



Province of Alberta

The 28th Legislature  
Third Session

# Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, November 25, 2014

Issue 7e

The Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker

# Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 28th Legislature

Third Session

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## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 25, 2014

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

**The Acting Speaker:** Good evening. Please be seated.

### Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

**The Deputy Chair:** Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call the committee to order.

#### Bill 4 Horse Racing Alberta Amendment Act, 2014

**The Deputy Chair:** Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

**Mr. Hehr:** Well, thank you, Madam Chair. What a great honour and privilege it is to be here this evening. It's my understanding that many of us were called back here tonight because of little old me, and I thank you, all, for going above and beyond the call of duty to hear my scintillating comments on the bill and to hear my minor amendment, that I think will go a long way to increasing openness and transparency and be a reasonable fiscal management tool for Horse Racing Alberta going forward.

If we look at this bill in the main, I have to ask myself – and I start from the starting point, you know – about Alberta horse racing: do we necessarily need to be in the business of fundamentally supporting this sport? I ask that because, in my view, there are lots of opportunities now in this province to go and bet on horses and to take part in it. They're called local pubs. I see people at those places all the time, like at Schanks in Calgary and other places, where, in fact, most of the people actually go to place bets – okay? – if they're interested in the actual sport of horse racing. You've seen a large portion of the Alberta population move with their feet, and they go, in fact, to these locations. That's where they do their betting. That's where they enjoy their horse racing because . . .

**The Deputy Chair:** Excuse me, hon. member.

Can I ask the Assembly to keep the level of chatter down? It's very hard to hear the member. I'm sure he's prepared some really good words for us to listen to.

Thank you, hon. member. Carry on.

**Mr. Hehr:** Like I was saying, many of Alberta's horse-racing aficionados, shall we call them, have decided to move with their feet and vote with their feet. They do. They go to pubs around this great province where they are able to bet on horse racing. You see that at the casinos in Calgary and other locations. You go in there, and they have the races from all across North America playing there, whether they're in California or Kentucky or the like. All the big races are there. That's where it seems to be that the majority of people these days are now going to enjoy their horse-betting experience.

So back to my point: is it necessary to prop up Horse Racing Alberta in the fashion that we do, where we have allowed for this organization – the only one, in my view, in Alberta that gets this special treatment – to have a unique arrangement with the Alberta

lottery foundation and this government as to how they organize and are able to run their operations? They essentially have access to video lottery terminals that are placed at their sites across Alberta. I don't think there are very many left, three of four tracks around this province that are still existing. This money that flows through from the video lottery terminals goes through to support Horse Racing Alberta.

Essentially, it's my understanding that this goes to support both the breeding of animals as well as to having bigger purses for the people who win the said races. You have two groups of people benefiting from this. Largely, they're the same people: one, the people who breed horses – they're the people who put horses into races – and then the people who win the races. So it's the 40 or so people in this province who run horse racing that this unique structure has come about and has been put in place for.

It's different than any other organization, and I have to almost question why we are bending over backwards to do this. It's my understanding that at one time this government wasn't in the business of being in business. Now, I'm not sure whether this government knows from day to day what their stance is anymore on that proposition or the like, but this appears to be, at least on the surface, something that is keeping Horse Racing Alberta afloat.

I will point out, Madam Speaker, that currently the organization has a large amount of debt outstanding on their balance sheet, that even with this unique arrangement with the funds provided by Alberta gaming, it is having a difficult way forward, and maybe – I don't even think maybe. I think it is dying a natural death in this province.

Now, I don't want the horse-racing industry to go away, nor did I really want the buggy and the wagon to go away, Madam Chair, but sometimes the population just isn't interested anymore, and they find other things. I heard they now have this MMA wrestling or, you know, battling on TV and the like that all the cool kids are going to see Friday nights and not necessarily going to their local track.

It's akin to: why would we bend over backwards for this industry when, it seems to me, we do nothing for bingos? My understanding is that the bingo parlours are not necessarily chugging along on all cylinders, you know, and we haven't allowed for that organization to put in video lottery terminals or other measures to increase their bottom line because I think, like the horse-racing industry, they may be dying a natural death. The cool kids just don't want to go play bingo anymore. I don't know why, Madam Chair – you get a dauber out; you start knocking away at those numbers; my goodness, I've had some fun times doing that – but it just seems to be the zeitgeist of the time.

I question as to why we're involved in this unique funding mechanism for this unique product at this time in Alberta, and our party has always questioned whether or not this is the right thing for the Alberta government to be involved in. It seems to be that if people were going to go to video lottery terminals, well, they would go anyway regardless of whether it was horse racing or not. Those funds would come back to the provincial coffers and then could be used to support some charitable opportunities for the homeless, some for the sick or the poor, or things of that nature that may be better served than us propping up our breeder associations and the like. It just seems to be a more rational way to treat our operations. Treat all the charitable organizations and gaming organizations alike. Let's not carve out a unique opportunity for a group that has a long-standing relationship with this government, who, just for the sake of running the operations, continue doing that. I question the whole mechanism of the program, ma'am.

With respect to the actual changes to the bill there are a few of them, actually, that are a good thing. I think that moving the appointment from 12 to 11 members is a better thing because then, you know, there are no tie votes. It's, obviously, important, from an organizational structure, to do those things.

It also increases the members of the public on the board from three to six. I think this is a good thing, too. The six members from the public at large can be people who are interested in horse racing, interested in just the accountability, interested in how we're using our lottery terminals, if that's what they're interested in, and can apply and be named to this committee. That's a move in the right direction and one that I would support.

7:40

Largely, what concerns me in this bill, despite my standing by the fact that I don't think this government should be involved in this business, is the fact that for some reason it is protected from the purview of the Fiscal Management Act. It is protected, then, from the Auditor General going in and looking at how this organization uses public funds. Although these funds are raised at their local operations, video lottery terminals are run by this province.

**The Deputy Chair:** Excuse me, hon. member.

Hon. members, the noise level is reaching a very high point. I know that each one of you is having a quiet conversation, but when 35 of you are all having quiet conversations, there is a very high noise level. Can we try to please keep it down.

Thanks very much.

**Mr. Hehr:** Thank you, Madam Chair. If we look at that unique structure, you know, we're wondering as to whether or not the viability – at least having some public members on that board, who are not from an industry association or a breeding association, I think is a positive thing for this bill.

But like I said – now I'm getting back to my point – I cannot for the life of me see why this organization is not subject to the Fiscal Management Act and the Auditor General Act. These are public funds. Although they're derived from horse-racing operations and the money they raise from the lottery terminals on their property during the events, the government is in charge of these terminals, and the government is in charge of the use and operation of those funds, so my goodness it should be subject to the act.

Therein lies the rub, and I'll cut back to it. Maybe this organization needs the eyes of the Auditor General upon it. Like I said, their books are not necessarily in that good a shape. The Auditor General could look into the practices and understand whether this unique set of circumstances in fact is in the public interest and whether we're getting public value out of it. That's why we have an Auditor General, and that's why I think it would behoove us to take that statute out.

On that note, I would like to move an amendment that does exactly that.

**The Deputy Chair:** Hon. member, do you have copies of the amendment?

**Mr. Hehr:** Yes, I believe I do. They are all here on my desk ready to go or the like.

**The Deputy Chair:** We'll take a moment until they get distributed to all the members, please. This amendment will be known as A2.

Hon. member, I think you can go ahead and read the amendment while we're waiting for it to be distributed, and then we can proceed.

**Mr. Hehr:** Okay. I move that Bill 4, Horse Racing Alberta Amendment Act, 2014, be amended by striking out section 4. If we look at the bill, this would take out the portion of the act that takes away the Auditor General's power and the Fiscal Management Act's power to investigate what is happening with this organization.

Like I stated earlier, the sole reason for the Auditor General existing is to look into the use of public funds and whether they're truly being used in a reasonable and rational fashion and whether they truly serve the best interests of the Alberta public. Are we gaining substantially by this investment as a province? It is the Auditor General's sworn responsibility to do so.

I for the life of me can't understand why Horse Racing Alberta gets the unique position of being unauditably by this organization. We're allowed to audit every government department. We're allowed to audit Alberta Health Services. We're allowed to audit WCB. We're allowed to audit universities and the like. So why is it that this organization deserves the privilege of being excluded? I, for the life of me, don't understand this. Maybe the minister responsible could explain to me why it needs this unique status. Maybe there's a good reason. I, for the life of me, have thought about it long and hard, and I just simply don't understand it. It may be easy for the minister responsible to do so. If we look at where this bill is and what it needs for openness and transparency, which this government repeatedly claims it's all about, then this amendment should happen.

So on that note, I'd like to invite the members to vote for the amendment and proceed from there.

**The Deputy Chair:** Thank you, hon. member.

We are debating amendment A2. Are there any other members who wish to comment on amendment A2? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

**Mr. Eggen:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the chance to make a couple of comments in regard to this very reasonable amendment. I thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo for pointing out section 4. I confess that I was just reading the overall bill and didn't look at this one. It stands out considerably because, of course, it excludes the board from the Financial Administration Act.

Considering, Madam Chair, the amount of monies that Horse Racing Alberta does receive from our Legislature here, from our budget, I think it's incumbent upon us to ensure that we use all the means which we have available to us to audit and administer the funds going to boards and agencies which we are responsible for. We debate the money that goes to Horse Racing Alberta. I can't remember how much it was last year, but I remember a number of \$40 million. [interjection] Yeah, that has been historically the amount, and considering the extraordinary financial arrangement that Horse Racing Alberta has as well by which they are collecting more of their VLT money than other equivalent bodies, then with that gambling element I think it's incumbent upon us to ensure that we are auditing and using all of the tools, especially the Financial Administration Act, to ensure that there is transparency there.

Globally, certainly, I don't believe that this subsidy to the horse-racing industry should continue anyway. I mean, historically we know the evolution of the tracks in Alberta. Really, there's only one main track left, and that's here in Edmonton. Attendance is down. You know, they have been making a go of it, and I wish them the best. Certainly, it's a very interesting and historical sport. I certainly followed it in my own family for many years and the track in Calgary, too. But \$40 million for an industry: I think a lot of Albertans are kind of surprised that we even do that. Certainly, at the very least, I would support the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo's amendment here but with the provision that I also in a

more global sense don't approve of our subsidy of the horse-racing industry in this province, period.

Thank you.

**The Deputy Chair:** Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members who would like to speak on amendment A2? The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

**Mr. Horner:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I would just urge hon. members to vote against this amendment because, in essence, it's the same as the amendment brought forward by the Member for Strathmore-Brooks, which essentially takes it away from the Auditor General Act and the Fiscal Management Act. As was articulated by the Minister of Finance earlier, there is no reason for us to amend this bill in this way. So I would urge all hon. members to vote against this amendment based on what the Minister of Finance said earlier this afternoon.

7:50

**The Deputy Chair:** Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members who wish to speak on amendment A2?

Seeing none, shall I call the vote?

**Hon. Members:** Question.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

**The Deputy Chair:** We're back to the bill now. You have some time left, hon. member.

**Mr. Hehr:** Okay. Well, Madam Chair, I'm surprised at that. It would have indeed gone a long way for openness and transparency and for allowing us to look at how an organization runs its finances. As we well know, this has a unique arrangement in the realm of Alberta government operations. Horse Racing Alberta benefits from a large contribution of taxpayer dollars in the form of revenue generated from our VLTs. I think it would be important for us to have the Auditor General able to look at this arrangement, at whether it's serving our best interest, whether we are doing everything possible to deal with problem gambling and the like, everything associated with horse racing and VLTs. We cannot have an eye on what is happening at these tracks without the Auditor General taking a look at it. So I'm surprised that we continue on this practice.

To close, in the main I'm wondering why we're involved in this industry in the first place. It seems like a government subsidy set up in a unique set of circumstances by possibly a unique set of insiders who are very close to this government and who have long-standing ties. In my view, it's something we should get out of and look at, actually, how our entire lottery industry is set up and whether it's serving the best interests of Albertans in terms of both revenue generation and problem gambling and balance those priorities with what's in the best interest for all of our futures.

On that note, I'd urge all members to vote against this bill, in particular since we voted down the amendment here and the amendment of my friends from the Wildrose that were seeking more clarity and more reasonableness and the fact that having the Auditor General look at things is usually considered a good thing for the Alberta public.

In any event, those are my comments, Madam Chair, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak.

**The Deputy Chair:** Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members who have any questions or comments or amendments for Bill 4, Horse Racing Alberta Amendment Act, 2014?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question on Bill 4?

**Hon. Members:** Question.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 4 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

**The Deputy Chair:** Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.

**The Deputy Chair:** Opposed? Carried.

The Government House Leader.

**Mr. Denis:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I would move that the committee rise and report progress.

**The Deputy Chair:** Hon. Government House Leader, could you ask us to do that for Bill 4, please.

**Mr. Denis:** For Bill 4. Mea culpa.

**The Deputy Chair:** Hon. Government House Leader, I need you to say that you'd like us to rise and report Bill 4.

**Mr. Denis:** Okay. Madam Chair, I would move that we rise and report Bill 4. Mea culpa.

**The Deputy Chair:** Thank you.

[Motion carried]

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

**The Acting Speaker:** The Member for Calgary-East.

**Mr. Amery:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 4. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

**The Acting Speaker:** Thank you.

Does the Assembly concur in the report?

**Hon. Members:** Concur.

**The Acting Speaker:** Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

**Mr. Denis:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As it is very late and I know the Member for Airdrie is tired, I would like to move that the House stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 7:56 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]







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