



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Executive Council
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 14, 2023
3:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 30-4-7

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The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participant

Ministry of Executive Council
Hon. Danielle Smith, Premier and President of Executive Council

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

[Ms Goehring in the chair]

**Ministry of Executive Council
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Deputy Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Executive Council for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Premier, when we get to you, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Nicole Goehring. I am the MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs, and I will be the chair of this committee meeting. We will begin, starting to my right.

Mr. Rowswell: Hello. It's Garth Rowswell, MLA for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mrs. Allard: Good afternoon. Tracy Allard, MLA for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Walker: Good afternoon. Jordan Walker, MLA for Sherwood Park.

Mr. McIver: Hello there. Ric McIver, MLA, Calgary-Hays.

Mr. Stephan: MLA Jason Stephan, Red Deer-South.

Ms Smith: I'm Danielle Smith for the record, President of Executive Council, Premier of Alberta, MLA for Brooks-Medicine Hat. I'm joined today by Mark Parsons, who is our deputy minister, Intergovernmental Relations; Christopher McPherson, who is our deputy clerk of Executive Council and deputy secretary to cabinet; we've got Ray Gilmour, who is our Deputy Minister of Executive Council; and Dana Hogemann, who is assistant deputy minister and senior financial officer for Executive Council.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Ms Notley: Rachel Notley, MLA, Edmonton-Strathcona. I'm also joined by Paul Bretscher, who is our director of research, one of our researchers – anyway, one of these days we've got to figure out our titles; this is how we roll in the Official Opposition – one of our lead policy advisers in the Official Opposition.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

The Deputy Chair: Ms Rosin, if you'd like to introduce yourself for the record.

Ms Rosin: I will do that. I am Miranda Rosin, MLA for beautiful Banff-Kananaskis.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitutes for the record: Ms Rosin for hon. Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by the *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn your camera on while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to

be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of two hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Executive Council. Standing Order 59.01(7) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the Premier or member of Executive Council acting on the Premier's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of the Premier's comments a 50-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but speaking times may be combined between the member and the Premier.

After this, speaking times will follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus. The member and the Premier may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. If members have any questions regarding the speaking times or the rotation, please send an e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

Ministry officials may be present and, at the direction of the Premier, may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to two hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the speaking block time and the overall two-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the Premier in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 16, 2023. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 hard copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during the estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the Premier.

I would now invite the Premier to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, colleagues. It's a pleasure to be here for my first budget estimates as Premier of this great province. I've already introduced my colleagues from Executive Council.

Executive Council is the central co-ordinating body in the government of Alberta and provides leadership to ministries to implement the government's agenda as well as leadership to the

public service. It leads strategic planning, policy development, and policy co-ordination across government and supports cabinet decision-making. Executive Council also leads interactions and partnerships with other Canadian governments as well as international governments. We do that particularly through our intergovernmental relations function. Executive Council plans and manages state, official, working, and in-person visits involving government of Alberta representatives.

Executive Council's budget reflects a new and modern structure for the ministry that consolidates international relations into our Intergovernmental Relations division. International relations was absorbed into IGR shortly after I became Premier and reflects my desire to centralize the teams responsible for Alberta's relations with Canadian and international governments.

Executive Council's budget is allocated to two programs in the voted estimates before you. The first one, program 1, is for the office of the Premier, Executive Council, which includes the office of the Lieutenant Governor. Program 2 specifically relates to Intergovernmental Relations.

Program 1 includes the following: the Premier's office at the Legislature and the southern office at McDougall Centre in Calgary; the office of the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, who serves as head of the public service and provides policy advice, operations, and issues management. The cabinet co-ordination office provides organization and administrative support to cabinet. The policy co-ordination office works with the cabinet co-ordination office to support legislative and policy agenda work. Operations and machinery of government works with ministries, tracks crossgovernmental programs, projects, and issues. The protocol office is essential to building partnerships and relationships here and internationally, normally through state, official, working, and private visits. The Lieutenant Governor's office is, of course, very important in supporting Her Honour's responsibility to fulfill her duties as the King's representative.

Program 2 is for Intergovernmental Relations, as mentioned. That continues the important work of Alberta fighting for a fair deal in the federation and on economic exports, especially pipelines, to improve Alberta's role in the federation. As noted, IGR plays a central role in providing to me as Premier and all government departments in advancing Alberta's intergovernmental interests across Canada. IGR is also responsible for Alberta's internal trade policy and leading all internal trade disputes under the Canadian free trade agreement and the New West Partnership trade agreement.

Core functions of international relations include leading Alberta's international engagement on key issues and providing policy research and advice on emerging international issues; managing the Alberta international office network; working with government departments and agencies to support international trade development, investment attraction, policy advocacy, talent attraction, and international innovation and collaboration; planning and co-ordinating missions by the Premier and the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta who are assigned to the ministry's U.S. transboundary organizations; and facilitating visits of senior officials from foreign governments as well as negotiating and implementing memorandums of understanding, or MOUs, with foreign jurisdictions. Alberta has maintained offices abroad for more than 50 years. The government of Alberta currently maintains 16 international offices across four regions: the U.S.; Latin America; Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; and Indo-Pacific.

Executive Council's work to open more Canadian and international markets and opportunities for Alberta businesses and industries for the benefit of Alberta workers and families is part of a larger economic development effort that's paying off. Alberta's economy is poised to lead the country in growth this year and the

next two years, with our GDP forecast to grow by 2.8 per cent per year this year, 3 per cent next year, and 2.9 per cent the year after that. It's a positive trajectory that's expected to continue with the decisions and initiatives in Budget 2023, that we expect will attract more investment than ever and help businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive.

3:40

With its strong focus on job creation, economic growth, diversification, and investment attraction, Budget 2023 sets the stage for Alberta to remain Canada's economic engine for years to come. In turn, prosperity supports government spending on health care, education, the environment, income support programs and care, and support for the vulnerable. We see that relationship in Budget 2023. If passed, its investments and priorities will make historic investments in health care and education. It will enhance community policing and access to addiction and mental health supports to keep communities safe and continue to drive the economy and attract record investment with more jobs, quality education, and diversification.

Just as important as the funding allocations are to these priorities is the continued commitment to responsible fiscal management. It's a commitment that led this budget to forecast a surplus for only the fourth time in the last 15 years, and it's a commitment that led this government to develop a new fiscal framework, one that adds more rigour around expense decisions while still giving government the flexibility to invest in the services and programs that Albertans rely on. The new fiscal framework will manage any future surpluses after all the hard work that went into putting the province's books in order.

First is balanced budget legislation. If there is a massive reduction in government revenue for some unforeseen reason, a return to a balanced budget will be required within two years. Next, operational funding increases must be below the previous year's inflation plus population growth. Governments traditionally based operational increases on guesses of future needs; this new approach will avoid an overestimate and therefore overspending. Third, we prepare for emergencies. Devastating wildfires, major flooding emergencies happen. We have a \$1.5 billion contingency fund to reduce or avoid supplementary estimates in the case of extraordinary emergencies.

Finally, future surpluses can go to only three things. We have created the Alberta fund as a short-term holding account until we know the full amount of the surplus that will be achieved in a given year. Of this, half of any surplus will go to paying down debt, so we can reduce interest payments and create fiscal room. Ultimately, that will set us on a path to pay off the debt completely. On the other remaining amount, it can go to debt reduction, to savings, or to one-time spending. Some of this will go into the heritage savings trust fund. Budget 2023 proposes a \$1.8 billion net investment this year, setting that fund on a positive growth trajectory.

The last area, one-time spending, means that it does not have ongoing operational funding attached to it and will not lead to higher government spending in the future. The prudent new fiscal framework gives government the ongoing fiscal strength to support our economy, create economic opportunity, invest in jobs, skills, and families, reliably support health care and education, and make Alberta the choice for investors, businesses, and workers looking for a good life for themselves and for their children.

Alberta has strong foundations, including low taxes, a skilled and educated workforce, and an efficient regulatory environment. Budget 2023 enhances our business climate even further by making strategic investments that support key and emerging sectors. If passed, Budget 2023 will support that future growth by helping

businesses and workers to thrive and by attracting more investment than ever before. It will support workers and families, transform the health care system to improve services, and target investments to local solutions for safer communities. In all, it will make life better in Alberta, which has been my goal since day one, and the fiscal framework will ensure that we manage our resources so that we can meet those needs well into the future.

Madam Chair, with that, I'd be happy to take questions.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, Premier.

I would like to return briefly to introductions as we have two members that have recently joined. I would like to start with Minister Schow.

Mr. Schow: Joseph Schow, MLA for Cardston-Siksika.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Member Renaud.

Ms Renaud: MLA Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

For the next 50 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the Premier may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Members, would you like to combine your time with the Premier?

Ms Notley: I'd prefer to, yeah.

The Deputy Chair: Premier?

Ms Smith: I would like to do block time.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms Notley.

Ms Notley: Well, okay. All right. Allow me to begin, first of all, by thanking everybody for being here, thanking the Premier for her presentation, thanking the public officials who have been working so hard since our last budget to try and maintain a certain level of stability and ensuring that the trains continue running over the last 12 months, which I know has not been entirely easy. I was going back through my previous observations at the last round of estimates, and interestingly, the level of instability in the Premier's office was a big theme then. Little did I know.

Anyway, on that basis, I guess maybe I will start by just going with the following quote:

I had actually rather looked forward to a conversation because I know you speak a lot about conversations, Premier. I had hoped that this would be the first opportunity for us to have one.

You probably are aware that that is the Premier herself speaking to former Premier Alison Redford when she, strangely or uncharacteristically, refused to do a back and forth in terms of the format for our conversation today. So I am disappointed that we're not going to be able to do that back and forth. However, we will attempt to carry on in this much more structured and limited format. Yes. I guess, ultimately, as it turned out, there was only one opportunity for you and that Premier to engage.

Anyhow, I'm going to start by referencing the strategic plan on page 4, in particular the Premier's message that refers to leading the way on health care reforms to build a stronger system; and page 5, the vision, that the government is providing record levels of health care investment, which, in fact, the Premier herself referred to in her introductory remarks; as well as strategic plan priority 2,

objective 4, ensuring an accessible and modernized health care system.

Obviously, we're in a position here, when it comes to health care, where we have a government that over three years has very aggressively and intentionally starved health care funding in this province, with reference to the business plan, which shows that the most recent actuals in 2021 showed that the plan was for Alberta to have the lowest per capita health care spending relative to B.C., Ontario, and Quebec. Of course, that would mean that it was probably the lowest per capita with the exception of perhaps one other province in the country.

As a result of that sort of history, we, of course, come into this budget as the wealthiest province in Canada, with 33 health care facilities with bed closures in ERs, in surgeries, in acute care. In Hardisty the ER has all six beds closed, and all of this has been going on for some time.

Then we come to this budget, where the Premier is endeavouring to argue that the crisis is over, everything is fine, and we've now made up for all our mistakes. But one of the questions I would like the Premier to turn her attention to, when she is able to respond, is to look at the amount of funding to this budget. Leading up to Budget 2023, we had failed to fund on the basis of population and inflation, and in fact we had reduced funding in health care considerably. We then, of course – and then we had a great deal of crisis experienced in the lives of Albertans each and every day: ER wait times, ambulance delays, failure to find a family doctor, doctors leaving the province, all the things, surgery delays. Real, unfortunate, hard-felt impacts on the lives of Albertans.

So we get to this budget, and the Premier in various contexts has asked us to throw her a little party for allocating a 4.1 per cent increase to the budget. But we know that inflation and population growth this year was, in fact, 8.6 per cent. That means that had you simply funded for inflation and population growth and ignored the fact that the system as a whole has been going through tremendous chaos as a result of the mismanagement over the last three and a half years, you would actually have funded an 8.6 per cent increase in 2022. So that means that we're about a billion dollars short.

3:50

If we had simply followed population and inflation going back to 2018-19, we'd actually have \$1.4 billion more in our health care system. We're short anywhere between \$1 billion and 1 and a half billion dollars in our health care system based on the simple principle of population and inflation, ignoring the fact that we just went through the biggest collection of pressures on our health care system that we have seen in multiple generations.

My question is to the Premier. Why does she think that the current budget is adequate given all the pressures that we have seen? Why, in fact, are we continuing to cut in real terms in this budget? In fact, by failing to account for population and inflation, this budget still amounts to a \$1 billion cut in real terms.

Now, according to your strategic plan, priority 2, objective 4, on page 21 the Premier says that she wants to modernize the health care system. In the past the Premier has argued that Albertans should have copays. She has argued that we should look at having Albertans pay some of the cost of their visits to their family physicians. She's argued in a paper, June of 2021, that the government of Alberta could actually generate \$4 billion in new user fees in health care. I'm just wondering if the Premier can talk about the relationship between these very clear positions she has taken in the very not distant past and the decision to bring forward a budget with real cuts, real term cuts as far as it relates to the quality of health care received by Albertans.

You know, we see that in strategic plan priority 2, objective 4, it reads: ensuring an accessible health care system. But we have 40,000 people in Lethbridge who don't have a family doctor. What exactly is the estimated time in which we can see those folks in Lethbridge getting access to a family doctor? Six months? One year? Two years? Three years? Just curious what the plan is.

Finally, I noted that the Premier on her radio show just this weekend was encouraging people to go out there and get themselves their own MRI and just buy their own MRI and then take that MRI around to doctors and see if they can maybe get better diagnostic support, better opinions from their family physicians on their health care. I'm just curious whether the Premier thinks it's appropriate to be encouraging Albertans to pay for what amounts to a fundamental component of their day-to-day health care out of pocket. That's some good, old-fashioned private health care funding right there. Not delivery; funding.

Then even today in question period I heard the Premier say, and I quote, in relation to the contraception issue: we want insurance companies to take the lead on setting priorities around what is funded in terms of treatment. Of course, we know that pharmaceuticals are an important part of treatment, and contraception is a very common form of medical care for women. I'm curious as to the degree to which the Premier is relying on insurance companies to direct health care priorities and health care decisions and the degree to which the short funding and the real cut in our budget is related to her belief that private insurance should be playing a role both in terms of funding health care services for Albertans as well as making priority decisions around what services are available universally as part of our health care system and those that are not, bearing in mind that most Albertans believe they should be able to get the health care they need on the basis of what their doctors tell them are their priorities regardless of how much money they have in their pocket to either pay for that service or to pay for insurance premiums.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Premier, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Let me see if I can deal with these in reverse order.

The experience that I think most jurisdictions have had is that having a mix of public and private pharmaceutical coverage has resulted in a broader range of items on the formulary being covered, and it just really does give the best level of coverage to citizens, which is what we should all be concerned about here, making sure that we've got the best coverage for citizens. I believe that we have a good system with Alberta Blue Cross being our go-to provider for a whole range of our programs, our over-65 level of programming, our Alberta Works, and others who rely on social services. We also know that universities have been very progressive at being able to provide pharmaceutical coverage and health coverage for their students. I think that this is a system that works. We on this side believe in free enterprise and the free market, and we believe that we can have a good partnership with every player in an arena of public and private, nonprofit as well as other players. We have an ideological difference, I think, from Ms Notley and her party.

When it comes to the issue of MRIs and CT scans, I think that Ms Notley has mischaracterized my comments, which I'm becoming accustomed to. So let me talk about how . . .

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt, but a point of order has been called.

Mr. Sabir: I think that under Standing Order 23 I will rely on (h) and (i). Basically, saying that the Premier's comments were mischaracterized, as she has become accustomed to: that's false allegations and imputing false motives. Simple questions were put forward to the Premier. The Premier should try to answer those.

The Deputy Chair: Mr. McIver.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. It's clearly a matter of debate. There was no personal insult there. It was a comment, the Premier's opinion, that her comments had been mischaracterized. Pretty common in political debate. Nothing unusual, certainly not a point of order. I just think it'd be more productive to have the questions asked of the Premier, or we can spend the next hour and a half doing points of order.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to determine that it's not a point of order, but I would encourage all members to use language that does not disrupt the committee. Thank you.

Ms Smith: Madam Chair, let me put into the proper context what I actually did say on the weekend when we were asked about why it is that the federal government has chosen to take an aggressive stance with eight provinces in reducing the funding. Part of it is just a different interpretation on how MRI and CT scans shall be paid for. In our system and that of seven other provinces if it is medically necessary and it is prescribed by a doctor or specialist, it absolutely is covered. There are certain circumstances – I don't want to judge the mindset of a particular patient – why they might decide to get a second opinion or why they might decide to get an annual diagnostic. But that is something that we have in our system, and that's where we disagree with the federal government, and we'll be seeking a legal opinion to be able to maintain that level of choice, where medically necessary scans will be covered.

In fact, this year's budget does call for a \$12 million increase, bringing the total to \$45 million, which will provide an additional 41,000 CT scans and an additional 24,500 MRIs this year. We would prefer for everybody to be able to get their care within a medically reasonable period of time, and I'll get to that in a moment, because that is one of the principal reasons why we put official administrator John Cowell in place.

When it comes to family doctors, I would hope that with the \$2 billion invested by our Health minister – he announced that a couple of days ago – as well as 3,400 new health practitioners that are going to be graduated from all of the different programs as well as expanding the scope of practice for all of our terrific front-line workers, we would be able to create what he's calling a medical home for every single person.

4:00

This is going to be central in taking the pressure off our health care system because the very first point of access into the system should be that medical home, whether it's a family doctor or a nurse practitioner or other health professional, rather than having to go to a walk-in clinic or, unfortunately, increasingly what we're seeing is emergency rooms. Making sure that everyone has access to a medical home is foundational to making sure that all parts of the system work, and that's why we have \$2 billion invested in that and an additional \$200 million to identify additional spaces that we can support at postsecondary as well as, I may say, the work that our Trade, Immigration and Multiculturalism minister as well as our Deputy Premier, Minister of Skilled Trades and Professions, is working on in recognizing foreign credentials as well as attracting

workers through different streams so that they can have provincial nominee status.

I was very pleased that we were successful in asking for a higher number of provincial nominees. It had traditionally been around 6,500. We've got that elevated to 10,000, and it's going to continue going up. So I'm delighted to be able to work with my colleagues to see if we can find additional streams. We do have a stream with an MOU that we have signed with the Philippines to bring in LPNs and have a bridging program to pay for the additional upgrading that needs to be done to get those individuals into the system seamlessly, and you will see a whole lot more of that.

When it comes to additional dollars coming into the health care system, one thing that I observed when I was last in elected office: it was the only time in my life I've had a health spending account as a politician. I think it's \$950; someone might have to correct me on that because I haven't tapped into it yet. There are others who've been around the table for 15 years, who've had access to that health spending account for 15 years, who may not agree with it being applied to the general taxpayer, but I certainly do. I think that if politicians are going to vote for themselves to have health spending accounts, then they should be prepared to start providing that to the taxpayers, who pay our salaries and pay our benefits.

Those around the table who have used health spending accounts: maybe they'd like to share at some point how they've used their health spending account. It pays for all the things not currently covered by public insurance. That includes eyeglasses and eye exams. That includes additional fees that you might pay if you go to a dentist or if you have pharmaceuticals that you need to pay a copayment on. It pays for chiropractic and physiotherapy and additional medical equipment, home care, and medical supports. There's a whole long list that the Canada Revenue Agency identifies. It's dozens and dozens of services that would be covered by health spending accounts.

My comments about empowering more people begin with the government making an allocation into that account, and then if people like it, we can expand the services. We can also have a conversation about whether we can make the dollars into that account tax free. Maybe we can encourage employers and nonprofits to donate to them. That would allow for us to balance the system so that we focus on all of the things that go towards keeping people well, which we also believe will take pressure off the system. My comments around health spending accounts are just to try to bring some parity to the taxpayers, who pay for all of our salaries and benefits, so that it's not just politicians who have health spending accounts.

The last area on population and inflation: I'm not sure where the question asker – may I refer to Ms Notley, or is it going to result in another point of order?

The Deputy Chair: In committee you can say Ms Notley.

Ms Smith: Thank you.

Ms Notley asked the question on population and inflation. Our calculation when we look in the rear-view mirror, which is the actual, was 6.2 per cent inflation plus population. The reason we don't look on a forward basis is because it's almost always wrong. It's almost always overstated. In point of fact, I think that there are some commentators on some of the social media that are saying: "See? Inflation is already coming down." That's part of the reason why you want to make sure that you're not overestimating what the future spending might be. So that's why we looked at the 6.2 per cent figure.

Of course, one of the big fiscal anchors the Finance minister had was that he wanted to make sure that we were bringing our overall

cost of government down to the same level that we see in the other large provinces – British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec – on a per capita basis. Mission accomplished; that's what we managed to do in this budget.

We also had some really excellent collaborative discussions happening around the table that allowed for us to get deals signed with all of our front-line workers in collective agreements, and we have a moderated increase year over year on those salary contracts. We made sure that we covered those costs and covered the increase associated with hiring more individuals to keep up with population growth, and that's part of the reason why we were able to come in at a little bit less.

It's a good problem to have, to have a surplus, because then you can talk about all the ways in which you can identify high-priority areas with one-time spending. You can put money into debt repayment and ultimately end the \$3 billion worth of interest charges. I know that when Ms Notley was Premier, she increased the debt to \$50 billion, and we have now, after two years, managed to get it into surplus the last two years. We're excited about that, and we're going to continue to pay it down, and as we pay it down, we'll free up operational spending from finance charges.

The other thing that we need to do is make sure that we're keeping the money invested in the heritage savings trust fund. The heritage savings trust fund, as it grows, will increase the investment income – that's the other part of that paper that Ms Notley mentioned – so that ultimately we can also start using that money for operational reasons as well as to reduce taxes.

So that's the whole philosophy. I believe there were five questions Ms Notley asked me to answer, and I've answered them all.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Before we proceed to Ms Notley, I would just like to remind members and the Premier that we are here discussing your budget, not the Health estimates, so I would ask that we stay on task. Thank you.

Ms Notley, go ahead.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. I think I'm mostly going to move on here. I will say that it's interesting. You know, the Premier very much celebrates her ideology of choice and free enterprise when it comes to health care. I would emphasize our values of universal coverage regardless of income, focused on health care for everyone. I guess that's just a difference that we're going to find, and that is why, of course, we still see a real cut in funding taking into account population and inflation, and that wasn't really addressed by the Premier's comments.

Nonetheless, I want to move to a different topic, and I will, for the purposes of the chair, just refer to the business plan, key objective 1.1, provide advice and support to ministries to align policy and legislative proposals to support government in implementing public policies; strategic plan, page 5, vision section, supporting Albertans by investing their tax dollars prudently; and strategic plan, page 13, standing up for Alberta's natural resources. As well, I'm going to now, before I touch on all those elements, refer as well to the Executive Council estimates, line 1.1 on page 93.

I'd just like to talk very briefly about the Premier's budget, which does appear to propose a 20 per cent increase in the funding dedicated specifically to the Premier's office. I am curious about what those increased costs are going to. My understanding is that when it comes to size of government, we've actually had a little bit of a surprising pivot by this Premier with respect to leaning towards large government, at least in certain unique spots. You know, when

I first became Premier, I had 12 ministries; when the former Premier Jason Kenney first became Premier, he had 23; and I see that this Premier has 27, including two without portfolio, and then, of course, a whole range of people who are parliamentary secretaries. Nonetheless, from what we can tell, it looks as though the Premier's number of staff has also gone up in her office, and I am curious about that. I'm wondering if she could just confirm how many FTEs that she has working in her office.

The next thing that I would ask for – and this will not come as a surprise to anybody who advises the Premier – is where the contracts for all those new staff are. The policy suggests that those contracts need to be posted on either December or June of any year. Certainly, I can reach back and tell that a number of the people who publicly occupy positions in the Premier's office were, in fact, in those positions prior to December, yet their contracts are not posted publicly in the pursuit of transparency. There was a time when the Premier and I were both in opposition, and we spent a lot of time pursuing that kind of transparency when we were in opposition, so I'm a bit surprised that those contracts are not there.

4:10

I would like, in particular, to see the job descriptions and the salaries posted for the Premier's chief of staff, Marshall Smith, as well as her executive director, Rob Anderson, as well as that for your manager of special projects, all of whom have been working in your office since October, so those contracts should be publicly available. They are not. Why not? As well, I'd like it if the Premier could provide the job descriptions for each of those positions.

Then I'd ask her to just comment on whether it makes sense to have the most expensive Premier's office budget that we have seen in many, many years, during the worst cost-of-living crisis that we've experienced in this province in over 40 years. Yes, I could quote back to the Premier comments she made to former Premier Redford when she was in my role. I will not bother to do that, but I certainly am interested in having her talk with us about the change in her positions on that matter, in terms of size of government.

I'd like to flip briefly as well to – and I quoted these sorts of anchors as I started this section – the issue of R-star. In particular, I'd like to just go through that a little bit. We know, of course, that it's been the subject of a great deal of debate in the public sphere. We know that the Premier has talked about consulting on a \$100 million pilot project that has been described by officials as potentially costing up to \$20 billion were it to go ahead. We know the Premier herself was a big promoter of this strategy, that it was an idea that was envisioned by a group called Sustaining Alberta's Energy Network. The Premier was a lobbyist for this policy when she was president of the Alberta Enterprise group. We also, of course, know that it's been opposed by the RMA, Scotiabank, Chambers of Commerce, landowners, environmentalists, and, of course, the current environment minister.

Then, of course, we've seen a number of strange links between people associated with those organizations and PACs that are very involved in the upcoming election campaign. Now, I guess the first thing I'd like to do – we know that the Premier was a lobbyist; now she is Premier. We know that Kris Kinnear is the director of special projects in the office of the Premier. He worked as the Premier's campaign co-ordinator, and he was, in fact, one of the creators of Sustaining Alberta's Energy Network. I'm just curious, specifically pursuant to the government estimates, page 93, what Kris Kinnear's roles are with respect to manager of special projects. I'm just wondering if you can tell us when he started. We know that he has expense claims for meetings with the Energy minister, so I'm assuming that some of the work he does relates to the Energy minister, because we've seen him publicly report about that in terms

of his expenses. I'm just wondering if you could explain what he was doing specifically for work before he was hired into the office and what the special projects are that he's assigned with now.

Then, going back to yourself, Madam Premier, I'm just wondering if you could table with us the conversations and/or written opinions you would likely have received from the Ethics Commissioner around your previous role as a lobbyist for the R-star program and your ongoing positions and work around continuing to advocate for that program. Now, I'm assuming you would have gone to the Ethics Commissioner and received advice, and we would very much like to see that tabled as part of this process.

The same would apply to – we're just looking for whether indeed Mr. Kinnear also received a letter from the Ethics Commissioner given that he also had a previous relationship with the advocacy group that was promoting R-star and whether you would be willing to table that as well given the important object of adhering to the Conflicts of Interest Act, which specifically references these issues.

I'll leave it there.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Premier, go ahead.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I have nothing to table from the Ethics Commissioner with respect to that particular program. The issues that she raised with me I'm dealing with through the company that I owned with my husband and a blind trust for my investments. Those are the only two issues the Ethics Commissioner has raised with me. I'll have to get back to you and table if there were any issues related to the staff member that I have. I doubt it because the staff member never got paid any money through the advocacy work that he did.

I'll move on to the fourth question, again in reverse order. The person in question is a yak farmer. He's a landowner, and he was doing survey work as an independent individual who was very concerned about the level of liability that was accruing on land. I mean, it's no secret we did a video together on his property that showed a flare pit that had been operated by a very large company generating over \$300 million of revenue, including \$60 million from the government, and then the regulator allowed that particular well site to be transferred to a teeny, tiny company that everyone knew was never going to clean it up.

As we started looking into this, we discovered that there are 4,300 or so flare pits exactly like this. There are 20,000 well sites that have been inactive for more than 20 years, that were drilled prior to 1980. This is a problem that the previous government never managed to fix either, but they certainly felt the bite of it. When you have inactive wells that, because of government policy, continue to allow them to be passed forward over and over again to companies ending up not having the means to be able to pay for them, when some of those companies go belly up, as Trident did, as Sequoia did, as many others did, then those well sites end up landing in the lap of the Orphan Well Association.

When that occurred in the previous administration, they ended up having to come up with I think it was \$265 million to lend to the Orphan Well Association in order to cover that liability. So I watched that with some dismay, and I watched as well, through the COVID crisis, when Ms Notley was very supportive of the federal program coming in with a billion dollars of just straight grant money that went to a number of companies in order to address the issue of these inactive well sites, and it really got the industry going.

I remember speaking with one person who told me that he got into the industry 20 years ago to do well site recovery, and it was the first time that he's done well site recovery. Now he's becoming quite expert at it. We also have a number of Indigenous companies

for whom this program was very, very popular, and they have also asked if there's a way that we could continue to make sure that we don't lose this momentum.

4:20

So it was in that spirit, in talking with landowners who watched as the regulator, sadly, made some of these decisions to just keep on punting forward the liability, that we felt we needed to have a different approach. So when I became Premier, I asked the Energy minister if he might use the principle behind what I had been advocating for but really focus it on these worst wells that no government has figured out how to clean up, not even the previous government of Ms Notley. That is the reason why we are doing the consultation with a number of different groups. We have six hours of Indigenous consultation that we are doing, by law, because whenever you make decisions that impact resources, there is a requirement to do Indigenous consultations. That's why it's not quite done yet.

We've also done consultation with municipalities. I remember that when I ran last time around, Calmar is a municipality that has a number of inactive well sites within their jurisdiction. My own home riding of Medicine Hat also has well sites that need to be cleaned up within their jurisdiction. Our First Nations are particularly keen to have these well sites cleaned up, because when you have a small territory, if you don't have these well sites cleaned up, it can sterilize the land around it. So those are the reasons why we are taking a little bit more time to do the consultation. We're putting it through the lens of what municipalities would like to have, we're putting it through the lens of what our Indigenous communities would like to have, and we're also putting it through the lens of what landowners need so that they're not left, in the end, holding the liability.

Ms Notley may remember that I was a landowner advocate when I got into public policy. I became acquainted with this abandoned well problem all the way back in 1997. So finding other landowners who felt the same grave concern that I did, that this was a liability that was continuing to get punted forward and would not be addressed, is the principal motivation why, when I got elected, I asked for an approach that would be very narrow, focused on, once again, the worst wells. It's called the liability management incentive pilot program.

The consultation amount that Minister Guthrie has suggested we would be able to potentially consider would be \$100 million, so it's a very confined program. Part of the reason for that is that now that the industry is doing well – when the industry is doing well, you change your approach. You have to remember that three years ago the government was looking at a \$20 billion deficit, and we had less than \$3 billion worth of resource revenue. We had companies, small companies, going under, not only in the last three years but also in the four years prior, when Ms Notley was in this chair. So that was the circumstance then.

The circumstance now is that the oil and gas prices have recovered, and as a result we are going to see a number of companies with the ability to take care of these liabilities, why we have put forward a policy that they are required every year to pay 3 per cent of their liability amount. It's \$740 million, and it's going to increase 9 per cent per year. That is all money coming out of their own profits, and we're going to be enforcing that through the regulator. There'll be more policy to come because we are very concerned about the outstanding amounts owing to landowners through unpaid leases and property taxes to municipalities. So there'll be more policy around that as well.

Those are the kinds of things that the special projects adviser to me works on because he does have a large number of contacts in

the field of small and medium business producers. So anything that relates to how we might be able to address this issue as well as the energy future task force that I've started, he is going to be spending a lot of time on those types of issues because it is his area of expertise. I'd be happy to table his job description.

I'll say a word about my office with the chief of staff and my executive director. Part of the reason why I have split those two roles is: think of the chief of staff as being the person responsible for people – he has 176 full-time equivalents that he does the HR function for – and the executive director of my office is responsible for policy. I'm a policy wonk. That's no secret to anybody who's watched my career, going back to my very first policy job in 1995.

The roles that I had to bring into my office: we've gone to 34 full-time equivalents compared to 31.5 full-time equivalents in the previous administration, compared to 30 full-time equivalents in the time that Ms Notley was in the office. Those extra full-time equivalents are related to the additional policy function that I'm asking my senior advisers and special advisers to do. Rob Anderson, as the executive director, is the one who is managing all of the policy process around that. I'd be happy to table the job descriptions for both of those employees.

As for the contracts, as Ms Notley well knows, the Public Sector Compensation Transparency Act requires the government of Alberta to publicly disclose the name, position, classification, remuneration of employees whose base salary, earning, and/or severance exceeds the annual thresholds. The threshold in 2022 was \$118,316. In 2021 it was \$114,647. Political staff contracts and severances are posted in alignment with this PSCTA on the GOA salary and severance disclosure site and the political staff disclosure site on alberta.ca. In June 2020 the office of the Premier disclosed 10 political staff contracts. In June 2023 it's anticipated that the office of the Premier will disclose eight political contracts to meet that requirement. We will do our disclosure in accordance with policy.

I do believe that I confirmed the number of full-time equivalents in my office, so, Madam Chair, I believe I've answered all of Ms Notley's questions.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.
Ms Notley.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. Just checking. I've got 10 minutes or five?

The Deputy Chair: Eight minutes, 45 seconds.

Ms Notley: Eight minutes, 45 seconds. Okay. Thanks.

Okay. Just on that issue, before we move back to the other one, the policy used to be that these contracts were to be posted in either December or June. These folks were hired before December. If you are in alignment with the policy, you should be posting these contracts as of December and/or telling us today what their salaries are and what their contracts are. This is a particular interest, Premier, because your office budget has gone up by 23 per cent. At a time, as I said, when Albertans are struggling with significant cost-of-living challenges, it is only reasonable that they get a clear understanding of why your office needed a 23 per cent increase and what the folks who are working for you are being paid.

If you guys quietly changed the rules in order to give yourself the opportunity to hide these contracts until after the election, I suppose you can get away with it, but I really would like, Premier, for you to speak directly on the record to this issue of why it is that Albertans are not being allowed to see the contracts of your chief of staff and your executive director, who, I assume, are part of the

decision to raise the cost and perhaps part of the reason for why the cost of your office has gone up by 23 per cent.

Now, as well, of course, I would certainly want to see the contract, the actual contract of Mr. Kinnear. It was lovely. You described him as a yak farmer. That sounds very affable and charming. He is also, as of 2:45 today, still registered as a director with SAEN, which is a boutique political consulting firm which describes itself as formed to help connect busy oil and gas people with campaigning politicians. SAEN members helped with 15 campaigns in the provincial election and three campaigns in the federal election. SAEN's ultimate goal was to give a platform to the small and mid-sized oil and gas producers that were not being heard by the government of Alberta; we achieved this goal, and now we are connecting government with great ideas from industry. It's not ideas from the yak farmers or the landowners; ideas from industry.

Meanwhile, Premier, if I could just quote to you section 23.2 of the Conflicts of Interest Act.

A member of the Premier's and Ministers' staff breaches this Part [of the act] if he or she takes part in a decision in the course of carrying out his or her office or powers knowing that the decision might further a private interest of the member, a person directly associated with the member or the member's minor or adult child.

Section 23.3 says that that same staff

breaches this Part if the member uses [their] office or powers to influence or to seek to influence a decision to be made by or on behalf of the Crown to further a private interest of the member, a person directly associated with the member,

et cetera, et cetera. On the face of it Mr. Kinnear is clearly in breach of the Conflicts of Interest Act, Premier. Now, it is possible for the Ethics Commissioner to waive that requirement of the act, but if so, it is incumbent upon her to put that in writing, and it is incumbent upon you, I would argue, Premier, to make that waiver public.

4:30

We are talking about a program that primarily benefits small and mid-size oil and gas producers to the tune of at least \$100 million, which you call a very confined program. I would say to you, Premier, that for the average person, who cannot afford a \$1,400 limo ride, let alone groceries at the end of the month, \$100 million is not a very confined program. And having someone whose very job it was and apparently still is, because he continues to be reported as a director, to advocate for this kind of money for business owners is deeply troubling to Albertans, who are just struggling to make ends meet day in and day out and are wondering if they can count on their government to put them first.

I believe it is very important that you table his contract. If you are in fact – you did say that you have no letter from the Ethics Commissioner to table. If that is true, I would suggest that you should consider asking Mr. Kinnear to leave his role and consider apologizing to all Albertans in the Legislature tomorrow or otherwise explain to Albertans why the Conflicts of Interest Act does not apply to you and your staff.

Yeah. I think I will leave it at that, and I will cede my time just to allow the Premier to respond to these very, very troubling issues. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just would like to correct maybe a misapprehension that Ms Notley has about the tabling of contracts. Contracts are only required to be tabled once per year, in June, and as I indicated, there will be contracts tabled in accordance with the order in council and the regulations. When it comes to severance, that is required to be done twice per year. And just by

the way the severance fell, those will also be posted in June for the staff members who are above that \$118,000 threshold and required. I look forward to having a further conversation with that, but that's what the policy says, and that is exactly what we will do.

My understanding of the Conflicts of Interest Act is that furthering private interest means something very clear, that a person's private interest cannot be furthered. Seems to be straightforward. In the case of my special adviser it turns out that with all the advocacy that he did and all of the light he shone on the particular case that he had on his own property with the flare pit, the company came in and voluntarily cleaned it up. So he has no private interest. That had nothing to do – he's not even going to benefit if this program does end up being adopted.

But it does seem to me that if there are 4,300 of these sites out there, I suppose having somebody make a video on every one of the 4,300 sites to cause enough embarrassment that a company will finally dedicate the time to cleaning up – I suppose that that's a process that we could go through, or we could just maybe consider if there's a better way to do it and create an incentive for the worst wells in Alberta to be cleaned up so that they don't end up having an undue amount of burden on the particular landowner, who's the one who's been dealing with the fact that nobody seems to be all that interested or all that motivated to clean up these worst sites.

Part of the issue, I think, around that is that we have to get our policy in alignment, and we have to make sure that the industry knows that we're serious. And the industry knows that we're serious because we're now mandating that they clean up 3 per cent of their sites every year, \$740 million, and it's going to increase 9 per cent per year. The thing I observed, though, with the site rehabilitation . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

As there are no independent members present, we will now move to the government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from the members. Member Rosin, are you wanting to combine your time with the Premier?

Ms Rosin: I'm happy to continue with block time.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Ms Rosin: Thank you. Okay. Well, thank you, Premier, and welcome to your very first budget estimates as our Premier. I want to first start out by talking about your Intergovernmental Relations budget as I know that is a significant portion of your portfolio and department and the work that you do. Certainly, there are many priorities that our government wishes to advance with other provinces across the country, priorities under health care, fiscal stabilization was one from the past, interprovincial trade had a lot of conversation around, even things like economic corridors.

You know, if we look at your Intergovernmental Relations budget, I do see that your budget is for \$19 million this year on page 93 in your second line item. I would first like to focus on the increase to that budget. I see that the budget reflects a \$1.5 million increase from the past year's budget, so I'm just wondering if you can speak to what that increase can be attributed to and how exactly the funding will be allocated to support Alberta's priorities on intergovernmental relations with other provinces.

Further to that, I would also like to discuss what metrics your ministry, department may be using to track the success of those initiatives and priorities and ensure that that increase to the budget is being utilized effectively.

I would also like to focus on the specific efforts that your department is prioritizing right now under Intergovernmental Relations. Certainly, there has been a lot of talk of collaborating

with other provinces on some files in the past. I'm just curious to know what the priorities will be for the upcoming year under the Intergovernmental Relations budget.

I do have one other question before I pass it off to my colleagues, which furthers the work interprovincially, and that is with regard to the free flow of goods, services, and labour. Certainly, our province led the way when it came to eliminating trade barriers to procurement from other provinces. We try and strive often to be a leader, I think, in the free flow of all things related to the free market and our economy, but I am just wondering if you can speak to what funding in your budget will continue to work towards those goals, of the free flow of movement and goods across Canada, and if there are any examples that you are working towards in furthering those endeavours.

With that – that was really quick; I rattled that off – I will cede the rest of my time, I believe, to Member Rowsell.

Mr. Rowsell: Thank you very much. On page 52 of the business plan documents, outcome 1 of Executive Council is stated to be that the government's agenda is to implement effectively in co-ordination with ministries. A key area of this government's agenda is to make life better for Albertans. It requires the close co-ordination of several ministries to ensure Albertans are receiving the support they need.

We know that Justinflation is causing strain on Albertans across the board and that life is getting more expensive: grocery bills, and I know I've heard my share of utility bill phone calls. You know, many are struggling. I had some very intense conversations with people as they came into my office, so I was pleased to see that the many different supports coming from the government directly to Albertans, like the utility rebate, direct payments to seniors, families that make under \$180,000 with children, folks on AISH and PDD, all make a difference when it comes to Albertans' pocketbooks.

I just listed supports coming from three different ministries all targeting the issues of affordability, which I have to imagine requires an immense amount of co-ordination between departments. I seem to remember that the ministries of Affordability and Utilities and Tech and Innovation created a payment system that must just have taken a lot of work, and they got it done in record time. I remember us talking about that and how impressive that was. What I'd like to do is just have the Premier to be able to outline how Executive Council assists in co-ordination and talk a bit more about the delivery of some of these supports that were offered up.

That would be my question, and I would pass this on to MLA Stephan.

4:40

Mr. Stephan: Thank you very much. I know the Premier had invited any corroboration on the merits of health spending accounts. I can say that when I practised tax law, advising business owners, many business owners were really interested in providing health spending accounts for their employees. The two main benefits of health spending accounts are that it does provide great flexibility for their employees, you know, because everyone has different health needs and priorities. Health spending accounts are wonderful because they provide that flexibility for individuals based on their needs.

The other great thing, though, about health spending accounts is that when an employer or the government provides health spending accounts for individuals, under income tax policy those benefits – normally all benefits provided by one's employer are taxable under our income tax laws, but there's a special exception for benefits under health spending accounts. They're not taxable benefits. Often in our income tax laws while there's a tax credit available for

individuals on their personal health expenses, the use of tax credits is less effective than the nontaxability of health spending benefits.

The Deputy Chair: I would just like to remind the member that I've cautioned about estimates regarding health and just to talk to the budget at hand.

Mr. Stephan: Oh, I'd love to do that. Let's talk about page 52, outcome 1 of the business plan, which talks about all-around implementation of the government's agenda. I'm going to be specifically talking about fiscal responsibility because that is certainly a key part of our agenda.

I remember, of course, in 2019 – wow, things have changed so much. I remember being very concerned with the unsustainable, irresponsible deficits that we saw in the many billions of dollars under the prior administration, but more than that, I think, you know, meeting individuals in my constituency in Red Deer-South and seeing how the prior government had actually shrunk, depressed the private sector in terms of jobs and the real human cost that resulted from a government that really did not know how to compete and excel in the real world. Certainly, in Alberta our inheritance and our legacy has always been one of freedom and prosperity.

You know, while the numbers are very serious, of course, that we had, what a great human cost there was for individuals and families, certainly, in our oil and gas sector. Unfortunately, under the prior government, they maligned and chased out capital, billions of dollars of capital, depressed investment, our economy. While it's nice to kind of talk about those numbers at a high level, there was sure a serious human cost to that. I've never heard an apology from the members of the opposition for the harm that they caused to Albertans.

I want to talk about where we are now today.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Member. I would remind you to bring it back to the estimates today.

Mr. Stephan: I know. I want to provide a contrast, though, because those were dark days. Now we're in good days. Good days are here. I like good days.

Of course, with this current budget we have billion-dollar surpluses. We have the most competitive place to start and grow a business. We are seeing record migration to Alberta.

You know, I mentioned this in my member's statement yesterday: I went to a French immersion school.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Sabir: Under 23(b)(i), speaks to the matter other than the question under discussion. That's been going on for a while.

The Deputy Chair: Responding to the point of order.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. Thank you, Chair. You asked the member to get back to the budget, and he has gotten back a couple of times. It might be time for another reminder to get closer to the budget. I know he's building context, which I think is legitimate, but steering our member towards the budget is probably an appropriate thing.

Mr. Stephan: Sure.

The Deputy Chair: I would have to agree with both members, that we need to be talking about the budget. I would again caution the member to address the committee related to today's topic, which is

the estimates related to this budget. Please make reference to where you're talking.

Thank you.

Mr. Stephan: Absolutely. I was talking about revenue items in the budget. In respect of the fiscal framework that we have, a budget consists of revenue and expenses. We have huge revenues because we are a competitive, attractive place, we're having this record migration to Alberta, and of course we have now balanced the budget.

I want to ask the Premier to elaborate on the value of having a fiscal framework. We saw, of course, with the prior administration that they just did a horrible job. They didn't live within their means. They set a horrible example for Albertans. But now that we have this fiscal framework, I want to ask the Premier how having a fiscal framework where we live within our means, where we balance the budget, you know, as well as, of course, being the most competitive jurisdiction, which we have historically been prior to this horrible government that we had, really sets and blesses Albertans going forward and the opportunities that it provides.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Member.

Premier, you have 8 minutes and 53 seconds to respond.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you. I'd like to thank MLA Stephan for his comments because there are many that I will not have to repeat since you did such a great job of setting the context on the table. I appreciate that.

I should just refer to the previous line of questioning. I've received a note that my special adviser resigned his directorship in SAEN in October. He has the paper of his resignation, and he has seen the Ethics Commissioner since. I'd be happy to follow up to see if she had any other guidance, but I believe that that closes the loop on the question raised by the member in the previous questions.

Let me see if I can go through these one at a time. Most of the changes in the office budget relate to the transfer of international relations into Executive Council. In particular, of the IGR increase that you'd mentioned of \$1.563 million, \$1.245 million was for international relations and \$318,000 was for the rest of IGR. Part of the reason that I wanted to bring international relations in is that I have observed that Alberta isn't necessarily represented the best by our federal government in public forums. It's part of the reason why one of the first acts that I did, especially when I had my courtesy call with the Prime Minister, was to indicate to him that we would be sending our own delegation to COP 27 and COP 15. That's the kind of approach that you will see us take on the international stage, that when it is appropriate for us to be sending our own delegation internationally, we are going to.

I've just asked our deputy minister of intergovernmental to give me an assessment of how we should be restructuring the international offices. They had been formerly under jobs, economy and innovation, and when I moved that department around, part of what I wanted to do is reorient Jobs, Economy and Northern Development to be talking about the things that we're doing in the province to attract investment to the province and largely focused on the discussion across the country, which is why the Alberta Is Calling campaign falls into that portfolio.

When it comes to Trade, Immigration and Multiculturalism, a lot of the work that's being done in that department by the minister is going to centre around how we increase our number of provincial nominees as well as develop new streams to attract new people from abroad. The offices of international are going to require a number of different lenses that we're looking at for how we want those

offices to work. A portion of it, surely, is trade, a portion of it is labour attraction, and a portion of it is diplomatic.

The federal government has 100 different offices around the world. The Quebec government has representation in 34 of those offices, most of them co-located, whereas we only have 16. So we have to do an assessment of what our reach ought to be internationally and what role we want those offices to play. That's part of the reason I wanted to bring that under my purview, that that work is still ongoing. But I think that if Alberta is going to project itself more broadly onto the international stage, it is something that I want to have hands on in directing that work.

4:50

When it comes to the metrics that we're going to look at as a success of our priorities, we are going to be looking at a few things, three main areas: the number of intergovernmental meetings that the department has supported, the review of intergovernmental agreements, and the satisfaction of ministries on the support they are being provided to advance Alberta's interests within Canada. It is important for us to include these types of metrics. We're going to see that as a strong priority for our intergovernmental department, and I'll just give you some stats right now.

Last fiscal year Intergovernmental Relations supported 211 intergovernmental meetings and reviewed 100 per cent of intergovernmental agreements within the designated two-week time frame. So far this year IGR has supported 120 intergovernmental meetings and reviewed 100 per cent of intergovernmental agreements within the designated two-week time frame. We are going to ensure the increased budget goes to support the key functions of IGR, including intergovernmental agreement reviews, supporting intergovernmental meetings, and advancing Alberta's priorities within the federation.

Let me just continue on here. Just also to give you some examples of the type of support that we have had when it comes to intergovernmental and the international role in particular, the department recently supported recent ministerial missions to Korea, Germany, and the United States; hosted U.S. Ambassador David Cohen – we had a terrific discussion about the potential for reigniting a conversation with our American friends about LNG export and hydrogen development – met recently with Consul General of Japan Takahiko Watabe. MLA Walker joined me in that meeting and helped assist with the various protocols. I can confirm that from the perspective of Japan they do believe that there is a case for LNG export. Certainly, food security as well is another big issue, perhaps another example of why it is we need to take a more hands-on approach in the international stage.

We represented Alberta in Ottawa at the first ministers' meeting on health, and I've continuously called on the federal government to take action to improve investor certainty, address major regulatory barriers. The Alberta government with the MOU – I've already mentioned that – is going to bring more licensed practical nurses to the province. Argentina: we signed an Alberta MOU in 2022. It supports the development of commercial and economic sectors and energy and clean technologies, and we will see more MOUs of that type over the coming months. So I hope that answers MLA Rosin's questions.

When it comes to the making life better and affordability, I must agree with MLA Rowswell. I was stunned and delighted that we have such a capacity in our public service that we were able to identify a brand new program and see it through all the way to completion of an online portal within the space of two months. I can't commend the public service more for the work that they have done on that.

I know that members of the Official Opposition kept on talking down the potential of it crashing, so I'm delighted to report that it didn't crash. They had it tested many, many times because, of course, they will remember on the opposite side that because of the actions of one of their members, they did crash the previous system. We wanted to make sure that that didn't happen again. So we did test it to make sure it wouldn't crash, and sure enough when we launched it, it was slow for a period of time, but it never ended up crashing. We have over 1.1 million who have now signed up to receive those payments.

The way we also designed it so that we could make sure it was efficient was to have the payments made on a monthly basis. There were 16,000 payments that didn't go through, only because of error in inputting banking information. The department did a very quick patch, so now people can edit their own file. The last piece that we're working on is how we might be able to extend that and integrate it with our federal partners so that we can make sure that we have disability payments. That's sort of the next decision that we're making. I can't say enough about the work that the department did and the collaboration that we had between various ministries. Of course, on top of that, we had electricity rebates, and we also had the suspending of the fuel tax, which has been very important to bring down the cost of everything. Of course, as you know, the Liberal-NDP coalition in Ottawa is intending to increase carbon taxes by 300 per cent, and these are the kinds of measures that we are taking in order to make sure that our cost for one of the most important underlying fuels remains reasonable. It's the lowest in the country.

I see I'm out of time, but I could go on.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

Now we move to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the Premier. As mentioned, members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of the rotation if they wish to combine their time with the Premier's time. Ms Notley, would you like to combine your time?

Ms Notley: Absolutely.

The Deputy Chair: Premier?

Ms Smith: I'll do block time, please.

The Deputy Chair: Block time? Thank you.

Ms Notley: Oh, well. It's worth a try.

Okay. A couple of things. There are a few questions that remain outstanding from the ones that I've asked already, which is another reason why it's always better to try and get the shared time in order to actually get some of the questions answered. I'd asked the Premier why it was that her office needed \$2.9 million more. There was a lot of sort of rambling around. Basically, all I could really get from it was that she is a big policy wonk. I have nothing but respect for policy wonks. Let me be clear: I have had many, many people complain at great length about that element of my personal way of doing business. However, I've never suggested that that should cost anybody \$2.9 million, and I'm just wondering if she has thought to speak to the public service, ever, in terms of pursuing some of her policy wonk tendencies. Anyway, but more to the point, to be a little bit less rhetorical there, I really would like to know more about why her budget has gone up by \$2.9 million.

Now, going back to Mr. Kinnear, I understand that we've gotten through hearsay that Mr. Kinnear told somebody who told the

Premier that apparently he resigned in October 2022. I have here, Madam Chair – and I'm happy to table it – a printout from the corporate search, with today's date, which very clearly identifies Mr. Kinnear as a director of this group, SAEN, for lack of a better term. We're going to call it SAEN for *Hansard's* purposes. I'm happy to table this. As far as I'm concerned, we still need to receive some proof of Mr. Kinnear having resigned and also some written assurances from the Ethics Commissioner that he's not in a gross breach of the Conflicts of Interest Act.

Now, I'm going to be really quick on this. There are other ways in which the Conflicts of Interest Act can be breached here. Mr. Kinnear is a director of a group that advocates for small and medium-sized oil and gas companies. His codirector is a person named Mackenzie Lee. Mackenzie Lee is also a director of an organization called Alberta First. Alberta First has received, as far as we can tell, so far about \$85,000 or \$90,000 worth of donations from small oil and gas companies which stand to benefit from the R-star program. Those same ones that we added up – and I won't name them for the purposes of this; I'm happy to table them if the chair would like – also donated to the Premier's leadership campaign. Mr. Kinnear was also the manager or a key person on the Premier's leadership campaign.

We have leadership campaign donations and donations to Alberta First, and then we have directors of both Alberta First and SAEN, one of them working in the Premier's office, trying to secure a \$100 million program that benefits the very people who donated to both the Premier's leadership campaign and Alberta First. I think we all know that Alberta First is a UCP-sympathetic, Smith-sympathetic political action committee which is running copious ads right now in support of the Premier. My concern is that all of this adds up to a breach of the Conflicts of Interest Act, which I just read out to the Premier, not only as it relates to Mr. Kinnear but also, quite frankly, as it relates to the Premier.

5:00

As a result, I once again ask the Premier to comment on the many interrelated benefits that exist between SAEN, Alberta First, her campaign, her previous work as a lobbyist, and whether or not she has something in writing from the Ethics Commissioner, because all of this is very – it doesn't look good, shall we say. It undermines public trust in the integrity of decision-making that is happening out of the Premier's office right now. Typically those issues are addressed by having the Ethics Commissioner engage in a thorough review of the many opportunities for conflict of interest through the arrangements that are going on right now that I've just described.

I think I've identified the things we need to hear from the Premier as well as the things we need . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Premier, go ahead.

Ms Smith: Thank you. It was the executive director of my office who sent me a note confirming that Mr. Kinnear had given his resignation in October. I'll ask him to just double-check the corporate registry and make sure that he's removed. I know I ended up in a similar situation in a volunteer, unpaid position on the Wild Rose Community Connections board that I had resigned when I first started politics, and the Ethics Commissioner was kind enough to point out that it wasn't removed from the corporate registry, which I was able to do, and so that's done. I'm assuming it is probably just a paperwork issue and that Mr. Kinnear went through the same process. If there's one more piece of information that he needs to file to make sure that he is removed from that, then I'll ask him to do that and double-check with the Ethics Commissioner. I think I

should just state clearly that he never – it was a volunteer position that he had there. He never received any money in that role. He had another line of income that he made money at, which I've also mentioned. He was a landowner. He's not an oil and gas producer.

When it comes to the program that we are designing, I quite frankly don't know who is going to be eligible for it because the specifications that the ministry is looking at are very narrow, to go on the worst wells, so I don't actually know which energy companies might be holding those particular sites. I guess we'll have to wait and see, once a program is designed, who is eligible to be able to access it. Even if it does get approved by caucus and cabinet, I think we're being a little bit pre-emptive. As Ms Notley would note, in the budget there's no reference to this as a line item. We've confirmed publicly we're still doing consultation, particularly with municipalities and First Nations, so we'll continue on that.

As for political action committees – as the former Premier well knows because she also would have had political action committees that supported her in her aspirations – as she well knows, there is no ability to co-ordinate between third-party advertisers and the work that I do. In fact, it's quite clearly stated in law that these have to be separate. I suppose that if Alberta First ends up being called before this committee, she can direct her questions to them, because I do not know how they operate, do not know what they do, do not co-ordinate with them. My work is being done through the auspices of the party, and quite frankly Ms Notley also knows that corporations and unions are not allowed to donate to political parties. The only people who are allowed to donate to political parties are those who are donating on an individual basis, and that is all, as well, publicly reported, any of the donations over \$250. I'm happy to be in full compliance with the legislation on that as well.

When it comes to my office, I've already explained that one of the increases was related to the IGR increase of \$1.563 million coming over for international relations and \$318,000 for the rest of IGR. Of the remaining \$2.9 million, that Ms Notley is interested in, \$1.7 million is allocated in 2023, and \$300,000 was forecast in 2022-23, for a total budget of \$2 million. That's, of course, the Public Health Emergencies Governance Review Panel that we are doing. We know that there are a number of pieces of legislation that require a review, and we have asked Preston Manning to lead that review for us, with an interim report that will be tabled I believe in June and a final report in November giving recommendations. That is an advisory group to me since it will be crossministry, and it's the way in which I've structured my office, that when things go crossministry, I like them to be under my purview.

The minister without portfolio is responsible for another \$365,000, that supports two new ministers without portfolio and includes the two staff. In previous practice, with the previous Premier and also the Premier before that, there were certain functions that were spread between different departments. In the case of what I inherited, there were five positions that were spread between five departments. It made it very difficult to have transparency in reporting. So with the minister without portfolio most appropriately in Executive Council, their staff has also reported there \$565,000 for ...

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

We now move to the government members because there are no independent members present. I would like to ask Mrs. Allard if you would like to go back and forth with the Premier.

Mrs. Allard: I'll actually stick with block time. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to join you this afternoon and to join the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition. I always enjoy entertaining the estimates of Executive Council.

I know we're not in Health estimates, but I just wanted to reference a couple of pages here, one in the business plan. On page 52 in key objective 1.1 it says to

provide advice and support to ministries to align policy and legislative proposals to support government in implementing public policies, programs and services.

So it's a fairly broad objective.

Then I'm referencing the strategic plan for Budget 2023, priority 2, objective 4. I'm just going to read that.

Ensuring an accessible and modernized health care system.

Alberta's government will continue to implement key initiatives to modernize and optimize Alberta's healthcare system so that every Albertan is able to conveniently access safe, high-quality, and reliable health services when they need them.

Further,

Alberta's government is supporting Albertans at risk of or experiencing addiction and mental health challenges on their personal journeys towards recovery. [The] recovery-oriented system of care coordinates networks of personalized, community-based services, providing access to a full continuum of services and supports, from prevention and intervention to treatment and recovery.

That's where I'm referencing my questions, and I do have several health-related questions for the Premier this afternoon, so thank you, Premier, for entertaining my questions, through the chair.

We know, first and foremost, that Alberta has some of the best front-line health care workers in the world. I was very pleased to join a meeting – I guess it was last week – with a renowned cancer physician who talked a great deal about Alberta's capacity and the capacity, actually, right here in the capital to expand cancer treatment. That's something I'll take offline with the Premier, but it just underscored to me the incredible depth of talent we have in our health care system here, and I'm delighted to see that and excited to see us maximize the capacity that is there.

With that said, we've come a long way since you came into office, Premier, through the chair. I appreciate your work to date, since you've taken the office of Premier, and I would like to talk a little bit about that first strategic plan of ensuring an accessible and modernized health care system. With respect to the leadership at AHS, this objective commits to implementing key initiatives to modernize and optimize Alberta's health care system so that every Albertan can access safe, reliable, quality health care. I'm passionate about this also as a rural MLA from what I would call a rural centre, a rural city, wanting to make sure that Albertans right across the province, no matter where they live, have access to health care where and when they need it.

My question. I'm wondering if you can speak to the specific priorities of AHS and of the government when it comes to health care reform. Could you speak to the operations at AHS a bit more? Specifically, how is AHS now functioning under the leadership of an official administrator? I guess I've heard this comment a number of times in my constituency office as well, wondering about how that has helped to turn the ship. I know Health is a large ship to turn.

Then, secondly, I had the pleasure – and I'm just checking my time. Oh. Short. I've had the pleasure of serving on AEPAC and assessing emergency medical services across the province. In an emergency, as we all know, every minute counts, and over the past three months ambulances have been responding faster to emergency calls, which is great to see. Improved ambulance times mean that Albertans are receiving the urgent care they need from highly skilled paramedics more quickly, and that's, I think, critical.

I think we would all agree. I'm hoping that you can share some metrics with us, looking back to November of 2022, just after the conclusion of the AEPAC report. When these changes were first being implemented, EMS wait times were as follows: 21.8 minutes in metro and urban areas, 21.5 minutes in communities with more than 3,000 residents, 36 minutes in rural communities with fewer than 3,000 residents, and 63.9 minutes in remote communities. So I'm wondering, to the Premier through the chair: when you look at the changes since November, can you speak to the EMS wait times today and how they may have changed since your health care reforms were brought forward in November? And then I have a couple of other quick ones.

5:10

I'm hoping you can shed some light on the work that chartered surgical facilities are doing in our province and clarify for the opposition that they are in fact still publicly funded although they are privately delivered and how they're impacting the wait times, because all Albertans want to know that.

Then on to the surgical wait times. Part of a strong health care system is ensuring that Alberta patients are receiving their surgeries within the clinically recommended times. I'd like to know if you could share some metrics with us such as how many surgeries were completed in these chartered facilities in November? How many were completed in January, and if you have any data related to the decrease in wait times?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.
Premier, go ahead.

Ms Smith: Right. I just want to deal with the previous question since I didn't get all of it on the table. The \$2.9 million: \$1.7 million to the public emergencies governance review; \$365,000 for the ministers without portfolio, supports two new ministers without portfolio, includes two staff, and brings what had been partial staff members into full-time equivalents in the office. It was just a moving of those dollars. The Premier's office: \$565,000 total budget; 36 full-time equivalents at the moment, 34 full-time equivalents are in position; and then the rest of Executive Council was \$268,000. Again that was moving an ADM position from the ministry of OMG, which is the operations and machinery of government. Yeah. And that was for overall salary, includes . . .

Mr. McIver: OMG: what a great acronym.

Ms Smith: OMG. I know.

That's the breakdown of that additional \$2.9 million in making some shifts over from previous departments.

Just going into some of the questions asked by Mrs. Allard, and thanks MLA Allard, for your questions. I think maybe I should start with talking about Dr. John Cowell and the incredible work that he has done for us in the very short time that he's been there. Part of the reason he has been so effective is that he was once the official administrator, he also worked for the Workers' Compensation Board, he also worked for Nova. So he brings a doctor's perspective as well as a business perspective. In talking with him, one of the things that he appreciated is the alignment that we have between the Premier's office, the Minister of Health, himself, and our interim CEO Mauro Chies in identifying the three key things that we needed to work on.

It was a question of: what is the core business of Alberta Health Services? The core business of Alberta Health Services is making sure that when an ambulance is called, they arrive efficiently, they pick up and bring to hospital, they do not wait full shifts or sometimes two full shifts before dropping off a patient. When a

patient is received, they get triaged effectively, they get admitted if they need to be admitted, or they get released effectively. That whole flow was what we wanted to improve in addition to reducing surgical wait times so that, in the end, no one is waiting longer than the medically recommended period of time. It's because he had previous knowledge plus also the executive business experience plus the alignment with myself and Minister Copping that we've been able to make some of these changes.

I can just give you some of the examples of what we've seen. The one I find most dramatic is the fact that we have seen a huge reduction in red alerts. That's when no ambulances are available for urgent care. Year over year, a January to January comparison, in the Edmonton zone there was a reduction of over 90 per cent. It went down from over a thousand red alerts that had been registered to somewhere around 80. We saw a similar decline in Calgary; they started at a lower level, about 350 red alerts, and we ended up reducing that by 57 per cent just in one or two short months as a result of being able to bring some of this alignment to the system.

Dr. Cowell is confident that by as soon as the end of March we may end up seeing – as we've hired 114 full-time equivalent nurses, and incidentally, we have all kinds of nurses stepping forward interested in taking those positions on. We'll have effective onload, and we're very hopeful that we'll reduce that hospital wait time for ambulances down to less than 45 minutes for every single drop off. I think that we should celebrate that.

When it comes to the surgical wait times, part of our success is – again, we take a different approach from the NDP, who at both the federal and provincial level have been arguing to shut down private surgical centres. I will confirm that private surgical centres are publicly funded, integrated in our system. When it comes to establishing the queue, they have to be integrated into our queue. There is no queue-jumping. It's just a matter of: where does the patient receive their service? I think that patients just want to receive their service; it doesn't matter to them whether it's a private facility or a public facility as long as they're not paying out of pocket.

We're now at a point where 20 per cent of our surgeries are being done at charter surgical centres. And Dr. John is confident because we are now reducing that number of people who are on the waiting list for longer than a medically recommended period of time, we're now reducing that by 3,000 a month. We went from 39,000; we're now down to 35,000. So he thinks that within 12 months that waiting list is going to be gone. That's the reason why we had to step in. It's the reason why we had to be integrated. It's the reason we had to do a private-sector . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

We now move into questions from the Official Opposition. Again I would ask, Ms Notley, if you're wanting to combine your time with the Premier's time.

Ms Notley: I sure would.

The Deputy Chair: Madam Premier, are you wanting . . .

Ms Smith: I'll do block time. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Block time. Thank you.

Ms Notley, go ahead.

Ms Notley: All right. I'm going to be referring to the strategic plan, page 24, priority 2, objective 7, enhancing the justice system, also referring pursuant to the Premier's business plan, key objective 1.1. I'd like to ask her about some interactions between her and the office of the Crown prosecution service.

I'd like to start with question 1. In December you told a far-right website on video: I put it to the prosecutors, and I've asked them to do a review of the COVID-19 cases with those two things in mind, and I am hopeful that we'll see a true turning of the page; I put it to the prosecutors. Question 1: was the Premier telling the truth when she said that?

Mr. McIver: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. This is an interesting question. I know that the Leader of the Opposition is – this is something she's stuck on, but it's not really in the budget or in the business plan, what happened in an individual interview. It's just not within the scope of what this meeting is about, I don't think, Chair.

Mr. Sabir: Chair, I think the Leader of the Official Opposition mentioned page 24, strategic plan, priority 2, objective 7, enhancing the justice system. Then she also mentioned page 24, which says, "Government will protect Albertans by making the justice system fairer, faster, and more effective." So any question with respect to the justice system, its independence, is well within this strategic plan, and, I guess, well within the purview of this interaction.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I don't see a point of order at this time.

Go ahead.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Second question. On January 12 the Premier said on camera, quote, we do have an independent justice department and independent Crown prosecutors, and I've asked them to consider all charges under the lens of: is it in the public interest to pursue? I ask them on a regular basis as new cases come out: is it in the public interest to pursue, and is there a reasonable likelihood of conviction? End quote. Was she telling the truth when she made that statement?

On January 13 her office put out a written statement that was attributed to the Premier: quote, I had discussions with the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General and asked them to look into what options were available with respect to outstanding COVID-related cases. End quote. Question 3: was she telling the truth when she made that statement?

My fourth question: is the Premier aware of the similarities between that act of talking to the Attorney General about charges being pursued or not pursued and the act of the Prime Minister who went to his Attorney General around the SNC-Lavalin scandal? And if she is aware of the similarity, does she remember that at the time she said: if anything warrants a Robert Mueller style committee investigation, it's this. End quote. So I guess the final part of this question is: because she did the same thing as Justin Trudeau, why didn't she commission an independent investigation?
5:20

Final question on this line. As we know, Minister Kaycee Madu was accused of abusing his office to dispute a traffic ticket, and it was the subject of an independent investigation by former Justice Adèle Kent, who found he had attempted to . . .

Mr. Stephan: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: Point of order has been called.

Mr. Stephan: This is not within the scope of these estimates. She's making personal allegations and attacks against an individual who

is not here to defend themselves. Unfortunately, I've seen a number of nasty personal attacks against individuals who are not here, who are not present to defend themselves. I would ask that the member refrain from making personal, nasty attacks against individuals who aren't here to defend themselves.

Thank you.

Mr. Sabir: An investigation was launched by this UCP government, was headed by Justice Adèle Kent, and a public report said that Minister Madu did try to interfere in the administration of justice. There was no allegation, just a statement of fact from a report commissioned by this government. It's not a point of order. This question is, again, well within the purview of these estimates because it's about a fair, independent justice system, that is mentioned a few times in the government strategic plan.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I do not see a point of order at this time.

Go ahead.

Ms Notley: Thank you. As a result of the report by former Justice Adèle Kent, who concluded that Minister Kaycee Madu had attempted to interfere in the administration of justice, he was removed as Attorney General. My question to the Premier is: why does she hold herself and her office to a lower ethical standard than that which was applied to her cabinet colleague Kaycee Madu, and why, as well, does she think that it's appropriate for him to serve in her office as one of two Deputy Premiers?

Ms Rosin: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Ms Rosin: Under, I believe – I don't have the citation in front of me but the same as it was last time.

Mr. McIver: It's 23(h), (i), and (j).

Ms Rosin: Under 23(h), (i), and (j). I fail to see how the ethical standard or perceived ethical standard or lack thereof relates to a budget line item. I respect that there may be references in the budget to the administration of a justice system; however, that is far different than the supposed ethical standards of individuals, which is fundamentally not a line item in this budget.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sabir: The government's strategic plan is about enhancing the justice system, making it fair and effective, and any calls to Crown prosecutors, any investigations of ministers interfering in the administration of justice don't achieve that goal. These questions are about serious allegations, serious matters of interference in the justice system, and they are within the purview of these estimates.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

I've previously ruled three times now that this is not a point of order. She is referring back to the budget at hand.

I would ask the member to proceed.

Ms Notley: Thank you. I'll just finish that question. Why is it that this Premier is held to a lower ethical standard than that which was applied to Minister Madu after he engaged in what was found to be interference with the administration of justice?

I'd like to move on to a different topic as relating to securing Alberta's future in Canada and the Fair Deal Panel, which, of course, the Premier has already referred to, and I'd like to speak

briefly to CPP. Albertans don't want to leave the CPP – polling is very clear about that – but the strategic plan continues to list that as a priority, and indeed it was part of a mandate by the Premier to the Minister of Finance.

A report was commissioned, the Morneau Shepell report. It is, we are told, sitting on the desk of someone in cabinet. It is not a report that has been released. We expect that the report has not been released because the Premier doesn't want to talk about CPP during an election and she is unwilling to have that matter put to Albertans as part of a referendum during the election because she knows how unpopular it is. So my question to the Premier: given the fact that this is part of the operation of her office and the report was commissioned, why has the Morneau Shepell report not been released, and why is she unwilling to speak about pulling Alberta out of CPP and come clean with Albertans about that plan prior to their opportunity to cast a ballot in the election on May 29?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Premier, go ahead.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I spent, I think, seven months on the campaign trail talking about the issue of amnesty. When I got elected on October 6 and was sworn in, I discovered that the Department of Justice had proactively, having heard the things I was campaigning on, decided to put together a PowerPoint presentation on the issue of amnesty to talk about what was possible and what was not possible.

That led to a presentation that the Justice minister and the Deputy Minister of Justice gave to me, where it was made clear that amnesty is in the purview of our Governor General, not a Premier – our system works quite differently than the U.S. – and also that the role of the Justice minister is also to be the head of the Crown prosecution service. That's actually the formal role of the Minister of Justice. He is jointly an adviser to me on legal matters as well as the head of the Crown prosecution service, and his deputy minister plays also the role of the Deputy Attorney General.

I'm not a lawyer. I know that Ms Notley is, but I'm not a lawyer. That's part of the reason why, when I got elected, I said that I would be seeking legal advice, and the person I seek legal advice from is a person who is legally obligated to give me advice. That's the Justice minister. It just so happens he also is the head of the Crown prosecution service.

So when I said that all of my requests and all of my inquiries were done appropriately, all of my inquiries were directed to the Minister of Justice and his deputy Justice minister. I may have used imprecise language, but as head of the Crown prosecution service as well as my legal adviser – I can see why there might have been some confusion on that.

What is not allowed is that it is not allowed – and it has been alleged by the opposition as well as by the CBC, and I've still not received an apology for this. What is not allowed is making calls to Crown prosecutors and individual offices in charge of cases. That never occurred. We did a major investigation by the independent public service over the course of the weekend, where they did a full review of all of the e-mails that had been sent and received out of my office as well as to Crown prosecutors, and found nothing.

You know, I'll still put it out there that I'd like an apology for the misinformation that has been put out there consistently and for the unfortunate role that I think Ms Notley is doing in casting aspersions, frankly, on our independent justice system.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Sabir: It's 23(h), (i), and (j). I think twice a reference was made to the Premier's own statement, and the Leader of the Official Opposition read exactly what the Premier said to the far-right website, to the media, where she admitted that she is in touch with Crown prosecutors on a regular basis as new cases come up and asks them whether it's in the public interest to prosecute them, asks them the likelihood of conviction. These are the Premier's words. Ms Notley is not casting any – whatever the word the Premier used. We are not making allegations. We are asking the Premier about her own words that she said.

I think I would say that it's a point of order to accuse the Leader of the Official Opposition with such language.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McIver: Well, it's unfortunate the NDP's stock-in-trade is character assassination even when it's unwarranted, and we've seen nothing but that in the last few minutes. It's a result of after a couple of hours of doing budget estimates that they have nothing to show, so they're going to the lowest common denominator, which is what they do.

The Deputy Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet this evening, March 14, 2023, at 7 o'clock to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Trade, Immigration and Multiculturalism.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

