simply note, for those who question the reasons why we brought up our concerns about this process, that this is a repeated pattern with this government.

Now, the people of Alberta are fortunate that this government did not perhaps pursue the angels of their poorer nature and that we have a candidate as qualified and as capable as Mr. Peters, who will step into this role.

3:10

To Mr. Peters I want to say thank you for putting his name forward. I want to say that he has the support of every member on this side of this House in the work he will do as Auditor General. We will continue to support him and the team at the Auditor General the way we have during our whole time in this House, the way we defended their budget against government members last fall, the way we have defended Mr. Wylie's reputation and that of his staff. We will continue to do so in our support of this motion that is here today, to see Mr. Peters appointed, because we do want Mr. Peters to be able to serve in this role knowing he has the support of all members of this Assembly, just as we want Albertans to understand the dire threat that is posed to so much of our democracy by the choices of this government and how they choose to operate in what is supposed to be independent, professional, and nonpartisan work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there any other speakers? Seeing none.

[Government Motion 35 carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 18 Safeguards for Last Resort Termination of Life Act

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As always, I am pleased to rise and speak in this Chamber, in particular today to Bill 18, the Safeguards for Last Resort Termination of Life Act.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

If passed, this critically important bill would assure that medical assistance in dying remains an exception, an end-of-life intervention, and should not become routine or replace the provision of proper medical care, disability, or social care here in Alberta. Bill 18 would help ensure the protection of vulnerable Albertans and that medical assistance in dying, or MAID, as it's commonly referred to, is only provided as a means of last resort as it was first intended to be when limited MAID criminal defences

were added in 2006 to the federal Criminal Code. Our government believes that when the outcome is death, the system must meet the highest standards of care, transparency, oversight, and, of course, accountability.

Mr. Speaker, we also believe that the compassionate approach is one that helps people live with dignity, not defaulting to doctor-assisted death. It was with that in mind that we undertook the development of this legislation. It's become abundantly clear and evident that we need to bring in safeguards to ensure protection, care, and dignity for all, especially our most vulnerable.

Now, Canada has the fastest growing death rates in the world when it comes to MAID. Far from being an option of last resort, MAID is now the fifth leading cause of death in Canada. The country is currently projected to reach its 100,000th death by MAID in June, becoming the first nation in the modern era to measure its total assisted deaths in the six figures, more than the totals of any other jurisdiction with some form of legal, doctor-assisted death. Far from being the exception, an option of last resort, it has instead become routine, rising 13-fold since legalization.

When legalized, MAID was always intended to be an option of last resort, yet it has become a substitute for care for those who are suffering from loneliness, poverty, mental illness, or social isolation. Health Canada reports that nearly half of track 2 MAID deaths involved suffering from loneliness or isolation, while almost half indicated that they felt that they were a burden. Ontario's MAID Death Review Committee found that most track 2 recipients were low income. Many did not name a family member as next of kin, suggesting that they were experiencing some form of social isolation.

Mr. Speaker, that information is sobering and it is saddening. It drives home just how important it is that we provide the necessary safeguards before things completely spiral out of control. Our government believes that those experiencing loneliness, isolation, or poverty should be met with compassion and care, not with doctor-assisted death.

Now, similarly, in March of 2025 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released findings on Canada's compliance with the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The committee sounded the alarm on track 2 MAID in Canada, suggesting that it devalues people with disabilities and acts as a dangerous alternative to providing social and economic supports. They have called on Canada to repeal MAID where death is not reasonably foreseeable.

If passed, Bill 18 affirms this recommendation, limiting MAID in Alberta to those whose natural death has been determined to be reasonably foreseeable. Now, when this bill was tabled, Inclusion Alberta affirmed this direction, stating that "track 2 MAID discriminates against persons with disabilities and [it] reinforces dangerous stereotypes about the [value or] worth of their lives." Bill 18 will serve as a correction. It would protect Albertans with disabilities from discrimination by ensuring Alberta's health system does not provide assisted suicide to people whose death is not reasonably foreseeable.

Mr. Speaker, our government believes that MAID should not be a substitute for robust health care options, mental health supports, or palliative care. To this end, one of our government's central concerns raised through the review is the federal government's planned expansion of MAID eligibility to include individuals who only have an underlying health condition of mental illness. Now, there's a serious risk that vulnerable Albertans living with mental illness may choose this most final of actions when other treatment options are available. A majority of Canadians do not support this MAID expansion, with September 2023 polling finding that only 28 per cent of Canadians believe that this expansion is appropriate

and 82 per cent of Canadians believing that mental health care should be improved instead.

If Bill 18 is passed, MAID would be prohibited for people whose sole condition is seeking MAID for an underlying mental health illness. Now, as the CEO for the centre of suicide prevention Alberta has stated at the tabling of Bill 18: recovery from mental illness is possible, expected even; for that reason, we welcome the steps Alberta is taking through the legislation to strengthen protections for those experiencing mental illness. Mr. Speaker, the compassionate response to those suffering from mental illness is what this government has been doing since the very beginning. It is support and care. It is not death.

To further protect vulnerable Albertans, Alberta's legislation would prohibit MAID for minors and those without capacity to make their own health care decisions. It would also make sure that the consultation is robust, that consultation provided ensures that those that are seeking MAID are not coerced or pressured and that those individuals who are looking to get MAID are the ones that take a proactive approach to seek that information. Mr. Speaker, coercion and pressure is not a real choice. Albertans should never be pressured to end their own lives. Now, Bill 18 strengthens protections of vulnerable individuals from coercion by ensuring that regulated health care professionals cannot initiate MAID discussions in the course of providing everyday health services. Instead, the patient must inquire about MAID services first. This government believes and it always has believed that when it comes to MAID, care should always be the first option.

The proposed legislation would address gaps in the current federal system within Alberta. It would ensure that vulnerable Albertans, including those suffering from mental illness, are protected by setting strong and consistent standards. I urge all members in this House to take the approach of compassion and be mindful about the sensitivities and the complexities of this consequential and very important bill. I would hope that the members opposite and members on this side of the Assembly support this very important bill. Mr. Speaker, hope must always be more accessible than death.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of Bill 18. Thank you.

3:20

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any others wishing to speak to Bill 18? The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to this important piece of legislation that relates to and affects people during some of their most challenging life moments. I want to start my remarks by saying that, insofar as this bill addresses disability community concerns with track 2 MAID or addresses Canadian Mental Health Association and many other stakeholder concerns with the availability of MAID where the sole underlying condition is mental health, my colleagues and I fully support the disability community, fully support that aspect of the bill.

As the minister mentioned, hope should be more accessible than MAID, and I think that we can also say that when it comes to the disability community, that should be the government's objective, that hope be more accessible, the province be more accessible to them, and they have every resource that they need to live a meaningful, dignified life with respect.

While we are on that topic, I suggest that that could be done by having more fulsome income support programs that are available to Albertans with disabilities. That's possible and certainly will make life better for Albertans with disabilities if we have an accessibility legislation. It would make life better for Albertans with disabilities

had this government not clawed back the \$200 disability benefit that the federal government was giving to Albertans with disabilities. Life could be a bit better if their benefits are not cut through the ADAP program to the tune of \$200. Their core benefits will drop by \$200.

I think those are all things – when we talk about Albertans with disabilities, it's not just that we are putting in safeguards in legislation, but we need to put safeguards in our policies, in our practices, how we do things, how we offer support in our province to Albertans with disabilities so that they have hope, they have real opportunity to live life with respect and dignity in this province, which is not the case for so many Albertans.

Just a week ago there was legislation before this House, brought forward by my colleague from St. Albert, about accessibility that was also supported by the disability community across this province, many organizations that the minister mentioned are supporting MAID. Again, that was turned down just a week ago in this House. If the government wants to be taken seriously that they are sincerely doing something for the disability community, their actions need to reflect that. They are still the only province in this country who is clawing back the federal \$200 disability benefit, and that's truly shameful.

I do want to say that concerns have been raised with respect to track 2 MAID, where death is not a reasonable foreseeability, by the United Nations. The same report, the same assessment, also talks about this government's record on policies affecting the disability community. I will urge the government to certainly take time to read that part of the report as well.

As I mentioned, we also support the part of the bill where it talks about limiting access to MAID for those whose sole underlying condition is mental health. That position is also supported by the Canadian Mental Health Association and many other mental health organizations, but I do want to note that there is an exemption in the Criminal Code which is set to expire on March 17, 2027. Along with stating that in this legislation, I think government should engage with stakeholders, the disability community, and mental health organizations to make sure that they are at that decision-making table when decisions are made with respect to that exemption. These are the parts of this legislation that we support wholeheartedly.

But there are many other pieces in this legislation that cannot be supported and should not be supported. I will talk a little bit about that as well. For instance, in division 2 the legislation sets out the right to refuse provision of medical assistance in dying to an individual practitioner. I think that's available in many other instances as well, but this time they're extending that right to the operator of publicly funded facilities to refuse that legally available procedure under our legislation and under Alberta Health Services. Now it's no longer about individual rights to refuse to do this process. It's now the government imposing its own world view, its own ideology onto Albertans. They are putting a 150-metre bubble zone restricting Albertans' access, taxpayers' access, to that facility, since the government is offering that protection to those operators, not the Albertan.

I remember when the then minister of health, the MLA for Edmonton-Glenora, brought forward legislation to put a bubble zone around abortion clinics where Albertans accessing that service were constantly harassed. She brought forward the legislation to put that bubble zone around those facilities. The UCP and PC opposition then ran out of this Legislature 13 times just to avoid the vote on that. Here they are, I guess, putting in bubble zones for health care providers and restricting Albertans' access to that facility, the facility that is paid for by those very Albertans.

I don't think that this has anything to do with MAID or this has anything to do with safeguards in the provision of MAID. It's just government imposing their own ideology to protect some of their own, I guess, friends who run private and, I guess, government-funded health care facilities. I don't think that we will be supporting that part of the bill. Certainly, when we get to that, we will bring forward a thoughtful amendment supported by the stakeholders.

3:30

Then there is another provision. This bill requires that a family member be present and witness the MAID process. I think, first of all, I have a question for the minister or anyone on the front bench. Can they name all other medical procedures that are available in Alberta where adults who have the capacity to consent are required to have a family member present to witness them? We would like to know what other procedures are available in Alberta where consenting adults with capacity are required to have a witness. If there are none, then why does Bill 18 legislate that a family member be present to witness the death? What's the rationale behind this, and how is this a safeguard? That's, I guess, the question for the government.

Some other aspects of the bill that many physicians have talked about are where the bill is kind of prescribing a number of things in relation to the patient and doctor relationship. I think those relationships are better left to doctors and patients, their families. We do have the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, who are responsible for the code of conduct that every doctor is required to follow, who are responsible to make sure that the practice of medicine remains ethical, complies with the standards that are in place here and across the world, quite frankly. I don't know who the government consulted with to come up with these kinds of prescriptive things about that doctor-patient relationship.

There was an open letter published by health care workers, providers. They wrote that "the proposed mandates and sanctions place clinicians in ethically untenable positions, undermining professional judgment and eroding trust within the therapeutic relationship." Lethbridge doctor Dionne Walsh said – it's a quotation – that MAID is not death on demand, and I think the government is painting it that way, but we have a really robust process that we can look at who is truly eligible, who is truly capable. End quote.

Speaking of painting, like the minister highlighted, they are prohibiting MAID for minors. A couple of things. The Criminal Code section 241 that allows for MAID is very clear that it's not available if you're under 18. Either the minister doesn't know and has not read that provision or the minister is not upfront about this and trying to give just a false impression that somehow under federal Criminal Code provision MAID is available for people under 18. Again, the Justice minister was just painting it in a way that people might think that it's available for anyone under 18. Section 241 that authorizes MAID makes it clear that it's only available for consenting adults and people over 18. So there are these aspects of the bill.

There is another aspect of the bill where this bill establishes a care co-ordination service. The care co-ordination service will be in the minister's office, and the minister responsible can delegate its authority to administer that office, but it will also be responsible to establish educational training requirements that a practitioner must meet as a condition of approval. So now the government, the ministers, who they have lots of, like the health minister, but in this case it's the Justice minister, I believe, will be responsible for the education and training requirements for the doctors who will offer this service.

I don't know, again, why this government thinks and why the minister thinks that politicians are better situated to come up with

the training requirements, educational requirement for clinicians, for physicians to be able to do this procedure. Why did they not think that, for instance, the College of Physicians & Surgeons would be in a good position? I think that the government is inserting itself in a place where it doesn't need to be. These are the decisions that are better left to institutions like the College of Physicians & Surgeons and to medical professionals, not politicians. That's also very concerning, that government thinks that they can have a care co-ordination service and that they can control who can offer this service and what their qualifications should be. Sure, the government has a role in regulating health aspects of MAID, but the government is going way too far in this bill.

One last thing I would like to point out is that section 241 is the valid exercise of the federal government's criminal law jurisdiction. It's a crime to kill somebody in this country unless you can fit under the provision, section 241, which will authorize the medical assistance in dying. That jurisdiction has not been challenged. This government has not challenged their jurisdiction to regulate in that sphere, and now the government in the name of their health jurisdiction is trying to regulate MAID, put safeguards, but it's not just safeguards. The government is going way too far with this legislation.

Some may argue that the government is essentially trying to defeat the purpose of section 241, thus making it if not impossible at least extremely difficult to access MAID in this province. I think that the government knows that they cannot pass legislation that will defeat the valid exercise of another jurisdiction, of another order of government, in this case the federal government, section 241, so this bill and section 241 cannot be enforceable at the same time. You cannot enforce 241 and this bill together.

Certainly, it looks like the government knows and they're ready to pick another fight with the federal government, this time on the backs of people with disabilities and on the backs of people for whom it's a very complex, sensitive, and challenging decision in their life. The government is just preparing to have another fight. There is so much jurisprudence out there as well that even if the court thinks that this is a valid exercise of the province's health jurisdiction, the federal bill will still be considered paramount.

I don't think that the government got this right. There is certainly huge uncertainty out there on how this bill and section 241 will play out in practice and in the courts. I don't think that the government has done their homework. They may have some validators, but they didn't consult broadly with everyone in the legal community, in the medical community, with professional organizations. They could've done a lot better, but at the committee stage we will try to make some amends. I don't know if you can really make this bill workable, but we will try to do as much as we can.

I think those are my remarks at this stage. Thank you.

3:40

The Acting Speaker: Are there others? I'll recognize the Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 18, Safeguards for Last Resort Termination of Life Act. Now, we just heard the Justice minister a little bit earlier talk about the dignity of life for disabled Albertans. I would suggest that the words that come out of this government don't actually match their actions.

I'm going to say very clearly that Alberta New Democrats are really in favour of safeguarding people with disabilities as it relates to track 2 for a lot of different reasons. I think that any of us that have known – I don't know if anyone has actually known somebody that struggles with a disability, mental illness, or one or the other

and lives in a society that is not really made for them. I do have some experience with that, so I kind of go back to those memories and those experiences to try to understand sort of where someone would have to be to think about MAID as an option.

What I would like to say, before I tell you that little story, is that since this government started to talk about the changes coming to AISH – that would have been in February of 2025. They passed legislation recently, but it really didn't say much. Now they're starting to trickle out information through regulation, but that changes here and there. What they've done, Mr. Speaker, has created a lot of stress in the disability community and a lot of harm already where it existed.

Anyway, what can start to strip away the dignity of life, as you may understand, is a life in poverty. It starts to strip that away from you. It starts to diminish your ability to take care of yourself: personal grooming that you need to get done, to cover the expenses of those things, buying groceries so that you're not just eating, you know, Ichiban. It looks at living in a safe environment where you're not fearful that you will be subject to abuse or you don't know from month to month if you'll still have a place to live or you don't know if the next rent increase is going to just cause you to lose your home. All of those things are really important for people with disabilities to live with dignity. It's the dignity of understanding what's going to happen in the future and knowing that whatever government happens to be in place, they're still going to be safe and they'll still be able to count on the supports that they need.

But that is not where we are in Alberta. To have a government for the last seven years that has systematically stripped away supports, has diluted supports and then not owned up to it, where we are at a crisis point – it is not a coincidence, Mr. Speaker, that we have alarming rates of food bank usage because food insecurity has skyrocketed. It's not a surprise that our homeless population or people that are living really in precarious situations has escalated. We know that public safety is a concern. If you think all of these things are not related, then your eyes aren't open because these things are very related.

When I hear this government say: "Look at us. Aren't we awesome? We consulted with Inclusion Alberta, the disability community, and we're going to protect people by eliminating track 2." Now, that's great. If you want to protect people with disabilities by making that access harder, that is great.

I have known someone that lived a life of living in the system. When he was very young, an infant, he was put in care and lived in care probably until, I'd suggest, his mid-20s. Then he got a job. You know, episodic illness or disability like schizophrenia is sometimes very bad, and sometimes it's just bad. This person lost the job, didn't have a family, lived in care, didn't have supports. Quebec income supports are not good. I would suggest they're pretty on par for Alberta. When they tell you that our benefits are the most generous in the country, that's incorrect. That's just factually incorrect. It's not true.

We saw this person grow up in a community without natural supports, without family, without all of these things, without someone to advocate when he was very sick to change medication or to find a new home when he got evicted because he got sick again. But that's what happens when a person with a disability lives their life without the supports that they need because of the nature of their disability. He did try to end his life on his own. He didn't have access to MAID. This was quite some time ago. He was in his 30s, took several attempts. They got increasingly serious, and then, finally, he was successful. Unfortunately, lots of people end their lives in the metro stations of Montreal, and that's where his journey ended.

What I learned through that – because I didn't meet this person until their 30s, I didn't understand how deep and how easily it can

happen that your dignity is stripped away if already you're struggling with incredible barriers. I saw that in my life. I saw it up close and personal. This was my half-brother, who I didn't find until I was in my 30s because we were both in care, him longer than me. But I did learn that if those things are not there, then MAID becomes an attractive option.

Let me tell you, the most difficult year of my 10 years in this place has been the last year. What has made it so incredibly difficult is that probably not a week goes by that somebody doesn't tell me that they can't do it anymore; they just want to end their lives. Now, I understand that sometimes that is just a desperate cry of, "Somebody needs to help me," and other times it's a very serious cry, like, "I am going to end my life." But I have never seen anything like this, and in the seven years it has grown and grown and grown.

They have deindexed, then reindexed, then indexed but capped at 2 per cent. They have cut housing and said that they're not cutting housing. They have cut AISH. They have created a whole new program with tiny little legislative changes and refused to be honest with the Alberta public about what is actually going to happen. The only time they roll out information, Mr. Speaker, is when they get pressed by public pressure. I know the e-mails these government members get because I get copied on them. I know that they're hearing about MAID because I see these e-mails. But what is so disturbing about this legislation is that this government is taking one piece that is good and saying: we are now going to harm all of these other people, because we can hide behind this one piece.

They say that they consulted the disability community, but you know what they didn't do, Mr. Speaker? They did not consult this disability community after the bill was dropped. I will tell you that this disability community is not okay with removing rights of other people or forcing a family member into a situation where someone is ending their life or changing the rules to play partisan politics. It's disgusting.

Do we believe in ending track 2? Absolutely. But more than that, we believe in working alongside the disability community and creating access and removing barriers so that people can live a life with dignity, whether that means they're employed or not. [some applause] Sorry. It's kind of a serious topic.

You know, I would like to say that the Justice minister earlier said: we had a robust consultation. I noticed this because this is a really irritating word from this government. They say, "robust consultation," which is funny because just last month – it was actually just before budget estimates started – the Public Accounts Committee actually had before it the Justice ministry.

Of course, the Justice ministry said that in the fall of 2024 the ministry in consultation with the ministries of health and Mental Health and Addiction initiated a review of the regulation made in the province to ensure that there's a consistent process as well as oversight to protect Albertans. So the online survey for two months, Mr. Speaker, for November and December. Engagement: they list a number of bodies – we didn't hear about this – and then they talk about that they consulted the disability community. I'm pretty tuned in to that community. I didn't hear about widespread consultation. But they went on to say in their own report that they would use that work to inform this legislation.

Naturally, Alberta NDP members on the Public Accounts Committee asked: "Well, can you tell us, Justice ministry, about the consultation you did with the two advice-giving bodies that directly relate to people with disabilities in Alberta? Tell us about the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Did you consult them about MAID?" "No, no, we didn't do that." "Okay. Tell us about your own hand-picked disability advocate. Did you consult with the disability advocate of Alberta when you

were crafting your changes to MAID legislation?" "No, we didn't do that either." Okay. But they had a robust consultation, when their own government departments – right? – in their own ministry don't even get asked the question. It's ridiculous.

3:50

Now, we already know that the United Nations has been very clear to the country of Canada about their concerns around track 2 MAID, and I don't disagree with them. The United Nations has stated that track 2 MAID is incompatible with the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. I mean, it is a negative, ableist, dangerous-driven decision or access point, and it is really such a complex issue because you can't simply look at that individual without looking at the system and the society around them.

Now, what is funny is that this minister stood up and said: well, yeah, the UN is really clear about track 2 MAID for people with disabilities, so we endorse that. Yeah. We agree with them. What's really odd, Mr. Speaker, is that just last week, I think it was, they decided to ignore another call from the United Nations on the status of people with disabilities, one that was made far earlier, talking about the absolute need for accessibility. Without systematically removing barriers to a life with dignity, they cannot achieve that. So this government picks and chooses from the UN, too. People with disabilities: all good for MAID. People with disabilities: not so good for access. That tells you exactly what this government is all about. They're playing partisan politics with something as serious as medical assistance in dying, and it's shameful. It's completely shameful.

I think back over this last seven years, and this government could not have tried harder to make life difficult for people with disabilities. From hiding wait-lists in 2021 – we have tens of thousands of people that cannot access legislated services because these folks can't do it. They're so busy hiding other things and shovelling money here and there and paying for things that Albertans do not want, but they refuse to do the legislated work. They have hidden wait-lists. We are impacting our future by not accessing early intervention. These families and children are missing out. They are not ready for school, they're not ready for postsecondary or apprentice roles, they're not ready for the workforce, and that all begins here in this place. Bad policy, bad budget, bad government that needs to be replaced.

Now, I want to say a couple of other things. You know, the AISH, ADAP thing: this is something, what this government is doing, and refusing to even acknowledge the facts of what they're doing or what is coming from the disability community will stick to them for many, many years. The harm that they will cause, they're already causing. They're already removing \$200 from people that didn't apply for the Canada disability benefit. Doesn't even matter if they qualify or not at the end of the day. Most people can't even get a hold of AISH because they've moved to a call centre or centralized system. There is no access to basic government services for people with disabilities. But you know what? We'll keep them alive, so I guess that's something, Mr. Speaker.

Finally, I will just say that what this government has done to disability services and the lives of people with disabilities, and not just the 80,000 people on AISH or the 15,000 people that use PDD or the 13,000 people that use FSCD but the million disabled Albertans that this government completely turned their back on, refusing to systematically remove barriers so that they can all live a life with dignity but then standing up and claiming to care so much about disabled people that they want to protect them from track 2 MAID – listen, that's a no-brainer. Alberta New Democrats will always support people with disabilities, and we'll always do our

best to ensure that they have access to all the supports they need to live a dignified life.

Track 2 is just dangerous for people with disabilities because, unfortunately, here in Alberta and, I would suggest, in a lot of other places in this country we have decimated disability services that were once the envy of the country. We have reduced the ability of people in Alberta to live a life with dignity, and this government is not even pretending to try, and that is the saddest thing of all, Mr. Speaker.

With that, I will always support ending track 2. I will not be supporting this piece of legislation. I hope that this government is wise enough to acknowledge their own mistakes and shortsightedness and listen when we come with good amendments to make this bill somewhat tolerable.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Any others wishing to speak?

Seeing none, I ask if the minister would want to close debate. That is waived.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a second time]

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 15

Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to everyone who is here today. I certainly rise to move third reading of Bill 15, the Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026.

Bill 15 is the next step in advancing the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service to augment and support existing law enforcement. It creates a clear path for officers, creating a streamlined transition for sheriffs who are performing those policelike functions to become ASPS police officers. Mr. Speaker, we're bridging the gap. The government is providing funding to ensure police officers performing these policelike functions have the training, the authority to become fully fledged police officers, and this allows them to perform a much broader spectrum of policing duties right across the province, which all contribute to the safety and security of all Albertans, especially those in rural Alberta.

Also, Bill 15 provides operational efficiency. Targeted amendments to the Police Act and SCAN Act align expertise under the ASPS to shut down problem properties who, unfortunately, at times terrorize communities.

Through Bill 15 we're also offering municipalities a choice when it comes to their policing model. As I've stated before, I do not care what the uniform is. I just want someone to show up to the call and provide that service when it is requested.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I know we have some members across the aisle that, we'll say, have differing views, but my goodness, I have never thought that they would be so overt in their antipolice policies. I would love to talk, as my friend spoke earlier today, about Motion 508. Motion 508 was what has now been commonly dubbed the defund-the-police motion. The NDP sought to redirect all resources from provincial policing initiatives, which ultimately ends to a road map of empty cars and no calls attending to service. The government on this side of the House chooses the boots on the ground over those books on the shelf, and we will not trade active

law enforcement for social programs. Officer presence matters. I've stated that time and time again. This is proved by the crime severity index, which overall is showing that our crime numbers are on a downward trend.

Now, forcing a social worker into any sort of law enforcement role is dangerous and, quite frankly, just wrong. I'm not going to put a social worker or anybody who does not have the law enforcement training and put their life at risk. I just will not do it, Mr. Speaker. This is an example that occurred in Saskatchewan. The tragedy on the James Smith Cree Nation is a real-life example where a crisis response worker was first on scene and, unfortunately, next to lose her life. We will not allow that in Alberta. We will not put social workers at risk, and we will not put them as first responders to 911 calls.

Now, let's talk about some of the other failures of the NDP, or should I say the Trudeau-NDP alliance. It's always a good one. The crime that does exist in Alberta, Mr. Speaker, is fuelled by Bill C-75. You've heard me say this time and time again. I know the members opposite don't like me talking about that. It's the broken bail system that releases dangerous offenders and drug dealers back into the communities time and time again. Repeat criminal offenders are just victimizing communities and committing further crime.

4:00

Why might somebody ask about that? Well, I will tell you that – again, this is supported by the NDP Motion 508. The NDP don't believe that an offender is a person who should go to jail. What they believe is that that offender is actually the victim of an oppressed society, and through intensive counselling and social work, Mr. Speaker, and maybe sprinkle in a little bit of taxpayer-funded drugs and a safe place to use those drugs, somehow, in the NDP fantasyland, everything is going to be okay. But I can tell you that in practice it doesn't work. Again, you only need to look at Eastside Vancouver to show that that ideological example is a complete and utter failure.

While the NDP call for law enforcement to be ideological, which is something I can't believe, this government is implementing what we call 24/7 electronic monitoring for high-risk offenders to try to help, to support the failure that is C-75. We've also created the fugitive apprehension teams, who've gone out there time and time again on the soft-on-crime policies to arrest those people that have been released because of C-75.

Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. We are not reducing funding to the brave men and women in the RCMP. We recently signed a deal, quite frankly, providing them, not too long ago, an additional \$17.3 million for just additional supports that they need. Now, it wasn't giving us more boots on the ground. It was just helping to support some of their needs that they have within the service. We've also increased their budget from \$396 million to as high as \$432 million. I hope the members opposite, if they really do support the RCMP, will actually support our budget to make sure that those members get the funding that they need in order to do the job in rural Alberta.

It started with – now, I have to say this, Mr. Speaker. I have to give a little bit of a history lesson here just in regard to Alberta's involvement in law enforcement within the province of Alberta. A lot of people don't know this, and some of us who might be older, like myself – I can tell you that in the 1980s we had what was known as the Alberta highway patrol. In 1988 the responsibility of court and prisoner security was actually transferred by the RCMP to the Alberta government. "Why?" you might ask. Well, because that was too much for the RCMP to handle at that time. They needed to attend calls to service. They had to make sure that they were responding to the needs

of the community. So what was created in 1988 was what is known as court and prisoner security, CAPS for short.

Now, additional responsibilities were required and always being placed upon these CAPS officers. In 2006 the name of CAPS was actually changed to the Alberta sheriffs because additional resources were put on the highways. To do what, Mr. Speaker? I will tell you: to augment and support the RCMP and the people of rural Alberta when it comes to traffic safety. Throughout the years since 2006 there's been more and more asked of the great men and women within the Alberta sheriffs, again, to continue to augment and support, to provide additional policing functions. Again, they are not police officers, but they've been asked to do this.

We have to have proper oversight. We have to make sure that they are meeting the needs from a policing organizational perspective. That is what has evolved into, hopefully, when this bill passes – and I don't want to presuppose the House, but I hope that this bill passes. When this becomes an actual police service with proper oversight, they will be able to augment and support not just the RCMP but augment and support Calgary and Edmonton and every other police service in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I have to talk to you – you know, I know that, again, the members opposite don't like to talk about their defunding record. We have talked in this House before about the 12 and a half million dollars that the members opposite did cut from ALERT, that was really tackling organized crime, and really put ALERT into quite a hole and a deficit during that particular time. I know that they don't like to talk about this because the Leader of the Opposition had past efforts as the mayor of Calgary to reduce public safety by redirecting \$20 million away from the Calgary Police Service. That was not helpful in Calgary, as many of us within this Chamber certainly represent Calgary.

Member Miyashiro: Where did it go?

Mr. Ellis: Oh, yeah, Mr. Speaker. I'll get to the Member for Lethbridge-West if he'd like to talk about the million dollars he reduced from the Lethbridge Police Service. If he wishes to, that's fine. Yep.

The members opposite: they also constantly chirp about ticket revenue, Mr. Speaker. You always hear that all the time, right? Ticket revenue and that, my goodness, it was actually this side of the House that defunded the police. Well, I can tell you nothing can be further from the truth. I can tell you that the Calgary Police Service . . .

Member Eremenko: You can tell us that. Doesn't make it true.

Mr. Ellis: I will.

The Calgary Police Service was the only police jurisdiction in Alberta that had ticket revenue as a line item in their budget. What does that mean, Mr. Speaker? Well, I'm happy to tell you that. That means that a police officer's job would be dependent on the number of tickets that they would have to write the public. Also, the public's safety would be dependent on the number of tickets that a police officer had to write them. That in itself is wrong. We do not agree with that, and that's why that was changed. So there is no defunding of the police. I can tell you that right now.

What we did is try to make sure that the city of Calgary, sadly, under the leadership of that former mayor, made sure that the police were not relying on ticket revenue to fund the Calgary Police Service because it is a responsibility of a city council to make sure that police officers and law enforcement are properly funded in order to do the first thing, and that is to protect the citizens of Calgary and the citizens of every municipality within the province of Alberta.

Now, I can tell you also on this side of the House that we stand with our rural communities. We want to make sure that they have

the resources that they need. We stand with our friends in the First Nations communities who reach out to me time and time again because they are not satisfied with their contract service provider, and they are constantly looking to either do their own self-administered policing or whatever it is that is going to provide the service they need to protect the people in their nation. Mr. Speaker, I stand with them to make sure that they achieve those particular goals.

We also want to make sure our men and women have the tools that they need, and I thank them for striving each and every day to put their lives on the line. I can tell you that on this side of the House, without a doubt, without any sort of equivocation, we will not defund law enforcement in the province of Alberta. We will make sure that we do whatever it takes to keep Albertans safe.

Now, we aren't choosing between police and mental health, Mr. Speaker. We are building a modern and integrated safety system. I can tell you that we are creating an ASPS system and a system within Alberta where we are not an arm of the state but an extension of the community, where we will augment and support all law enforcement in the province of Alberta.

Now – interesting – I do want to talk about this for a moment. I don't want this to get lost because I have been saying this for several years, and you know, I have some members opposite that kind of brush me off like I don't know what I'm talking about, but I was confirmed by the Auditor General, actually, in March 23, 2026, which is only a few days ago. A report from the Auditor General federally revealed that there was a shortage of approximately 3,400 RCMP officers across Canada, Mr. Speaker. Even if we start doing simple math where we start running 30 or 40 people through depot in Saskatchewan over the course of a year or the course of several years – and we also have people that might retire. I can tell you that, again, the shortage when it comes to police officers in the RCMP when we talk from the Auditor General numbers is something that will be very, very challenging for the RCMP to catch up in.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For me and my colleagues here it's about: how quickly can we get police officers to again augment and support all of our municipalities within the province of Alberta to make sure that they have the resources that they need in order to stop the epidemic of organized crime that is plaguing not just Alberta but, quite frankly, Canada, Madam Speaker?

Now, I also want to talk about our training, Madam Speaker. I think it's very important to our new applicants. New applicants will be getting 26 to 27 weeks of matching training that is going to not only match, but it's going to hopefully exceed AACP standards. It's going to be delivered by subject matter experts, experienced police officers specifically selected from the academy meeting those AACP standards. Applicants are going to undergo a rigorous vetting and assessment process. All hires have to complete specialized training focused on Alberta statutes and ASPS-specific policies, use of force, advanced arrests, and control techniques, with primary focus on de-escalation, and I can tell you that there'll be community-based policing in Alberta's recovery-oriented system of care, which helps with people with mental health and addiction supports.

4:10

ASPS will also offer existing sheriffs the opportunity to transition to police officer status through a rigorous equivalency and enhancement process. Most highway patrol officers, quite frankly, Madam Speaker, already possess 15 weeks of basic sheriff training plus four weeks of RAPID courses covering intimate partner violence and crime scene management and high-risk deployment,

and transitioning officers will undergo an additional six to eight weeks of training, bringing their total equivalent training to 25 to 27 weeks. That's actually more than the RCMP. I have to say that and to put that on the record.

Now, following classroom training officers are going to be deployed to busy urban centres for four weeks to work alongside municipal partners, gaining exposure to high-volume calls and, more importantly, the social support networks that this government has made possible and available for all law enforcement in this province, Madam Speaker. There are no shortcuts in the ASPS training. In addition, we recognize the real-world value of the current sheriffs, many of whom have eight-plus years of experience in drug enforcement, impaired driving, crisis de-escalation, and I thank them for their work and what work they're going to be doing into the future.

Madam Speaker, while the members opposite want to, you know, reimagine a kind of world of Alberta without police, this government is busy reinforcing it because Albertans deserve to have timely and effective policing in this province. They need to have an understanding that they can depend on law enforcement so that when somebody calls 911, somebody will be showing up to the call, regardless of the uniform. This will not just be for rural Alberta. This will be for Calgary, Edmonton, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, and any municipality that needs additional supports because on this side of the House, as the Premier has stated time and time again, as I have stated time and time again, we will do whatever it takes to keep Albertans safe. That is a commitment from me and this side of the House.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton–City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 15 at third reading and to follow on what was, frankly, just another cartoonish performance by the minister of public safety addressing everything except his own record and his proposal to create a provincial police force no one has asked for.

Now, let me speak to one of the elements the minister just brought up, where he talked about this government's record of defunding police. He made an interesting claim. The minister's claim was that the Calgary Police Service, in his opinion, was issuing too many speeding tickets. What he is saying is that the funding that was taken away from the Calgary Police Service in 2019 was part of this government's sterling moral record of reining in a police service that was using the public as a cash cow.

Here are the facts, Madam Speaker, from an article in LiveWire Calgary from 2019 titled *Alberta Budget Leaves Calgary Police a Further \$13 Million Short*, in which it says, "Calgary's police chief said the province is taking a bigger chunk of fine revenue and that's leaving them with a potential \$10 million hole in their already shrunken budget." Chief Neufeld "said that in their typical duties, officers are enforcing provincial offences and legislation [and] the province collects the fines and they return a portion of that to the city for policing." To quote Chief Neufeld at the time, "The province's portion of that up until this budget was 26.7 per cent of the revenue, and they've boosted that to 40 per cent . . . So, the impact on our budget on that alone will be about 10 million." So the facts, contrary to the minister's claims: his government, the UCP, took a larger share of the fines that were being levelled on the people of Calgary. It was not a moral position of this government; it was a greedy one. For the minister to stand here and try to deflect from his own record by blaming Calgary police: that is not support

for our officers, Madam Speaker. It makes it awfully difficult to take the rest of what he had to say seriously in any way.

But I can tell you that when it comes to Bill 15, the minister already lacks any credibility amongst Albertans, not with municipal leaders, the folks that he claims are going to be his customers, and certainly not with the men and women of the RCMP who are not feeling the brotherly love the minister sure claims he puts out even as he continues to repeatedly attack that service and besmirch those members.

Let's talk about how we got here, Madam Speaker, the road to the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service. You know, it started back with Bill 11 in March 2024, when the minister claimed at that time that he was doing this because the RCMP wasn't able to provide enough officers. "If that's a challenge," the minister said, "I get that. But I can't wait." In March 2024 the minister said the problem was so significant that he could not wait. Now, municipal leaders at the time expressed their disinterest in his plan, their opposition to his plan. Alberta sheriffs noted that they had not been consulted by the minister about his plan.

Nonetheless, on September 26, 2025, the Premier shows up at Alberta Municipalities and, contrary to the minister saying that this is just to supplement the RCMP, she told Alberta Municipalities that Alberta now has two provincial police services. September 2025, Madam Speaker: now has. It didn't exist yet, but the Premier claimed that was her intention. That's what they're going to do. She said that municipalities are going to have the opportunity to choose an independent sheriff's detachment.

May 2025, Bill 49. An article from the media said that "the Alberta government wants to create a new provincial police service using about half of the sheriff workforce, to offer municipalities an alternative to the RCMP." Again, moving forward from where the minister was just a year before, where he said he was supplementing the RCMP, now he wants to give an alternative to the RCMP. Now we find ourselves back here this year, where he's claiming he's supplementing the RCMP. At that time he said there'll be one more option for municipalities to determine the best approach to law enforcement. That's the first time he started talking about having 600 sheriffs performing policelike duties that he could train and deploy as officers.

At that time the president of the Alberta Municipalities said that municipal leaders were frustrated, yes, by rising costs without seeing improvement in the community, but he said, quote: I don't know of any municipalities that are asking for an alternative to the RCMP. He had many questions about the cost of a provincial service, worried it would divide the skilled workers between multiple agencies, and the minister's office did not have any answers to questions about whether the government plans to replace any of the sheriffs who he intends to transition to police. We did get that answer this year in estimates, Madam Speaker. He does not.

July 2, 2025. We had the announcement of the new name, the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, and the new chief, Mr. Sat Parhar. Now we have Bill 15, so we have a two-year journey to get here, Madam Speaker. The minister back in 2024 said he could not wait because the problem was so significant for folks in rural Alberta to ensure that they would have those boots on the ground when they call, when they need them. As of two years later not a single pair of new boots on the ground, not one from that minister.

What we know now through Bill 15 and through the budget this year, which is the first time the minister has put any numbers on the record in two years, the first time we've had any glimpse of what the cost of this is going to be, how much he intends to spend, what he intends to accomplish – you know what his budget and business

plan says? You know what it says on schedule 22 in the fiscal plan? It says the minister will add 30 new officers in the next year. Thirty.

4:20

There are well over 100 RCMP detachments across this province, Madam Speaker. Now, of those, there are maybe 20 to 30 that are in mid-sized cities, so that leaves about 80 to 90 out there. The minister is offering 30 officers. Thirty. That's – what? – half an officer, a quarter of an officer for each area? The minister said two years ago that he could not wait, and he is offering next to nothing.

Now, of course, the minister talks about transitioning the 600 sheriffs that are already doing policelike functions. Again, at estimates we discussed that, and he plans to transition 200 per year over the next three years, but the fact is, Madam Speaker, that that is not any net new boots on the ground. Those are the same officers already fulfilling policelike functions. They will get a small increase in their efficiency because they no longer have to depend on an RCMP officer or other officer of jurisdiction to complete an arrest, but that is not a single new officer amongst that 600 that he will transition within three years that will add to anyone who can answer a call when it comes in. Not one.

Meanwhile what I can tell you, Madam Speaker, is that the RCMP did just graduate a class of 22 new recruits, all of whom are already beginning service in Alberta, new boots on the ground. In addition, they have another six experienced police officers who are currently in training that will deploy here in a few weeks, so we are seeing some results there.

I mean, the minister has remained pretty critical of vacancies in the RCMP despite the fact that he has vacancies himself within the Alberta sheriffs that they can't cover. He admitted that during estimates. He said clearly that they are not keeping up with prisoner transfers. They don't have enough officers. You know what happens when we don't have enough sheriffs to do the prisoner transfers, Madam Speaker? It means that RCMP officers have to go and do those prisoner transfers. The minister says that we don't have enough RCMP officers; therefore, we need to send sheriffs to fulfill policelike functions. The sheriffs are fulfilling those policelike functions and don't show up to do the prisoner transfer, which means we have to pull more RCMP officers to do that prisoner transfer. The minister's plan has been to take more actual, full-fledged officers away from taking calls so that he can grandstand about sending sheriffs to answer police calls. That is not a plan that respects Albertans. That is not a plan that respects either the sheriffs or the officers.

You know, I was out at the Rural Municipalities of Alberta. I was at the Alberta Municipalities caucus, and I can tell you, Madam Speaker, this minister has no credibility with his plan. Nobody is buying what he is selling. A performance like this today, a profoundly unserious performance from the minister on something on which he is spending tens of millions of dollars and on which he has refused to consult with the sheriffs, with the folks that are apparently supposed to be buying his service, with the Albertans he's claiming he's doing this to serve – he stands here and makes up stories about the Calgary Police Service. He stands here and makes accusations that are, as I have laid out, quite contrary to the facts and spends more time attacking the opposition than speaking to his plan. Perhaps he's auditioning to be back on this side of the aisle in a year or so.

The fact is, Madam Speaker, that when we are talking with municipal leaders, their concern is this minister's police funding model. They are concerned with their rising policing costs in their communities, and this is a universal truth. Even in the cities that have their own police services – Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat – we are seeing rising policing costs. You know what

they're calling for? They're calling for more investment in other areas that will help reduce policing costs.

I just spoke with some members of the RCMP today, and they agreed. They said if this government would step up and make proper investments in the court system – I will give the Minister of Justice some credit. He has been appointing a few more judges lately. Let's hope that continues. Let's hope they don't follow through with their threat to start defunding the courts because they want to stomp their feet at Ottawa. But we need more of that. We need more staff in those courts so that we don't have situations like we had in Calgary just a couple of years ago, where judges had to call this government out because they were having to combine courtrooms because there was not enough judges or staff.

A properly functioning justice system will reduce the cost of policing, Madam Speaker. It will mean that when we have those boots on the ground, when they make an arrest, that arrest can stick, the Crown prosecution have the time and the capacity to push all of those things through and don't have to think about what are lower level cases because this government is not properly funding the system.

You know what, Madam Speaker? They are also calling for more investments in social services. The minister can stand here and make whatever claims he wants about what we mean when we say, but what we are doing is actually reflecting the voice of Albertans, the folks he does not want to listen to. They're calling for increases in FCSS because they know that when they have more funding for their local programs for prevention and support, that takes a burden off of the local police. We're not talking about social workers having to go to serious crimes. What we are talking about is helping prevent things like domestic violence, petty theft, drug use, all of these things that happen when people lack proper social supports, when we don't invest in prevention programs. Then these things grow out of control, they take up the capacity of police, and that is what keeps police from being able to respond to more serious crimes or makes it more difficult, that takes boots away from where they need to be.

The minister would rather stand here and make cheap political attacks. They, naturally, recognize that public safety is an ecosystem, and yes, our police and our first responders are at the front of that. They are the tip of the sword, and they are an essential part of this. I will continue to say and maintain that this is the only government that has ever defunded those police, as I just read: the facts, the article, the quote from the chief of Calgary police himself.

But there are many, many things we can do to improve the situation. One of them is not the creation of this minister's new provincial police service, which in over two years has done nothing to put any more boots on the ground, who in the next year will barely move the dial in putting any boots on the ground despite spending \$29 million more. A minister who refuses to even just simply go and see the Real Time Operations Centre, where he's refusing to appoint an Alberta sheriff to collaborate with the RCMP. That is not a minister, Madam Speaker, who is willing to do everything he can to actually put boots on the ground, to actually protect Albertans and provide better safety. Those are the actions of a minister more interested in politics than public safety.

The fact is that what we have in Bill 15 is not going to make any significant difference for any community in this province any time soon. The minister wants to have it both ways. He wants to stand here and tell us all about how crime is actually going down, but at the same time that it's absolutely desperate we have more boots on the ground to respond to crime.

4:30

What I will say, Madam Speaker, is that, yes, we need to respond to the needs of Albertans. We need to do that collaboratively, actually listen to and work with our municipal leaders, talk with them about their concerns about this new police funding model in which the minister is drastically raising the policing costs for every municipality in this province, some by as much as 300 per cent, then stands here in this House and mocks their suggestions on how we can help bring those costs down. We need a government, we need a minister who is actually willing to work with all of the partners, who actually works with the RCMP instead of just talking about it, who actually treats him with respect, who actually sits down at the table with the federal government to negotiate a better deal. They are there, and they are sitting, and they are waiting. This minister has instead spent two years putting together a multimillion-dollar system that will deliver only 30 boots on the ground two years later.

Albertans deserve far, far better, Madam Speaker. I will stand by my record of support for the police here in Edmonton: the multiple graduations I attended on behalf of the Minister of Justice during our time in government, the times I've gone out on patrol with the members, the meetings I continue to have with our local chief, with members of the RCMP, with folks doing this work on the ground across the province, with municipal leaders, actually listening to them about their concerns and actually bringing their voices here instead of standing in here and talking and refusing to take their calls and e-mails.

Albertans deserve transparency. They deserve real support. They deserve a government that puts their needs ahead of its political interests. They don't have it now, but I'll tell you, Madam Speaker, that we are ready, and we are waiting.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mrs. Sawyer: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak in support of a bill dedicated to community safety, Bill 15, the Public Safety and Emergency Services Statutes Amendment Act, 2026. This legislation is a key step in strengthening safety across Alberta and ensuring a smooth and effective transition as we build the Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, or ASPS. Bill 15 at its core is about seamless continuity, smarter policing, and safer communities.

What exactly does this legislation do? Bill 15 makes amendments to the Police Act and transfers all unionized and non-unionized Alberta sheriffs employees into the new ASPS structure. This transition ensures that officers who serve and protect Albertans today can continue doing their jobs without disruption. This continuity is especially critical for rural communities, where police, sheriff, and RCMP response times are inherently longer due to distance and geography, and that cannot be understated. In many parts of rural Alberta an emergency call does not mean immediate backup. It can mean waiting alone with help still miles away. Sometimes it doesn't come.

Madam Speaker, I do not speak about rural crime in the abstract. I speak from a lived experience as a farmer in rural Alberta. We have dealt with batteries and generators being stolen during harvest and seeding, trucks taken directly from our farmyard while I'm in the kitchen cooking. Fuel tanks that once sat open now must be locked and monitored because theft is so rampant. Rural crime is not always a break and enter in the middle of the night. Sometimes it involves people arriving at a farmyard during the day, often in groups approaching a residence under false pretenses. I've had it happen to me. When you are alone on an isolated property, these

encounters are not just suspicious; they are frightening. There is no neighbour next door, and there's no immediate help.

That reality leaves no room for disruption or uncertainty in policing. A smooth transition ensures skilled boots on the ground remain in place to protect rural families and livelihoods. This legislation advances our government's work to establish ASPS as an independent police service designed for the future needs of our province. Safety in our communities must remain our number one concern. Alberta is growing fast. Our rural communities, our small towns, and our urban centres alike are feeling the pressures of increasing crime and the complexities of modern policing. Nowadays police deal with more than just crime. They are the first on the scene during a mental health crisis. They rush in to support in accidents. They mediate public disorders and community disturbances. That means we cannot afford any gaps in service, any sudden staffing shortages, and any risk to the stability of our law enforcement system. Rural Alberta knows what it means to do more with less: fewer officers, larger territories, and longer waits.

This bill supports ASPS as it builds out operational capacity, including the recruitment and training of new police officers tailored specifically to Alberta's public safety realities. This is forward-looking legislation, designed for a forward-looking policing model. Importantly, Bill 15 also amends the Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act so ASPS officers can continue to enforce it. These amendments allow specialized sheriff units such as surveillance teams and property closure units to continue performing their duties seamlessly. Through SCAN officers will continue to shut down drug houses, disrupt gang-related activity, responding to public tips about suspicious properties. That's what Albertans deserve: a community, wherever they may choose to live, that is safe and free. This legislation is a commitment to maintaining continuity and programs that have made real differences in our communities.

Now, Madam Speaker, we fully expect the opposition to criticize the bill, as we've heard. They'll say that it's wasteful. They'll say that it's unnecessary. They'll claim once again that the status quo is good enough. But let's be honest. The status quo has not been good enough for a very long time. The opposition has become comfortable defending a justice system that too often catches and releases repeat offenders right back into the communities they victimized. They want Albertans to believe that building new capacity in our law enforcement framework is a frivolous expense rather than a necessary investment. Even worse, they want Albertans to believe that those that harm us have no fault, out on bail once again to harm another, all thanks to the NDP and their Liberal partners in Ottawa. Crime has evolved. Organized criminal networks have evolved. Our policing system must evolve as well, and this bill is a step in the right direction. The Alberta Sheriffs Police Service is modernization. It is proper preparation. Bill 15 helps us do it responsibly, efficiently, and without interruption to the public.

Madam Speaker, when I think about the future of this province, I think of safe communities for our youth, for our families, and for every Albertan who calls this province home. I think of all of those who choose to build a career in policing, and I thank them for their courage and for their service. To be in this Assembly protected by these hard-working men and women is an experience that all in Alberta deserve to feel. They deserve it when they walk through their local park, when neighbours gather for a backyard or farmyard barbecue, and when they head down the road to work, whether that road is a city street or a rural range road. The heart of Bill 15 is simple: creating safer communities for every Albertan. It won't always be perfect. We do know that. But until we make decisive action, criminals will continue to feel that Alberta is theirs, too. ASPS is not about reacting to crime after the damage is done. It is about staying 10 steps ahead, anticipating threats, using intelligence

more effectively, deploying specialized units where they are needed most, and working collaboratively with local law enforcement to enhance capacity, not compete with it. Enhance. We want a policing system where officers have the resources and jurisdiction they need to intervene earlier, respond faster, and target the individuals and networks causing the greatest harm. Bill 15 is one step in building that system.

Albertans might ask why this legislation is needed now. I would offer that Bill 15 will ensure that the officers who protect Albertans today remain empowered to protect Albertans tomorrow. It ensures that Alberta continues building a modern, effective, and future-ready policing model. For those reasons, Madam Speaker, I strongly support Bill 15, and I do urge all members of this Assembly to do the same.

Thank you.

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

4:40

Member Miyashiro: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Why are we spending so much time on this bill when actually no one wanted this? Why is this government spending so much time and effort on establishing a provincial police force? Well, one thing that's clear from today is that this process allows the minister to stand up and editorialize at length with false narratives and conjure up bogeymen.

The process also allows the minister to data mine and come up with some gotcha items, you know, things like, oh, what my colleague just mentioned: the Calgary police had fines as a revenue stream, notwithstanding the fact that in this government's own budget document, page 151 of the fiscal plan, they list fines and penalties as revenue. Hmm, isn't that interesting? But you know what? That's just the thing you do when you're creating a budget. You list all the revenues available.

You know what? Speaking of data mining, I have to tell you the story about the Lethbridge police. The minister keeps bringing up that the Lethbridge police defunded the police and cut their budget. What the minister doesn't know, because he doesn't want to look into it – I thought he was a budget expert. Actually, historically the Lethbridge police would do two parts of the budget. One was enhancements that they'd like to have, and the other part is the base budget, the increase in policing costs, increase in operational costs. That budget has never been cut by Lethbridge city council, never been cut while I was on two terms of city council. The part that he's talking about was enhancements that we, actually, when I was on council, provided: approximately \$1.5 million in additional funds. The part that we cut, according to the minister, was some monies that the police department found later on in their reserves, so you know, there's data and then there's data.

Moving on. This government did not run on a provincial police force during the 2023 provincial election. Polling has consistently shown that Albertans would prefer to keep the RCMP. Truly, the UCP isn't listening to experts or Albertans. They're forcing through massive policing restructuring that nobody in Alberta has asked for or wants. Albertans have repeatedly rejected this plan, and Albertans deserve genuine solutions to their safety concerns. And there are some safety concerns – let's grant that – but you know what it seems? It seems like this government just wants its own police force. I mean, really, it's easier to do law enforcement than it is to, I don't know, move a bill through the legislative process.

Who did they speak with that confirmed a desire for a provincial police force? Well, there's no larger stakeholder in this process than rural municipalities represented by the RMA, or Rural Municipalities of Alberta. Way back in October '21, which I think my colleague mentioned as well, there was a study done by this government. You know: "What should we do? Should we explore a replacement force?"

Well, at that time five years ago, the RMA officially opposed the creation of a new provincial police force based on three things: it hasn't been determined that this move will improve the level of service for rural Albertans, there's no evidence that this transition will enhance local community input into policing, and that the government of Alberta has failed to demonstrate the move will be cost neutral to municipalities. What's become very evident in the last few months, especially with the new police funding model, whatever model they want to introduce, is that it's going to drastically increase policing costs.

You know what's interesting about this in this government and policing costs or costs in general? Policing and fire and emergency are the largest costs for any municipality, and when the government itself are the ones that are increasing policing costs for municipalities, that puts a real pressure on their tax base.

Again, the RMA continues to oppose the implementation of this police force for the same reason it did years ago. It hasn't just demonstrated that this will improve the level of service. There's, you know, a synopsis of this.

The sheriffs department currently has about 1,200 employees. The minister stated that roughly 600 of those already performed policelike duties and then claimed that many of these sheriffs could become police officers with a whole six weeks more of training but didn't say how they're going to be backfilled. Now, are we just creating the same amount? Are we getting the same amount of people? That's not clear either. We haven't solved that problem.

Some Alberta sheriffs branches in their own department have a vacancy rate of almost a quarter of their full complement, and that one is the sheriff highway patrol. If they can't even fill those positions, how are they going to move the 600 people into a provincial policing model and try to backfill when they're already 25 per cent short in one of their own departments?

This is also a little bit ironic because the UCP has been very critical of RCMP vacancies, and they really still haven't said how they are going to fill these vacancies a lot easier than the RCMP is filling theirs, which is quite interesting because recently we heard that over 20,000 people have applied for the RCMP recently, and among those there are thousands from Alberta. So the RCMP is actually making an effort to recruit. They're increasing the capacity at the Regina depot, and they want to move forward with fully policing RCMP across the country.

You know what also hasn't been made clear, Madam Speaker? It's something that's kind of a little bit nerdy from my perspective, but what does your organizational structure look like? When you have this new police service with higher levels of service, it adds complexity. The operational requirements for a more complex organization are far higher than just transitioning everyone over from sheriffs unless this government just thinks they can do that. I don't know. It's possible. These complexities arise from things like more services in general as a police force and more specialized services, higher levels of ongoing, continuous training, facilities management, prisoner transfer and cells, records management on a higher level.

The other thing that'll really benefit this new police force is management and supervisors who have extensive, wide-ranging skills and experience as well as an understanding of what positive organizational behaviour and a positive organization looks like. Where are they going to find these people? They're going to need tons of them.

You know, there's also no evidence that this transition is going to enhance any local input into policing, and that was one of the things that I think was asked by the RMA: how do we have some input into how this is going to work? In Bill 49 from this government it just redefines the new board as corporations, right? It defines that the relationship is between that police service and the government, not

between the police service and the community. It doesn't mean oversight. What it means for local government is that it means a contractual services agreement, so it has nothing to do with service oversight. It has more to do with the transaction.

You know, really important to Rural Municipalities is that this government has failed to demonstrate that this move will be cost neutral. Above all else, this policing model does not make sense for municipalities because there's no cost advantage at all. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report estimated the cost for the transition to the APP over six years is \$366 million, and in doing this transition to a provincial police force, the province will lose about \$170 million a year in federal funding. That's over \$1 billion in six years.

Madam Speaker, this initiative seems to be no more than a power grab and possibly a vanity project, so I will not support Bill 15. Thank you.

4:50

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

Member Boparai: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to express our party's steadfast, unequivocal opposition to Bill 15, legislation that continues the UCP's reckless march toward an Alberta provincial police force. Let us be absolutely clear from the outset about what this bill represents. It is not about public safety. It is not about getting more boots on the ground despite the minister's repetitive and misleading talking points. This bill is the latest chapter in a costly, unnecessary, and unmandated vanity project. It is an exercise in political branding.

Bill 15 amends the Police Act to enable the mass transfer of staff from the Alberta sheriffs branch to the new Alberta Sheriffs Police Service, or the ASPS. It grants the minister the sweeping power to forcefully transfer employees, tearing up the spirit of their contracts and pushing through a massive restructuring of provincial law enforcement that absolutely nobody in Alberta asked for.

Albertans are facing a real crushing crisis right now. They're struggling with the cost of living. They are waiting hours in emergency rooms and months for critical surgeries. They're worried about finding good-paying jobs and ensuring the kids have properly funded classrooms. Instead of addressing health care, affordability, or education, this UCP government is laser focused on pouring millions of dollars into an expensive policing rebrand.

Madam Speaker, let's talk about the mandates. During the 2023 provincial election the UCP deliberately hid their intentions. They did not campaign on replacing the RCMP. They did not run on building a provincial police force. In fact, every time they were pressed on the issue, they downplayed it, yet here we are in spring 2026. Through Bill 11, Bill 49, Bill 4, and now Bill 15 we're watching them build the framework for a provincial police force brick by brick. They convened the Premier's Alberta Next Panel, chaired by the Premier herself, which conveniently produced a report telling her to charge ahead with this plan without a referendum and without genuine consultation with Albertans.

Polling has consistently shown that Albertans support the RCMP. They want to keep the RCMP. Municipalities across the province have made it clear that they do not want this change, warning that it will destabilize rural and small-town policing, but the UCP is not listening to experts. They are not listening to municipalities, and they are certainly not listening to Albertans. They are pandering to a fringe, separatist base. They want to leave the Canada pension plan, they want to withdraw from the joint tax collection agreement with the CRA, and they want to kick out the RCMP.

Why? Why is this government so obsessed with creating a police force that nobody wants at a price tag we cannot afford? Madam Speaker, we have to look at who benefits. It is certainly not the taxpayer. The UCP wants an independent, federally overseen law enforcement agency out of the way. They are constructing a system that suits them by building a provincial police force from the ground up governed by boards they appoint through frameworks they dictate and led by a minister who can order personnel around on a whim. They're building an agency that answers directly to the UCP cabinet.

Madam Speaker, Albertans are rightfully suspicious. This is a government that had lurched from scandal to scandal. They have a history of trying to interfere in the justice system. Now they want to replace the independent RCMP with a force they control. This isn't about community safety; this is about covering up their tracks. It is about consolidating power, removing independent federal oversight, and creating a policing structure that can be manipulated to shield their own corruption and political scandals from genuine scrutiny. It is an absolute affront to democratic accountability.

Madam Speaker, the shell game is no new boots on the ground. The minister has repeatedly tried to sell this transition by claiming it will result in more boots on the ground. This is mathematically and logistically false. Moving an employee from one agency to another does not add a single new position to the front lines. The Alberta sheriffs currently have about 1,200 employees. The minister claims roughly 600 of those sheriffs already perform policelike duties and could become police officers after just six more weeks of training.

First of all, six weeks of training to elevate a peace officer to a fully fledged police officer is dangerously inadequate. As Doug King, a criminal justice professor at Mount Royal University has rightly pointed out, sheriffs will need to learn incredibly complex new skills and laws, handling Charter rights, executing search and seizure, and managing detentions versus simple arrests. Fast-tracking this puts both the officers and public at risk.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, where are the replacements going to come from? If you take hundreds of sheriffs off highway patrol and out of courtrooms to make them ASPS officers, who does the jobs they left behind? We already know the UCP cannot recruit enough sheriffs for the current system. A freedom of information request from last summer revealed that the sheriff highway patrol had a hard vacancy rate of 22.5 per cent. The UCP has relentlessly criticized the RCMP for vacancies, yet they are experiencing massive gaps in their own provincial agency. How exactly do they plan to fill these old but still entirely necessary sheriff positions? They don't have a plan. It is nothing more than a bureaucratic shell game.

Madam Speaker, there is a staggering cost. For months the UCP refused to be transparent about the price tag of the ASPS. Finally, the release of Budget 2026 laid bare the initial financial damage. We saw an additional \$36.9 million allocated simply to the implementation of the ASPS, bringing the total operating budget for the sheriffs up to nearly \$201 million. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The National Police Federation has laid out exactly what converting roughly 600 sheriffs into fully trained police officers will actually cost the taxpayers: \$29.36 million just for salary upgrades to match first-class constable pay; \$5.4 million for training to meet Alberta policing standards; \$7.8 million for uniforms, gear, and pistols; \$140,000 per vehicle for new or retrofitted fully outfitted police cruisers; \$32 million for infrastructure upgrades, leases, and retrofits.

Madam Speaker, let us not forget the independent PricewaterhouseCoopers report commissioned by this very government in 2021. That report estimated the cost of transitioning to an Alberta provincial police force over six years would be \$366 million. Worse yet, by kicking out the RCMP, Alberta stands to lose \$170 million annually in federal

funding. That is over a \$1 billion loss over six years. Where is the money coming from? It is coming out of the pockets of hard-working Albertans. It is money that is being diverted away from a health care system that is collapsing under the UCP's watch. It is money stolen from public education.

Madam Speaker, furthermore, Bill 15 wields a profound disrespect for the workers who keep our province safe. Under this legislation the minister may order the transfer of an employee or a whole class of employees to the ASPS even if their contracts say otherwise. While the government claims that this operates under a successorship model that maintains current collective agreements until new ones are negotiated, the reality on the ground is one of coercion and uncertainty. Transferred employees are entirely ineligible for severance or termination pay if they refuse to go along with this scheme.

5:00

Madam Speaker, Bobby-Joe Borodey, vice-president of AUPE, which represents about 1,000 sheriffs, has raised serious unanswered alarms. As she stated, quote: "Some of them are looking forward to an opportunity to pursue a career as a police officer. Some of them are not. That's not what they signed up for, and they feel like they are being forced to do something that they had no intention of ever doing." Unquote. What happens to the conservation officer or the court security sheriff who loves their job but has zero desire to become a municipal police officer? They're trapped by a government that views them as pawns in a political game. Has the UCP even properly consulted AUPE on the logistics of establishing this new bargaining unit? The chaotic rollout suggests they haven't. My colleague the Member for Edmonton-City Centre, our public safety critic, said it best. We have to ask what impact this is going to have when we are moving sheriffs away from key services while the minister is experiencing the exact same recruitment problems as every other police service in Canada.

Madam Speaker, Bill 15 also amends the Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act, allowing the director to delegate powers to this new independent police service. The SCAN unit currently does valuable work investigating community complaints and turning criminal activity over to the police, though the UCP is blurring those lines, consolidating power, and muddling jurisdictions simply to justify the existence of their billion-dollar ASPS experiment.

[The Speaker in the chair]

We cannot and will not support the UCP's backdoor move toward establishing a provincial police force while so many real, agonizing priorities for Albertans remain completely unaddressed. Albertans deserve genuine solutions to their safety concerns. They deserve robustly funded social services, mental health support, and addiction treatment, things that actually prevent crime. They deserve a government that works with municipalities and respects their input, not one that forces expensive mandates down their throats.

Mr. Speaker, the UCP lacks the mandate for this bill. They lack the funds to do it without cannibalizing other vital services, and they lack the trust of the Alberta public to build an independent justice system. I urge every member of this Assembly to listen to the municipalities, listen to the workers, listen to the experts, listen to the taxpayers, and vote against Bill 15.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there any other speakers?

Seeing none, would the hon. minister like to close debate?

Mr. Ellis: Waived.

The Speaker: Debate has just been closed with a waive.

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

(continued)

Bill 21

Interprovincial Trade Mutual Recognition Act

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of the Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration to move second reading of Bill 21, the Interprovincial Trade Mutual Recognition Act.

With growing uncertainty around U.S. trade and the use of tariffs, it is more important than ever that Canada make it easier to trade within our own borders. This legislation, if passed, will enable the implementation of the Canada mutual recognition agreement on the sale of goods, strengthening Alberta's position as a national leader in reducing internal trade barriers within our Confederation while opening new doors for Alberta businesses, expanding economic opportunities, and delivering real benefits for consumers across our province and the country. The mutual recognition agreement signed by most provinces and territories commits across Canada to recognize each other's regulatory approvals for the sale of goods. That means that if a product is already approved for sale in one jurisdiction, it should not have to jump through the same hoops just to be sold in another jurisdiction.

Right now, Mr. Speaker, Alberta businesses often spend time, resources, and money navigating duplicative processes and rules before they can introduce a product into a neighbouring province. This legislation aims to cut through that unnecessary red tape by giving Alberta businesses and Alberta the tools they need to efficiently implement the agreement and to maintain the high standards that Albertans expect when it comes to health and safety for consumer protection and environmental responsibility.

While Canada has long championed internal trade and true Canada-wide competition, steps need to be taken to modernize our own legislative framework to ensure consistency with other provinces and jurisdictions. Other provinces moved quickly to introduce legislation, and we have learned from their experiences. This allowed us to create a framework that is clearer, more flexible, and more transparent than others. The legislation before us does several important things to give Alberta businesses a fair and competitive advantage while maintaining Alberta's sovereignty over key policy areas.

First, Mr. Speaker, it designates the mutual recognition agreement on the sale of goods as a recognized agreement under Alberta law, ensuring that once it takes full effect on June 30 of this year, businesses can rely on it with confidence of the law. Second, it establishes an efficient and transparent ministerial order process for managing Alberta's list of exemptions. This allows responsible ministers to quickly add, remove, or update exemptions in cases where Alberta needs to maintain its own standards to protect public health, safety, consumer protection, and workers, or the environment. Third, it provides structure needed to adopt future agreements covering services and use of goods, which are expected to come in years that follow. This is about creating a system that is flexible enough to grow with Canada's evolving internal trade landscape while giving Alberta full control over where and how it recognizes regulatory measures from other jurisdictions.

Mr. Speaker, implementing mutual recognition is a big win for Alberta, for our businesses, our economy, and the entire country. It

means lower compliance costs, quicker times to market, fewer barriers standing between Alberta businesses and consumers, which benefits everyone who buys and sells goods in Canada. For Albertans this means more choice on store shelves for consumers and fewer delays for businesses. Alberta will continue to set into force its own requirements in areas where unique provincial interests must be protected, and this legislation gives us a stronger and more transparent mechanism to do exactly that.

Some have asked what happens if another province's standards differs from our own. Well, Mr. Speaker, that is precisely why the agreement includes the annex, which is in this legislation a clear process for managing exemptions. When equivalency exists, mutual recognition will be applied. Where differences in the regulatory process for the sale of a good matter, such as in areas of public safety, protecting the environment, Alberta retains the authority to require its own processes in those circumstances.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's regulatory bodies and business community have worked closely with the province throughout this entire process. They've made it clear that removing unnecessary barriers will help them grow, innovate, and compete at a national scale and that maintaining Alberta's high standards is essential. This legislation delivers for Albertans and Canadians on both fronts. Looking for a new trade opportunity and partnership is always top of mind, and this legislation helps us bridge gaps between jurisdictions, build new relationships, and strengthen Canada's economic union. This is a big win for us as Albertans and as a province. It is a big win for the rest of Canada, and we're excited for the potential growth that it offers to our entire economy.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, this legislation positions Alberta as a leader in a way that it comes to strengthening internal trade, creating opportunities for businesses, and ensuring our province remains competitive and safe for years to come.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I again am pleased to move second reading of Bill 21, the Interprovincial Municipal Mutual Recognition Act, 2026.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has moved second reading of Bill 21.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

5:10

Member Hoyle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 21 is, at its core, about something that should be simple: making it easier to do business within Canada. I want to begin by being very clear about where we stand. Alberta New Democrats stand with businesses and support the reduction of interprovincial trade barriers. We support making it easier for businesses, especially small and medium-sized businesses, to operate, grow, and compete. We recognize that in a country like Canada it should not be harder to do business across provincial lines than it is to trade internationally. It's good to see the UCP government finally take a step in the right direction with Bill 21, as Alberta is one of the last provinces to get onboard with reducing international trade barriers.

It really should have come sooner, Mr. Speaker, because when the early threats of global uncertainty and trade tariffs were coming down last year, this UCP government did not present any meaningful steps to supporting Alberta businesses and growing investment. For far too long Alberta businesses have faced unnecessary barriers when trying to sell goods and provide services across provincial lines. Stats Canada noted that barriers to interprovincial trade added approximately 7 per cent to many costs for businesses, and earlier this year Alberta's internal trade grade fell to a B in CFIB's internal trade report

card because other jurisdictions advanced reforms while Alberta stalled on introducing mutual recognition legislation.

In fact, right now it is still often easier for an Alberta company to trade with the United States than it is to sell goods in another Canadian province. Products approved in one province often have to go through duplicate testing and duplicate approvals and additional fees just to be sold in another. This is inefficient, it is costly, and it makes Canadian businesses less competitive not just globally but within our own country.

Let me start by acknowledging the intent behind Bill 21. The idea that if a product is lawfully approved for sale in another Canadian jurisdiction, it should be generally recognized here in Alberta is a good one. It reflects a principle that most businesses would agree with: reducing duplication, cutting red tape, and allowing companies to move faster and more efficiently. From that perspective Bill 21 is a step in the right direction. Estimates suggest that fully removing internal trade barriers could increase Canada's GDP by as much as 7 per cent, or roughly \$210 billion, over time. For Alberta, the potential gain is nearly 5 per cent in real GDP per worker.

Mr. Speaker, the challenge with this bill at the same time is that it doesn't nearly go far enough as Alberta businesses actually need. When we look closely at the structure of this bill, it becomes clear that while it creates a framework, it does not deliver the kind of certainty, clarity, or ambition that a true Canada-first approach to internal trade would require. At its core Bill 21 is framework legislation. It establishes the principle of mutual recognition, meaning that goods approved for sale in one province should generally be accepted in Alberta without duplicate approvals, testing, or fees, but it also includes a paramountcy clause, meaning it can override conflicting provincial rules, which is significant.

The strength of that framework is quickly diluted by how much is left undefined. Bill 21 gives cabinet sweeping authority to create exemptions covering jurisdictions, industry professions, and even "Any other matter," without having to return to the Legislature. Ministers can also issue exemption orders on a case-by-case basis. From a governance perspective this may offer flexibility, but from a business perspective it introduces uncertainty, and I say this as somebody who has been a business owner for many, many years prior to this role.

What businesses need now more than ever is stability. If you're a manufacturer, a distributor, or a service provider, you want to know the rules of the game. You want to know whether your product will be accepted across provinces, whether your approvals will be recognized, and whether those rules remain stable over time, and that is particularly important for small and medium-sized businesses, which stand to benefit from most reduced regulatory burdens but are also the least equipped to navigate shifting rules.

Moreover, this underlying agreement in this bill does not apply to food, alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, live animals, or plants, and that matters because these exclusions are major sectors of our economy here in Alberta. If this government is serious about reducing internal trade barriers and is serious about putting a Canada-first approach, those are exactly the sectors we should be tackling, not leaving off to the side. Even business groups that support this bill have said the same thing. They welcome the direction, but they're calling for expansion, particularly in areas like food and alcohol because they understand that partial economic solutions will only deliver partial results.

As the director of Alberta interprovincial trade with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business said about this bill, quote: we would really like to see everything included as part of mutual recognition, all goods, all services, all labour being able to move freely across Canada; I think provinces do need to let go of some of

the protectionism and open up the great products that we have across our country. End quote.

There are also gaps in Bill 21 with respect to labour mobility as it does not apply to professions already covered under the Fair Registration Practices Act or the Labour Mobility Act, and that means it does not solve one of the most significant barriers in our economy, which is the ability of workers to move freely between provinces and have their credentials recognized. That matters because internal trade is not just about goods. It is also about people, services, and the ability to move talent where it is needed. According to federal data barriers to internal trade, including labour mobility, are costing our economy upwards of \$200 billion lost in GDP and about \$5,100 per Canadian every year.

In some service sectors regulatory barriers function like a 40 per cent tariff due to restrictions on professional mobility. That is an enormous drag on our productivity and growth, and this bill does not meaningfully address it. We are a province that depends heavily on skilled labour, whether it's in construction, energy, health care, or trades. When workers cannot move easily, projects are delayed, costs go up, and businesses struggle to expand. When we talk about internal trade, we need to be honest. Goods are only half the story. What good is it to approve a product across provinces if the workers needed to produce, install, transport, or service that product cannot move as freely?

Then there are gaps in enforcement. Bill 21 does not create a clear, direct mechanism for businesses to challenge barriers if they persist. Instead, it relies largely on government-to-government processes, meaning companies must depend on other governments choosing to act on their behalf. At the same time, the bill includes a protection from liability clause shielding the government from legal proceedings for actions taken in good faith under the act, so businesses are left in a position where they're expected to trust the system but without a strong independent way to enforce their rights if that system falls short.

Mr. Speaker, there's another major issue that cannot be ignored, and it goes beyond the technicalities of this bill. This legislation is rooted in strengthening interprovincial trade and building a more integrated Canadian economy. In many ways it's about putting Canada first and ensuring that Canadian businesses can succeed within their own country before looking elsewhere. But that message is undermined when members of this government continue to flirt with separatist rhetoric. While the Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration is standing here advancing a bill that reduces barriers between the provinces, some of his colleagues are promoting ideas that would pull Alberta away from Canada altogether, and that contradiction is not lost on businesses. Investment decisions are based on stability, predictability, and confidence in the future. When there's even a hint of political instability or ambiguity, our province's long-term place within this country is at risk, and risk drives investment away and jobs away.

5:20

I have to ask: how can this government claim to be pro business, to support economic growth, to encourage interprovincial trade while at the same time refusing to clearly and unequivocally denounce separatism within its own ranks? You can't claim to support internal trade and to support a Canada-first approach while at the same time tolerating and entertaining ideas that could weaken the very federation that makes trade possible. If this government is serious about supporting businesses, then it needs to send a clear message that Alberta is committed to being a strong and stable part of Canada. It should be clear that Alberta's future is within Canada and that our focus is on building strong economic connections, not questioning them. Will the members opposite denounce separatism

to ensure and assure businesses that they will not face more regulatory burdens because of Alberta separatism talks? What I can tell you is that on this side of the House we oppose the idea of separatism, or leaving Canada, and we will always defend Alberta's economic future and are always on Team Canada.

Mr. Speaker, there is value in Bill 21. Industries like oil and gas, forestry, and fertilizer production could benefit from reduced duplication. Small and medium-sized businesses could see real gains from simpler regulatory processes, but this bill doesn't go far enough in reducing barriers. Alberta has an opportunity to push for real internal free trade, to break down barriers, and to strengthen our position and lead Canada. Yes. On this side of the House we support reducing trade barriers. We support making it easier to do business. We support policies that help Alberta companies grow and compete, but this bill should have gone further to include key sectors like food and alcohol, tackling labour mobility in a meaningful way, and providing businesses with full clarity and transparency.

This UCP government should be backing that all up with a clear commitment to staying within Canada, one that removes any doubt about where this province stands. Until we see a clear Team Canada commitment from this government, this bill will remain what it is today, a step forward in the right direction but the bare minimum for our economy and the industries within it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Johnson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today to speak in support of Bill 21, which implements the Canadian mutual recognition agreement on the sale of goods signed by Alberta in co-operation with other provinces, territories, and the federal government. At its very core this legislation is about breaking down long-standing trade barriers, like unnecessary red tape and regulation, that have stood in the way of growth for our businesses and limited choice for consumers while maintaining Alberta's high standards for health, safety, and environmental protection.

For far too long provinces have operated with different product standards, licensing rules, safety regulations, and transportation requirements, making interprovincial trade far more complicated and onerous than it needs to be. Businesses often must spend additional time and money complying with multiple regulatory systems, redoing paperwork, repeating testing, and securing multiple certifications simply to sell the same product in another province. That duplication adds cost, delays entry into new markets, and discourages investment and innovation. Currently 1 in 5 businesses in Canada has identified regulatory duplication as a major barrier. This means fewer Alberta businesses expanding across the country and fewer opportunities for businesses, especially small and medium-sized ones, to grow and compete.

Not only does this situation impact business profitability and growth potential; it also has very real consequences for consumers. When businesses face high regulatory costs, those costs are often passed on to the consumers through higher prices. In other cases, products never reach Alberta's market at all, leaving consumers with fewer choices. Less competition ultimately means higher prices and limited selection.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot afford to see this situation continue any longer, especially at a time when the destabilizing actions of our largest trading partner, the United States, have made abundantly clear the importance of strengthening Alberta's domestic economy. In an increasingly uncertain global trade environment it's more important than ever to ensure that our

domestic market is resilient, competitive, and capable of supporting long-term economic growth.

Internal trade is critically important to Alberta. Trade within Canada accounts for roughly one-fifth of Canada's GDP, and domestic trade exports contributed to approximately 20 per cent of Alberta's GDP in 2024. Alberta is a major contributor to internal trade. In 2021 alone Alberta exported \$95 billion worth of goods and services to the rest of Canada, making it the third-largest domestic exporter in the country. Yet despite the importance of internal trade unnecessary interprovincial barriers continue to limit its full potential. It's estimated that these barriers cost the Canadian economy up to 7 per cent of GDP and that more than \$130 billion in economic activity could be unlocked if provinces recognized each other's regulations and harmonized standards.

This government, through the Interprovincial Trade Mutual Recognition Act, is taking concrete action to help unlock that potential, strengthening Alberta's economic competitiveness and diversification while increasing choice for Albertans. The act relies on the principle of mutual recognition whereby a good that meets the safety and quality standards of another province or territory is treated as meeting equivalent requirements in Alberta without the need for additional testing, approvals, or inspections. In simple terms, if a product is already approved for sale in another province, it should not have to go through the entire process again just to be sold here. For Alberta businesses this brings practical everyday benefits.

As Alberta removes unnecessary barriers and shows a willingness to trade freely, other provinces are encouraged to reciprocate, making it easier for Alberta-made goods to reach customers across the country. Mutual recognition also allows Alberta businesses to access cheaper and more competitive inputs from other provinces due to fewer regulations, helping them reduce costs, improve efficiency, and produce goods at a more competitive price point.

For many small businesses the benefit is straightforward. For example, a small business in Lacombe-Ponoka such as a hardware store or an ag supply retailer should not face extra red tape just to sell a product that is already approved in another province. Mutual recognition allows that business to stock more products, offer customers more choice, and remain competitive without facing the added paperwork or costs that come with duplications in regulation. These businesses can focus on what matters most, which is growing a successful business that is tailored to serving the needs of their communities.

With mutual recognition consumers stand to benefit as well. More goods are moving freely across provincial borders, and that means more competition and greater product choice on Alberta shelves. Whether it is household goods, building materials, or manufactured products, Albertans benefit when businesses can bring in a wider range of options at more competitive prices.

Mr. Speaker, it's important to emphasize that this legislation is not about lowering Alberta standards or limiting our ability to protect the public interest. Certain categories of goods, including food, alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis, are appropriately excluded from mutual recognition due to unique health, safety, and environmental considerations. Alberta continues to maintain full oversight in these areas through a ministerial order model which ensures that each ministry remains responsible for its own regulatory framework while applying a consistent and clear process for adding or removing exceptions. This model provides flexibility when required while maintaining accountability and strong protections for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation builds on Alberta's long history of leadership in reducing internal trade barriers. For more than 20 years Alberta has played a key role in advancing freer trade within Canada. We were active participants in negotiating the agreement on internal

trade and improving it into what is now the Canadian free trade agreement. We also worked closely with our western neighbours to establish the New West Partnership trade agreement. Alberta has also taken strong unilateral action. Beginning in 2019 Alberta reduced its exceptions under the Canadian free trade agreement by 80 per cent. In 2021 we introduced the Labour Mobility Act, making it easier for workers to have professional credentials recognized right here in Alberta. Our ongoing efforts to reduce red tape and unnecessary regulatory burden continue to strengthen Alberta's internal market.

5:30

The Interprovincial Trade Mutual Recognition Act builds on this strong foundation. It aligns Alberta with other provinces, it demonstrates our continued commitment to free trade within Canada, and it provides a framework to implement future mutual recognition agreements effectively. Mr. Speaker, this is a balanced and responsible piece of legislation. It reduces unnecessary red tape, helps businesses grow and sell more, gives consumers greater choice, and preserves Alberta's high standards. For these reasons I am proud to support this bill, and I encourage all members of this Assembly to do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will be short and sweet this afternoon and speak to Bill 21, Interprovincial Trade Mutual Recognition Act, perhaps from a different perspective as many have come at this bill today, and mention in general terms my feeling with respect to the government bringing this piece of legislation forward now in the light of their lack of attention to many pieces of free movement of goods and services across the country over a number of years. Now, in response to this new effort to collaborate with the federal government in a new-found dedication to Canadian nationalism that this government is trying to sell, they're looking to introduce this Bill 21 to bring it in alignment with the federal legislation and the MOU and so forth that have been signed and agreements that have been signed with the federal government.

However, if indeed the commitment was really there, Mr. Speaker, to look at aligning and look at improving and reducing trade barriers across the country, perhaps we'd have seen evidence of that in other areas of trade over the years. Some elements of this I've been harping about for a long time in this Legislature. Perhaps the Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration and the transportation minister might have paid more attention to things like removing barriers to trade for the movement of goods and services and people between provinces by perhaps seriously promoting a rural bus transportation network right across western Canada. That is indeed at the heart of promoting movement of goods and services across the country and removing economic barriers to do just that.

But we haven't gotten that type of attention, Mr. Speaker, from this minister or the transportation minister in trying to show some leadership right across the country and bring forward a resurrected, robust transportation network so that we could have a freer and more easy movement of people, goods, and services using a bus network, which is a simple thing to do. It's maybe not a sexy issue, but it's something that's necessary across the country. This bill that is brought forward has got lots of terms to it, and it's a framework legislation which will align itself with agreements that the Alberta government has come into with the federal government.

Realistically, I'd like to have seen a theme or a history, a track record, from this government and this minister to actually promote things like low-hanging fruits such as a robust transportation network across Canada and do something like write a letter to every transportation

minister across the country – provincially, federally, territorially – and suggest some Alberta leadership, that we get together and collaborate to talk about something as simple as bringing back robust transportation in a way that works, in a business model that will function for small communities right across this country and making sure that goods and services can flow into smaller communities. That's the only network of transportation that many small communities have.

Trucking, sure. There are some trucking capabilities, but buses served an integral piece of that transportation network, and it was indeed the flow and movement of goods and services these buses had that allowed many small communities to survive, including many, many Indigenous communities right across this country. Mr. Speaker, that is one element that has been missing from the motivation of this government before they saw fit to bring in Bill 21 to address this pressing problem of collaborating with the federal government. All of a sudden they think they're Captain Canada on the other side of the House. There are things that could have been done that they haven't done, and one of them is the resurrection of robust transportation, that I will continue to campaign for.

Secondly, little things as well. We talked to the agricultural producers, sugar beet producers today, and they were talking about one of the byproducts of their product of sugar beets, and that happens to be molasses. Molasses was talked about as being used as animal feed as a byproduct from sugar beets, yet many people don't realize that in an anti-icing or deicing product, molasses is one of those proprietary elements that is added to make the deicing or anti-icing agent actually stick to the roadway to prevent ice from forming in the roads.

So we have a resource here in Alberta that can be used by Alberta companies to actually create an anti-icing or deicing agent for our Alberta roads that we could then sell to other parts of the country. Perhaps this piece of legislation, Bill 21, would allow us to do just that more easily because our formulas are proprietary formulas by the two suppliers I know of in Alberta and would be able to be used in Ontario and in Quebec and perhaps reduce the amount of salt that they use and use calcium chloride instead.

Once again, lack of leadership and lack of comprehensive knowledge of the opportunities that exist that are right before us. The ministers of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Innovation and transportation can be faulted in both instances for not being aware and not actually taking a bull by the horns and promoting these issues. Perhaps they're more consumed, Mr. Speaker, with the concept of separatism or their own political survival in this province. The issue that they seem most seized with is that of separatism, and I am very, very concerned about the danger that this poses for the province.

Many of us in this Legislature were around in 1980 when the first referendum was held in Quebec, and then the second separatism referendum in 1995, where 50.2 per cent of the vote in favour of remaining in Canada was a slim, slim majority, which allowed us to hold the country together and avoid the horrific negotiations that would have been triggered by a loss of that referendum, yet this government continues to dance with the separatists.

For Lord knows what reason they see fit to not do the hard work of bringing people together instead of looking to pander to separatists, who have been around for a long time in this province, complaining that we get the short end of the stick in Confederation. Well, it's a lot harder, Mr. Speaker, to actually try to solve problems and join people together than it is to divide and try to get people angry all the time. I'm really, really, super upset that this government is continuing to pretend to be Team Canada when, in fact, they still tolerate separatists in their midst and actually promote it by way of allowing referendums on separatism, an easy route to pass it.

I've got lots more to say on that, Mr. Speaker, but I'll end my remarks for today and get wound up a little bit more in future debate. Thank you.

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

Member Kayande: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise and talk about this bill on liberalizing interprovincial trade as part of an agreement that this government was a part of last year. It is an important, nation-building activity that we be able to trade with other provinces and other people in other provinces. It's especially important for small businesses, who often don't have the horsepower, for very good reason, to manage a number of different regulatory environments and have to get approval in every single province separately in order to sell their goods. This is absolutely a no-brainer, and as part of something that helps tie our nation together, I'm extremely supportive of that. However, it took a really long time to get here. The minister alluded to that when he said that they were just really dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's and making sure that it was an absolutely perfect bill when we are, you know, one of the last provinces to do this.

5:40

The other thing that I would like to talk about is alcohol. This is, of course, not entirely within the control of the Alberta government. I understand that. However, we are the only province in Canada right now that still allows the sale of American bourbon and the import of American bourbon.

Mr. Nixon: Hear, hear.

Member Kayande: I'm hearing some hear, hears on the other side. Look, I like bourbon, too. I detest Trump trying to make us the 51st state more. That's what this is about. That's what this is about, and there's a perfectly good product from Taber that fits into my old fashioned, right? You know, I like the big ice cube, and I put my little cherry in there and a little twist of orange and, you know, some bitters. My kids make an absolutely mean old fashioned.

Member Ceci: In moderation.

Member Kayande: In absolute moderation. In moderation and very rarely.

The fact that this is a province that still allows entry of American – and let me be clear. When I brought this up in estimates at service Alberta, the minister said that I should be ashamed of myself, that I should be . . .

Mr. Nixon: You probably should.

Member Kayande: I just heard a heckle from the other side from the minister of social services, agreeing that I should be ashamed of myself, that I should be ashamed of myself for wanting American bourbon to be banned in Alberta, of all the things. This bill is a response to Donald Trump trying to make us the 51st state, and this was part of the response that we nationally, every province and the federal government, made to tie ourselves together more strongly.

An Hon. Member: Elbows up.

Member Kayande: Elbows up. This is part of the elbows up, and we will not get a deal on alcohol as long as we are bringing in product that weakens our nation. That is a fact, so what I would urge this government to do is to make it feasible and possible. The LCBO, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, is the world's largest liquor buyer, and Doug Ford, for all that I don't like a lot of things that he does, is two things: he is a patriot, and he has a generational political talent. So I highly recommend that we take steps to make it easier to sell our alcohol, our beer, our spirits into Ontario.

Member Irwin: Cheers to that.

Member Kayande: Cheers to that. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there any more speakers? Seeing none.
Does the hon. mover care to close?
I don't see anybody closing.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a second time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the debate. Glad to see progress made. I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 on Wednesday, April 1, 2026.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:45 p.m.]

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