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The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday morning, December 7, 2017

Day 63

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature

Third Session

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Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UCP)
Vacant, Calgary-Lougheed

Party standings:

New Democratic: 54 United Conservative: 26 Alberta Party: 2 Alberta Liberal: 1 Progressive Conservative: 1 Independent: 2 Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Thursday, December 7, 2017

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good morning.

If each of us could pray or reflect, each in our own way. As we conclude another full week of work in this Assembly, may we reflect on the hard work of our peers and what has been accomplished and commit ourselves to reaching agreement by recognizing that our objective is not to win or lose but, rather, to reach an agreement. Let us also continue to support each other and find mutual respect in our diversity.

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 32

An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta

Mrs. Pitt moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, be amended by deleting all the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

[Debate adjourned on the amendment December 6: Mr. Strankman speaking]

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

Mr. Cooper: Well, good morning, sir. Good morning, all. It's a pleasure to be joined by 87 of my closest friends and colleagues, some more friends than colleagues, some more colleagues than friends.

An Hon. Member: Are you counting yourself as a friend, then?

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. You've got a friend in me.

Ms McLean: Apparently, you have a colleague in me.

Mr. Cooper: Well, you also have a colleague in me, particularly the Minister of Service Alberta.

It is a pleasure to rise this morning and speak to Bill 32, and by pleasure – I mean, I always enjoy rising, but it is with some great concern that I rise this morning, Mr. Speaker, with respect to Bill 32. I had the opportunity to speak to this bill yesterday and identify a number of challenges that are in Bill 32. Just as I said yesterday, there are a number of really positive steps forward in Bill 32. Those include some of the discussions around the funding of third-party advertisers and how that is going to be co-ordinated and worked upon. Those include the use of voter assist terminals. They include some of the work to be done around advance polls.

But as I mentioned yesterday, I have some significant reservations around the speed at which this bill is likely to proceed, so that's why I was so, so, so pleased with the good work my hon.

colleague from Livingstone-Macleod did to recommend referring this piece of legislation to committee.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, because I'm sure that you've read it with great anticipation and excitement, this bill is over 200 pages long and was dropped as if it was hot just days before the scheduled end of the session. In fact, it was hot when it was dropped because it had just come off a photocopier in the backrooms of the Legislative Assembly. It was done so because the government wasn't even ready to get it introduced and it hadn't come back from the printers. But I think that we've provided this account of how it actually arrived here yesterday.

Mr. Speaker, one of the more concerning things about this piece of legislation is the lack of consultation that has taken place with the primary stakeholder. You know, the Chief Electoral Officer is entrusted as the keeper of democracy in our province. He or she is mandated under the current Election Act to

- (a) provide guidance, direction and supervision respecting the conduct of all elections, enumerations and plebiscites conducted under [the Election] Act.

The Chief Electoral Officer has a significant role and requirement inside our democracy to ensure that direction and supervision respecting the conduct of elections are considered.

In this case he is required to

- (b) enforce fairness and impartiality on the part of all election officers in the conduct of their duties and compliance with [the Election] Act and the Senatorial Selection Act;
- (c) issue to election officers any guidance, direction and information the [CEO] considers necessary to ensure the effective carrying out of their duties under [the Election] Act and the Senatorial Selection Act;

investigate matters that might constitute an offence under the Election Act; reach out to political parties or representatives concerning the election process. Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on about what the Chief Electoral Officer's responsibilities and duties are.

My point here, Mr. Speaker, is to highlight the fact that the powers of the CEO are not to be understated. This individual is essential to the keeping of our democratic system. He's essential to keeping our democratic system accountable and the rules enforced at all times.

One would only assume that if you were going to be making significant structural changes to the Election Act, you might want to reach out to the individual who is primarily responsible for the enforcement of that act, say, the definite subject matter in this case. One would assume that you would want that individual to be quite involved or at least approached in crafting any legislation that pertains to areas he oversees; namely, the Election Act, the Senatorial Selection Act, and the election finances and contributions act.

So you can only imagine my surprise, Mr. Speaker, when said individual, the CEO, Mr. Resler, provided the following letter to the minister of democratic reform.

Mr. Stier: I was shocked by it.

Mr. Cooper: I was shocked myself. I was.

He issued a letter yesterday to the minister responsible for democratic renewal and very kindly CCed members of the Leg. Offices Committee. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer reports directly to that Leg. Offices Committee.

I might just premise, Mr. Speaker, that my comments today are providing very specific reasons why we should be sending this bill to committee as recommended by my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod.

First and foremost is, Mr. Speaker, that the Chief Electoral Officer provided his opinion, essentially stating that he hadn't been

consulted with respect to Bill 32. Don't take my word for it; take his. I'll be able to provide significant portions of the letter this morning. But in this case he concludes his letter with:

Since I provided recommendations to the Special Select Ethics and Accountability Committee, I have not ...

Emphasis on "not"; my emphasis, not his.

... been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32.

Holy smokes, Mr. Speaker: a piece of legislation that dramatically changes the way that we do democracy in Alberta. Now, in the name of full disclosure, many of those things are a positive, but you would think that you would want to ask the individual who enforces, provides guidance, direction to that particular piece of legislation.

Let me provide some more context for you, Mr. Speaker, with respect to what Mr. Resler actually said. He says:

I have had a chance to review Bill 32 after first reading.

I am pleased to see that some of my recommendations respecting the residency requirements for electors, flexibility in hiring election officers, the ability to set remuneration of election officers, and the increase in accessibility provisions for electors to be able to vote anywhere and with voter assist terminals have been incorporated into Bill 32: An Act to ... Protect Democracy in Alberta.

While I applaud the spirit behind the proposals about advance polls and special mobile polls, I wanted to bring to your attention potential unintended consequences of these particular proposals. If passed in its current form, I am concerned that Bill 32 will deteriorate the service provided to electors and increase the timelines for communicating results.

9:10

Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer is concerned that Bill 32 will deteriorate the service provided to electors. Here the government claims that the legislation is going to strengthen and protect democracy, but the Chief Electoral Officer, who's responsible for the delivery of that service, says that Bill 32, if passed in its current form, will actually do the opposite, deteriorate service.

He continues:

The most notable areas of concern include the change in advance polling ... and the absence of the authority to utilize vote tabulators for advance polls, special mobile polls and Special Ballots.

He goes on to speak about a number of different changes. I don't believe I'm going to have the opportunity to read the entire letter this morning because of some time constraints, but I'm certain that some of my colleagues will be able to provide some additional content around this particular issue.

But let me highlight a few key areas of the letter, Mr. Speaker, because I know that you will share – I would never presume what you would share or not share with me, but I can only imagine that you will share some of my concern.

Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer identifies a number of issues in this letter with respect to advance polls and his inability to get where-to-vote cards printed and sent to electors. He speaks at length about his concerns around where-to-vote cards. These where-to-vote cards play a very, very important role in ensuring that electors know where they can vote. Now, it may be great that you can vote in the advance polls anywhere in the province – it's an idea that I support – but we have to give the Chief Electoral Officer the tools to be able to communicate to Albertans and for the Chief Electoral Officer to be able to report timely results to us as well.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the official results, the Chief Electoral Officer says:

I had recommended ... the time for the official results from 10 days to 7 days after polling ... This recommendation was premised on either status quo for voting, or vote-anywhere combined with tabulators. A vote-anywhere process without the ability to automate the sorting and counting of ballots comes with additional requirements that will result in an increased timeline for processing Special Ballots, advance poll ballots and special mobile poll ballots. The proposed amendment to section 55 to change the announcement of the official results from the 10th to the 7th day following polling day shortens the allowable timeline. It will be a challenge, if not impracticable, for returning officers to comply with section 55 if the other amendments noted above remain unchanged.

The Chief Electoral Officer is essentially saying that it will not be possible for returning officers to comply with other sections of the act.

You would think that if you were going to be introducing a piece of legislation in the Chamber, you would have at least asked one of the most important stakeholders when it comes to this bill. Mr. Speaker, don't worry, though. The Official Opposition is here to help, particularly my hon. colleague from Livingstone-Macleod, who said: we've got a solution for this problem; let's send this bill to committee so that the Chief Electoral Officer can come and present the facts to this government.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that you will recall in question period when the Premier stood in her place and made a claim that the opposition likes to ready, shoot, aim. Was there ever a more clear example of ready, shoot, aim than the Chief Electoral Officer not being consulted with respect to the primary piece of legislation that affects him? If there's anyone inside this Chamber that is a superstar at ready, shoot, aim, it is the government. Time in and time out, time and time again this government is proposing legislation where they haven't consulted with Albertans, haven't consulted with the stakeholders. Certainly, in this case – and I'll say it again – the Chief Electoral Officer concludes his letter with:

Since I provided recommendations to the Special Select Ethics and Accountability Committee, I have not been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32,

the bill that primarily he will be responsible for delivering. He has not been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32. I don't know if the government members remember or not, but it was well over a year ago that the government killed that committee.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Well, thank you and good morning, Mr. Speaker, and good morning, all. You know, this new bit of ...

The Speaker: Under 29(2)(a), hon. member?

Mr. Stier: Yes. Thank you. This new bit of information that has just come to our attention by the elections officer is, I think, a crucial point in our argument that we've been presenting for the past few days. I would urge members to pay a little bit of attention to what we have to say because I think this is vitally important to the discussion regarding sending this to committee. I have a prepared speech that I'll probably go into later on, Mr. Speaker, but with this new information, I think this is critical, and I think it is important that we hear some more details that the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills was about to say. If that's the case, I'd like to ask him to carry on, please.

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

Mr. Cooper: Why, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was about to say that I'm speechless, but clearly I am not. I have a few more things to say. How is it possible that this government thinks that they didn't need to consult with the province's leading expert on the matters on this issue when they are so critically important? Why is it that they didn't think that they needed to consult in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32?

You know, Mr. Speaker, in this piece of legislation the government has taken a number of recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer, and he acknowledges that. The problem is that they are creating a wide, wide swath of unintended consequences that are going to prevent and limit the ability of the Chief Electoral Officer and his team to comply with this very act. It makes absolutely no sense. I was shocked that the Chief Electoral Officer hadn't been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32. How is it that the government could bring forward legislation that fundamentally alters the way that our democratic elections are run without first consulting the Chief Electoral Officer on the ramifications of that issue?

Ms McLean: Table the letter.

Mr. Cooper: Oh, I would be more than happy to table the letter.

Ms McLean: I'd love it if you read the whole thing.

Mr. Cooper: I wish I had time to read the whole thing.

This is a perfect example, Mr. Speaker – a perfect example – of why this legislation must be referred to committee. We cannot possibly fix this legislation before the end of the session if we haven't heard from the experts. You know what will happen? We will pass this legislation, it will be a train wreck, and then we'll have to come back and fix the problems that the government created. In fact, a case could be made that that's what we're already doing here. If they had continued the special ethics committee, we could have discussed a wide range of issues, including those that affect third-party advertisers, which we were happy to do, but this government shut down the committee because the time ran out. I don't know if the government had the ability to extend the time or not, but they chose not to because they don't want to listen.

9:20

The Chief Electoral Officer has raised some significant concerns. In this letter, Mr. Speaker, he hasn't even identified his concerns with enumeration, that he identified at Leg. Offices just two weeks ago, and the additional costs. He has not spoken specifically about the independent elections commissioner and whether or not the way that the government has proposed it is, in fact, the best path forward. I'm just speculating here, but my guess is that he would say that it isn't. I also believe that the government hasn't asked whether or not he thinks it's a good idea. The reason why I would say that is because they didn't ask about policy direction leading up to Bill 32.

Mr. Speaker, this government clearly – clearly – has not taken the right path to strengthening and protecting democracy in Alberta. The Chief Electoral Officer indicated in his letter that it will do the exact opposite.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. W. Anderson: Good morning, everybody, and good morning and thank you, Mr. Speaker. First off, I just want to thank my hon. colleague for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills for his elaborate dissertation on the documentation from the Chief Electoral Officer. It's quite enlightening to know that this government did not consult with someone who has such great power and authority.

I stand here to support the motion from the member to refer Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, to committee for further review and consultation. Since the hon. member mentioned the document from the Chief Electoral Officer, it's fairly obvious that one should definitely now or at any time consider this. I think that when we're talking about the topic of electoral integrity and protecting our democracy, we need to stop and think for a minute about the seriousness of anything we choose to do.

As members we know that our democracy in this province and in this country is an inheritance that predates the existence of Canada as we know it. As this parliamentary tradition that we have is our most sacred institution, I want us all to think about its history whenever we contemplate legislation that will affect our democracy.

Just two short years ago this Legislature had the honour to host what is perhaps the most sacred secular document in history, the Magna Carta, the Great Charter. It was the original guarantee of rights and liberties that we all enjoy and hold fairly dear. Today, if you go to that small village surrounded by green fields across the ocean, thousands of kilometres away, there is a small monument, one that on the scale of human structures might be hardly noticed by unknowing passersby, and on that memorial, amongst others, there are three words that stand out: "Freedom under Law." These three words, that capture the pillars of our free society and our democracy, convey the fundamental rights and liberties of the individual, they imply the rule of law, and, yes, also represent the very beginnings of our parliamentary democracy.

While most think of the Great Charter as simply a statement of rights and liberties, an early bill of rights, it's actually so much more. It required that the king gain consent of his royal council in order to levy taxes. It is this royal council that became the Parliament of England, the world's first parliamentary democracy. This, in turn, became the Parliament of Great Britain and eventually the Parliament of the United Kingdom. It is from that document, written more than 800 years ago, that the Westminster parliamentary tradition was developed and to where the Parliament of Canada and this Assembly trace their roots.

It is also important to remember that for hundreds of years this tradition and its institutions stood alone as a pillar of freedom and democracy in a world where most people were subject to the arbitrary rule of tyrants or despots. Still today, for the billions of people who live under the oppressive regimes of the world, Legislatures like this stand as a beacon of hope and freedom.

Again, I want all of us in this House to consider these facts, the exceptional history and significance of our democracy, before we make legislative changes that will affect it. I would suggest that this kind of consideration cannot happen in the few short days in which this government intends to pass this bill.

Above all else, if there are changes that deserve the review and the legislative scrutiny and the greater consultation that is allowed by sending this bill to committee, they are changes that affect our democratic process. Mr. Speaker, I realize that to some my words may seem like the kind that should be reserved for great constitutional changes, but it is vital to recognize that the changes in this bill could have impacts on so much more than just electoral technicalities.

This brings me to the name of the bill. If this Legislature is going to pass this legislation claiming to strengthen and protect democracy in Alberta, we should be absolutely sure that it does not contain measures that end up doing the exact opposite, and if it appears that it does, we should take steps to review them and amend them. To me, while there are good measures contained in the bill, there are also some significant problems with this bill. We need to

address these. Some of these are matters of practicality, and others are matters of principle. Let me start with the former.

I'm curious as to how the government came to the conclusion that the province-wide door-to-door enumeration ahead of the next election was a practical idea. The recommendation by Elections Alberta was that selective in-person enumeration accompanied by mail-outs would be the most effective and efficient manner in which to accomplish this goal. For many reasons going door to door can be difficult, not to mention extremely expensive. This is a situation where it would be worth while to go to the committee, look into the best practices, and try and find the best way to go about future electoral enumeration.

While I'm speaking about the duties of Elections Alberta, I would also like to address the proposed establishment of the new, independent elections commissioner. The stated purpose of this new office would be to oversee matters related to third-party advertisers. This is a role that has been administered by Elections Alberta in the past, something, I would suggest, that should be the case going forward. Albertans have confidence in the administration of our elections and the excellent people who have done and continue to do this. In addition, Elections Alberta has the budget and the expertise to execute a wide range of duties, including the ones that this bill proposes to be dealt with by this new office.

At a time when we desperately need to restrain new spending and expanding government, I see no reason why we need to create a new office and no reason why we cannot continue to place our trust and confidence in the women and men at Elections Alberta, under the leadership of the Chief Electoral Officer, someone we should have consulted with. If the government has a legitimate argument why this should not be the case, they should bring it to committee and share it with the rest of us.

Moving on, I would also like to suggest that there should be a second look taken at the list of exemptions that this bill would allow in regard to the ban on government advertising during elections. To me these exemptions are far too broad rather than prohibiting this kind of advertising during an election. Instead, give the government a road map on how to spend taxpayers' dollars during an electoral period. It is absolutely critical to ensure that taxpayer money is not used to give unfair advantage to one party in an election. The integrity of our democracy demands that we go back and take another look at this to close any loopholes that currently exist.

While I'm speaking about democratic integrity, I also want to raise the elimination of the residency requirements as a condition of voter eligibility. It should go without saying that only residents of Alberta should be able to vote in Alberta elections, and it is established in practice that an extended period of time is required to establish residency. This is no different than requiring one to be the age of majority and a Canadian citizen, requirements that are rightly being retained.

This bill as it stands opens a door to unacceptable outside interference in Alberta elections. While I know that the NDP is discovering that they don't have a whole lot of supporters left in this province, I would suggest that if they wish to change that, they should seek to better serve Albertans instead of changing the long-established rules on elections. Frankly, I think that if more Albertans were aware of this provision in the bill, there would be widespread and justifiable outrage. This piece of legislation, that has the appearance of trying to influence the outcome of free and fair elections, should be subject to absolute scrutiny. That part of the legislation alone should justify the referral motion at hand in order to better inform and consult Albertans.

A significant part of this bill is the new restrictions and expanded definitions in regard to third-party advertisers. I believe that this is an area where we also need to tread carefully. When you think about

it, what is a third party? Is it a party that is involved that is not contesting an election itself? In a way, this makes every single Albertan a third party. When we talk about advertising, is it clear that this is also a form of speech and expression? In this case, is it of a political nature? The regulation and restriction of political speech is a topic on which the Supreme Court of Canada has suggested that legislators exercise extreme care and caution. In this case, where we are applying these rules to those who are not themselves political parties and candidates, we should be even more aware of the potential impact on freedom of expression.

9:30

If we boil it down to a very basic example, if your average Albertan is concerned about a political issue and they compose and print off some flyers to post around their neighbourhood, should they be subject to restrictions by government? I would think that the nearly universal answer is no. Say this person is too busy to accomplish their goal themselves, and they want to spread their message beyond their local community. What if they hire someone to write and design their literature? What if they print off thousands of copies? What if they need to pay for envelopes and postage to get their message to Albertans across the province? Is it reasonable for the government to restrict this person's fundamental right to freedom of expression?

What if our hypothetical, politically-engaged Albertan finds a number of like-minded people who want to express their opinion on the same issue? Do the rights of the individual diminish because their idea is popular? What if this group of people find that there is a political party or a politician who shares their concern, or what if they find that there's a political party or politician working against their interests? Do their rights to organize and support or oppose like-minded people end if those people are seeking or hold elected office?

Of course, we know that one of the arguments is that Albertans should be restricted depending on their financial capability and capacity to spread their ideas. I would caution that restrictions based on these factors, while they may seem to be based on a principle of fairness, are in fact a form of censorship on a group of Albertans. Mr. Speaker, restricting the political speech of Albertans is something that should be done rarely and reverently. It is certainly something that deserves more than a few rushed days at the end of session. It is something that cannot happen without deep deliberation and consultation, the kind that could happen in the setting of a committee.

Mr. Speaker, to close – and I'm sure everybody appreciates it – I would just like to repeat one idea, that whenever we seek to change the rules of our democratic process, we should remember the potential significance of what we're really doing. We should remember that in our political tradition the primary defenders of our rights and liberties are the parliamentary bodies like this Assembly. As such, I would urge all members to help fulfill our duty as legislators and support the motion to refer this bill to committee for further scrutiny and consultation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Cardston-Taber-Warner, under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Hunter: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the Member for Highwood for waxing poetically on this important referral motion, and I want to thank him for his reasonable argument for why this needs to go to committee. I think that this morning already we've heard some very good arguments that would indicate the need for this government to take a sober second thought, to send it to committee, and to provide Albertans with an opportunity to have a

more fulsome discussion on this issue. I think Mr. Resler's indication that this is a rushed process and that he has not been consulted is evidence enough of why this needs to go to committee and have a more fulsome discussion.

I'm very interested to hear from the hon. Member for Highwood how important it is for Albertans to feel like the democratic process that they are engaged in will have the best efficacy in terms of its application and that the process of that democracy is as strong as it can be. I would like to ask the member if he would be willing to share his feelings on this process of being able to make sure we get this right for Albertans, who are aware of the importance of democracy in our society.

The Speaker: The Member for Highwood.

Mr. W. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to my hon. friend from Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Cooper: Easy for you to say.

Mr. W. Anderson: Yeah. It's early in the morning for Wayne.

Mr. Cooper: Names, names, names.

Mr. W. Anderson: I apologize.

Further to my colleague's question, the part that I find really disturbing is when we received the letter from the Chief Electoral Officer stating that he was not consulted with effectively. That, in its own right, should be a definition that this bill has to go back to committee. We have to consult with those of authority. I have a lot of respect for the Chief Electoral Officer, and given his words in his document, I think it's imperative that we have the opportunity to reconsider the democratic process that we're currently involved with and send this bill back to committee. My constituents in Highwood as well as constituents in other constituencies, obviously, are concerned about our democratic process, and they want to ensure that we do this the right way. Therefore, thanks to my hon. friend from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills for highlighting the point that our illustrious Chief Electoral Officer was not consulted with and that we need to move forward and take this bill back to committee.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Any other comments or questions under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing and hearing none, is there anyone wishing to speak to amendment REF1? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you. I rise to support my colleague's motion to refer Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, to committee. Mr. Speaker, we see it again. Days from when this House is scheduled to rise, this NDP government introduces another piece of omnibus legislation that demands thorough review and broad consultation. How many is this now? Thirty, 31, 32 – and the list goes on – 33, 34? I don't know if there are more yet. We don't even know. They introduced one yesterday. Is there one today? We don't know.

Let me explain the massive undertaking that is Bill 32. Many of the concepts and proposals in this bill were previously discussed in committee, which ran out of time when the government refused to extend its mandate. We have a very clear idea of the complexity of discussions that need to occur on this bill, and they cannot be done in the waning hours of this session. Mr. Speaker, for that fundamental reason, Bill 32 must go to committee.

What does committee allow us to do? To begin with, it allows us to consult, and consultation is a critical part of our job. We must

ensure that we're reflecting the views of Albertans when we come to this House to review and amend and to pass legislation that will benefit all Albertans. Clearly, that is a challenging job, and we do not take any piece of proposed legislation lightly. We need to carefully review it, ask many questions of stakeholders, see how it affects them, and then determine potential ways of improving it.

This is our task for every piece of legislation. But when we have short sessions, with bills introduced practically every day of it, clearly that cannot happen, and this is not happening. We need to look at each piece of legislation with an eye to determining if it has forged the right balance of Albertans' differing views. Some bills are simple, but Bill 32 is not. This bill begs study, and the place to do that is in committee. This is a critical part of being a legislator. We need to thoroughly understand the proposals in every bill, for none of us want to pass something and then have a passed flawed bill.

Mr. Speaker, let's look at the complexity of Bill 32. The NDP want to create a new independent office of the Legislature. We don't know why, but we do know that these offices cost millions of dollars. Sending this bill to committee would allow us to explore this concept.

Bill 32 proposes to allow Elections Alberta to launch a door-to-door enumeration before every election. That might be a great idea, but the cost is, once again, massive. Sending Bill 32 to committee would allow us to look at the justifications and determine if that expense can be justified at every election. Perhaps it can, but right now we do not know. Yet we will have to vote on this within days.

9:40

Then there are the seemingly minor amendments such as the length of time a voter needs to live in Alberta before being eligible to vote in an election. Is that minor? Mr. Speaker, sending this bill to committee would allow us to ask Albertans what they think of that change. Perhaps they would want longer residency requirements.

Here's another good one. Bill 32 eliminates portions of the Senatorial Selection Act, that the NDP let fall by the wayside. Those elections were a big step for Alberta. They sent an important message to the federal government at the time, and Albertans may well want to keep those sections. Mr. Speaker, the NDP may not realize it, but Albertans care about elections and voting processes. They care very much, and pushing this bill through this House in days, as the NDP clearly intend to do, is wrong.

I haven't even touched on its size, but let me remind everyone that it's over a hundred pages long. These are not just technical amendments. They will change the nature of voting and elections in Alberta.

Some of the amendments in Bill 32 are good. I applaud the modernization aspects of this bill, easing up rules for advance polling and allowing for the use of new technologies. I'm sure that in typical fashion the NDP will only market those positive aspects of the bill to Albertans but fail to mention the more contentious changes.

Mr. Speaker, sending this bill to committee will allow the public to engage in this process, too. We rely on them, and they need to rely on us. Let's do the right thing here. I look to all of my colleagues to support this referral motion.

Mr. Speaker, this is the third time, I think, that this government has brought in amendments to the Election Act, you know, in their short time in this House. And here we go again with another version that's rushed through here with flaws in it, so I guess they'll be bringing back some amendments in the next one. I don't know if every session will have an automatic elections amendment act – I guess that could be – but maybe we should take our time and consult

and do it right. Even the last time when this went to committee, a bunch of the changes proposed today were recommended in that committee and voted down, and now here the government brings them back.

You know, they said that they took big money out of politics. That was the last idea that they had. Well, maybe they did take big money out of politics, but at least it was transparent, and everybody could see what it was. They took big money out, and now they're talking about dark money, so they turned big money into dark money, I guess. You took big money out and put it underground . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. members, come on.

Mr. Drysdale: You know, they took big money out, put it underground in the form of PACs and unions – it's all included in there – and now they call it dark money. Well, they created the dark money. Now they're going to try and take the dark money out. I don't know what colour the next money will be.

You know, Mr. Speaker, any time they change these rules without proper consultation, this is what happens, and then they'll have to make more amendments. Now they're going to propose to take dark money out, which, if you're going to get rid of the PACs, which they helped create, includes unions. I hear there are paid union workers out door-knocking in Calgary-Lougheed. I mean, that's PACs. That's dark money, so get rid of it, I guess.

We need to consult on this and make sure that it's done properly, Mr. Speaker. That's why this bill needs to be referred to committee. Thank you.

The Speaker: Member for Calgary-Hays, under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. McIver: Yes, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for recognizing me. And thank you to the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti for really enlightening the House on this bill. Really, to the hon. member through the Speaker, I was very taken by you pointing out what I think is obvious. This is another example where the NDP is bringing forward a bill to undo the damage that previous NDP bills have created. There are so many examples in this session alone. They say that they've taken away big money, and now they say they're going to take away dark money. The only money they're not interested in taking away is the orange money. They want no one else to be able to raise money but themselves, and that is actually, I think . . .

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Okay. I thought you were standing to shut me down, Mr. Speaker. I see you're just changing seats. That's never happened before. That's why I was so surprised.

As I shift gears, Madam Speaker, to the hon. member, I'm grateful that you pointed out that this bill is just another of many examples of the NDP having to create a bill to undo the damage and the harm that they did with the last bill and by the gang that can't shoot straight that hasn't got it right in the past.

This time I also thank you for pointing out that they want to create a new independent officer, which is going to cost, I would think, at least a million dollars a year, just based on what other independent officers cost – if it's a half a million or 2 million, the fact is that it's a bunch more money – presumably so that they can consult with that officer. And I thank you in your remarks for pointing out that they haven't consulted with the officer that they have now.

In fact, the smoking gun that shows this – and I thank the hon. member through the Speaker for pointing that out – is where in the letter from Mr. Resler, the one sentence in the last paragraph says,

"I have not been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32." To the hon. member, I have to wonder how he feels about the fact that this government claims over and over and over again, including on this bill, that they've consulted with everyone, yet one would think that the Chief Electoral Officer would be on the top three list of who they ought to consult with if they're going to consult with anybody. It would appear that the government hasn't even consulted with the person on probably the top three list of people they ought to consult with.

Madam Speaker, the hon. member has really made a powerful point here about the big difference between what the NDP says and what the NDP does, even down to the subject of the bill. So I want to talk to the hon. member about how he even feels about the title of the bill, which is actually typical with this NDP government. What the big print giveth, the small print taketh away. Now, the big print sounds pretty good. To the hon. member, I'd like to know how he feels about the title of the bill that says – it's very poetic – An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. I can't think of a better thing to do than to strengthen and protect democracy in Alberta, but the hon. member pointed out that that's the opposite of what the bill does and, in fact, has pointed out that one of the top three people they ought to talk to, the Chief Electoral Officer, has said in writing that that officer of the House hasn't been consulted whatsoever. His words; not mine.

A smoking gun here, folks, and somebody from our party will table it in the House here shortly although I'm sure the government is well aware because the letter was addressed to the minister that moved this bill, the minister responsible for democratic renewal. Again, what the big print giveth, the small print taketh away with the NDP. You just can't trust even the titles of the bills. You just can't trust them.

To the hon. member, I'd like you to reflect on the title of the bill and how absolutely opposite it seems to be to the effect of the bill, and also if I could get you to reflect on the obvious hypocrisy of wanting to create a new officer of the Legislature when the current officer of the Legislature has taken the trouble to send a letter to say that that officer hasn't even been consulted. I wonder, to the hon. member, how you think the government is going to make an excuse out of creating a new officer when they're ignoring the one they have already. [The time limit for questions and comments expired] Oh, my goodness. I wanted to hear that answer. I'm sorry, hon. member.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to rise and speak in favour of referring Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, to the Legislative Offices Committee on the grounds that this bill covers a lot of ground in its attempt to tip the balance of the electoral system in favour of the governing party.

9:50

The purpose of our committees is to foster debate on proposed legislation and issues facing our constituents. Committees allow us to host public forums and take submissions from private citizens, businesses, boards, trade associations, and the list goes on, all the while getting a better understanding of how we can better represent the needs and interests of those who will be affected most by the final decisions that we make in this House.

Given that Bill 32 is extensive in size and scope and given that we don't get to see the bill before it's released and given that the government only released this bill days before this House was

scheduled to rise, it follows logically that we send this bill to the Legislative Offices Committee so that we as members are extended an opportunity to further examine the merits of this omnibus bill.

I want to rewind for a minute and go back to the overall size of this bill. This is an omnibus piece of legislation. The members opposite are going to argue that they did the proper consultation before tabling it. But we all make mistakes. Yes, even members on this side of the House make mistakes. So why would it be a bad idea for more eyes to review this bill, especially eyes outside the walls of this hallowed House?

Now, one of the parts of this bill that was very disconcerting to me when I first read this part of the bill was stripping the right of Albertans to be able to vote for our senators. I remember this being a very important issue for Albertans. We have, I believe, fought for the right of being able to have equal and fair representation by elected senators in our province. In these people we have – I actually feel very proud of those senators that we've elected and sent to Ottawa. More importantly, Madam Speaker, is that they were elected. Our senate system is broken in this federation in that it's not elected. I believe that an elected senate is very important.

Now, we led out in this argument and in this case of being able to say: "You know what? In Alberta we're going to do it right. In Alberta democracy will reign supreme. We will have the opportunity to be able to say who our senators will be through the election process, through democracy." It is unfortunate that there were not more provinces that followed the example of Alberta to elect their senators. However, it doesn't matter whether or not everybody else follows that good practice. The fact is that Alberta led out. We led out in showing our federation that electing their senators is the right thing to do because we believe in an elected senate.

So for an NDP minister to put this part into this bill, I found completely offensive to the work that has been done in the past. I think it's only incumbent upon this government, if they feel that this is the right thing to do, to take that to committee, to send this bill to committee so that they can actually hear what those Albertans who fought so hard to get senators elected and to have that piece of legislation where we had the right to elect those senators stripped away from them – they need to have the right and their day in court where they can actually speak their mind, tell this government and that committee why they think it is a good idea or a bad idea. If they think that this is the right approach, then I don't see why they wouldn't want to have Albertans have their say on this.

But I can tell you, I believe that the government and especially the minister do not want to have this brought before Albertans because they know what the answer will be. They know that Albertans were passionate about this issue and that Albertans are still passionate about this issue and that they would reject this part of the bill. I have no doubt in my mind that the government will not send this to committee, will not give it a second sober thought, based upon the idea that they know what Albertans are thinking.

How can this be the path that this government is taking? I think that the polls show very well what Albertans think about this path.

By trying to ram this bill through in the dying days of session, the government is telling the members of this House and, frankly, all Albertans that: we know better than you, and we don't make mistakes. We are not being afforded sufficient time to consult stakeholders, draft amendments, and give this bill fair debate. That's why we should refer this bill to committee.

Madam Speaker, we also need to be honest with ourselves about the timing of public interest. There is this idea that what is salient is important, and saliency as far as politics and the public are concerned usually comes with the interest of the media after a bill is actually tabled. Prior to that, most people aren't paying attention

to the little details involving the government, reading government websites, filling out surveys, or attending public forums.

We must give the media the opportunity to be able to disseminate the information about these bills so that people can make an informed decision, and I have to say that the process that we have seen – and I will admit that I am new to this House, being two and a half years into it. As I've watched and seen what that process is and recognized that these bills can go from inception and introduction to completion within a week, how does that give our public the opportunity of being able to take a look at what is in these bills, especially the stakeholders? In this situation democracy itself is being redefined. I think that it's important, as a democracy-loving citizen, that the people should have the right to be able to take a look and have a say in how this thing is drafted.

The government could say that the public needs to pay more attention, but that's not fair given the thousands of other things nonpolitical people juggle in their days. People are busy, Madam Speaker. You know that. I think that when we allow the media to disseminate that information to the general population, then we have an opportunity of really getting true and fulsome feedback from Albertans.

All this to say that the e-mails, letters, calls, and meetings with private citizens don't usually flood in until the bill is knocking at their door. Unfortunately, by this point their feedback isn't given much attention unless the bill is referred to a committee, where those concerns are brought forward.

Now, I've spoken before about the necessity of even committees being able to hear the arguments and hear from their stakeholders. As I said before in another speech, I was in a committee meeting with Resource Stewardship where there were stakeholders that had been waiting for two and a half years to be able to come in and speak to this Resource Stewardship Committee, and the government side of the committee had blocked their ability to be able to come in and see them and talk with them. We gave them a great opportunity to be able to say: yes, you have the right to come in. We were going to create a working group.

The reason why I say this, Madam Speaker, in terms of context is that unfortunately the NDP government have created a pattern, are showing a pattern that rather than actually wanting to hear what Albertans have to say, they believe that they have it right and that they don't need to listen to what Albertans say. This is a dangerous, dangerous path to take, and I believe that when that happens, Albertans decide at elections that they no longer will accept that government.

I've heard of constituents concerned about the infiltration of outside influence into our elections by way of fake votes if this bill is passed. Bill 32 eliminates the six-month residency requirements for Alberta voters in general elections. You know, I believe that when the six-month rule, which I believe is fairly universal in terms of a democratic system, was implemented, it was implemented to fix a problem of people coming in and having undue influence in elections where, in terms of Alberta, we need to hear from Albertans, whether or not they accept the mandate that has been presented by each party and elect their representatives in that way.

10:00

Now, the concern that I have with them taking away this part of the six-month residency requirement is that potentially it could allow our elections to be influenced through outside influence. These constituents' concerns are that their votes will count for less in the next election. Again, I don't believe that Albertans deserve that. I believe that Albertans deserve the right to vote and to be able to vote for who they want to have govern them in the next four years after that.

This is all assuming the government calls the next election in the spring of 2019, based on the Election Act, so I guess we'll have to see on that. The point here is that concerns like this would never have come in during public consultation. I bring this up to highlight that there are likely countless other submissions just like this one flooding our constituency offices. All these concerns are legitimate and should be given due consideration.

One thing that I've been very interested in over the last two and a half years as I've listened is that I have yet to hear one NDP MLA, whether it's a backbencher or whether it's a government official, stand up in this House and table or send negative feedback that they've received. Now, I can tell you, especially on other bills that we've seen, that if my office is receiving this negative feedback, I'm sure that their offices are receiving it as well. Why would they not want to represent all of their constituents?

This, again, is a dangerous precedent that they've set, and I think that they are going to be punished in the next election for that. Furthermore, if the government was to send this bill to committee and allow for more input from the public, wouldn't it give the government side of the House more licence to pass bills like this? I know they have already heard from their list of stakeholders, but imagine how much approval a bill such as this could have with extensive input from the concerned Albertans that I've been hearing from.

I'd like to pose a question to the government and to the government side. What is their fear of sending this bill to the Legislative Offices Committee for a review? Is the government afraid of the feedback it might get from the 11 committee members, from the stakeholders, and from the countless Albertans that want to have a say in this regard, or does the government not trust this committee to make the right choice? I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the public trusted these individuals to make good choices by electing them, so is the government saying that it doesn't trust the decisions of the electorate?

This is not a stretch. The Standing Committee on Legislative Offices does not have the mandate to approve changes to legislation, but these 11 members could certainly discuss this bill, take feedback from the public, give it more consideration, and debate the recommendations for the rest of us to discuss. How can this be considered a bad thing?

Now, earlier I heard the Deputy Premier say: how many times did you do it? She was referring to, I would assume, the PC governance model in terms of omnibus bills. My question to her is: do two wrongs make a right? I mean, if you promised Albertans and said to Albertans, "We want to do things differently," then if you're throwing these omnibus bills, if you're not consulting, then, really, are you not doing what you supposedly were condemning in the past? Whether you believe that it's your right to do this because you have...

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills under Standing Order 29(2)(a).

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just appreciate the member's comments. I have two very quick questions, actually. One of them: in your remarks you suggested that perhaps the government thinks that they know better than Albertans or that the government knows best. I'm just curious to know what your thoughts might be around: do you think that they also have concluded that they know what's better for the Election Act than the Chief Electoral Officer, who is responsible for delivering results on that Election Act?

The second question that I have for you is around the Senate. Do you think that this government thinks that they know better than

what Albertans want with respect to elected senators, and is that why they chose not to bring the Senatorial Selection Act back to the Chamber for debate so that under the cover of darkness that bill would expire, because they were concerned about the push-back that may have come from Albertans?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to thank my esteemed colleague for what I believe are the quintessential questions about this bill. I'd like to address the first one first of all, you know, the question: does the government know best? Now, I would not presume to assume what the government is thinking on this bill. But in terms of actions and outcomes I would have to say that they have shown a propensity to believe that they know best about what Albertans want and what they think they want. This, again, in my opinion, is a dangerous precedent and a dangerous path to take.

Albertans in 2015 were decisive in how they felt about that. Whether it was perceived or actual, Albertans made a decision. It is incumbent upon any government, whether you are a Conservative government or an NDP government or a Liberal government, that you have got to consult with Albertans, that you have to really try to understand what the will of the people is and then govern in that way.

When it comes to the second question that my esteemed colleague asked, about the Senate, the loss of the Senate, I do believe that this is a very important question to Albertans. I do believe that they would love to have the right to discuss this issue and to bring it to committee so that people can come in and present their beliefs on whether it's important or whether it's not.

Again, as I said before to the Deputy Premier, this approach that the government is taking, the approach that, "Well, the previous government did it; therefore, we can do it," won't fly with Albertans. Albertans will reject it, and they will say: "No. We want you to consult with us. We want you to figure out what the will of the people is, and then we want you to govern accordingly." Again I have to say it, and I've said this before. I believe that the polls indicate that Albertans don't feel that this government is doing that. They're not following that course of action of consulting with Albertans, of making sure that Albertans' views, the views of the general population, are represented here in the House.

With that, Madam Speaker, I just hope that the rest of my colleagues will send this bill to the committee so that we can have sober second thought. Thank you very much.

10:10

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and, once again, good morning, all. It's a pleasure to be here again this morning on a bright day. I see we have some wonderful schoolchildren in here today to witness our process. Everybody can wave. They're here to see democracy in action this morning.

Madam Speaker, we're talking this morning about a very important part of democracy, and that's Bill 32, which is titled An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. We're working on an amendment here that we want to send it to committee because we believe it needs to be rethought, and we think it needs some refinement, and we think it needs, with some new information that we just recently obtained, a little revamping.

You know, there's also been a lot of conversation this morning about a lack of consultation and so on and so forth. As we've seen many times in the past few years that I've been here, this seems to happen time and time again, but most often it is within the past two

years that I've seen this go on and on and on. So I feel sometimes I'm like a broken record every time I rise to speak in the House, asking and cajoling and pleading that this government consult on legislation that they're proposing. Here I am again asking that another massive NDP bill be referred to committee in order for there to be consultation on the impacts.

And it is a big bill. Stacked here on my desk are some of the bills we've got. This is the bill we're talking about.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I apologize for a moment.

We're not in committee, and all members are required to be sitting in their own seats. Thank you.

Go ahead.

Mr. Stier: Thank you. The Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock is welcome to take his seat in front of me. I don't mind.

To go on, anyway, Madam Speaker, as was pointed out earlier, we got a couple of copies of this Bill 32. It's a pretty big one. It's 105. I guess they had to bring it out in a rush before they made it that way because we got a big stack of paper a day or two ahead of that. It's something that I think indicates that this government wasn't ready on this one. I don't think that they had all their ducks in order when they brought this one out.

As I've stated before in debate on other bills and sometimes in statements and questions under consideration by the House, there's a difference between asking stakeholders about an idea versus asking them to consider a very specific change, as is articulated in this bill. This government needs to ensure that if it gets the legislation right, it doesn't end up being tied up in the court as various stakeholders and other parties challenge the constitutionality of various aspects of the bill.

The best way to ensure that legislation it is considering is constitutional is to ask the experts. By referring this bill to the committee, we will have the ability and opportunity to ask those experts to come before the committee and provide their expert testimony to consider when it writes its final recommendation on how the Legislature should proceed on the bill.

In that set of phrases I'd like to take a bit of a break from my prepared statement by just looking at something from the expert that we were talking about earlier today. I'm speaking of the letter that was addressed to the minister responsible for democratic renewal. It has been written by the Chief Electoral Officer, Glen Resler, as was mentioned by the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills earlier, and I think it is probably something that when the government received it, they probably stepped back and said: "Uh-oh. We might have goofed here. We might have missed something." I'd like to take a moment beyond my prepared statement to say a few words and to read some of the statements made by the electoral officer because I think that there's a classic example of a true expert.

The second paragraph down he says:

While I applaud the spirit behind the proposals about advance polls and special mobile polls, I wanted to bring to [the attention of the House] potential unintended consequences of these particular proposals. If passed in its current form, I am concerned that Bill 32 will deteriorate the service provided to electors and increase the timelines for communicating results.

Now, how many times have members and how many people in here have participated in elections and wound up with some very, very, very angry voters when they've had difficulties with the voting process? This is important. If the electoral officer of Alberta has concerns, you can bet that Albertans will have concerns.

He goes on to say:

The most notable areas of concern include the change in advance polling days and the absence of the authority to utilize vote

tabulators for advance polls, special mobile polls and Special Ballots.

Those are important things that were mentioned in this bill, and the Chief Electoral Officer is very concerned about this, folks.

With regard to advance polling days he says:

While I support increased availability of advance polls, the earlier advance polling days do not leave sufficient time to notify electors adequately of the locations through the Where-to-Vote cards or to have candidate ballots printed.

He's very concerned about that process. Well, I would be concerned if the people of Alberta aren't given proper notice so that they have the time to consider where they're going to vote.

It goes on. He's now talking about where-to-vote cards.

Where-to-Vote cards are produced for . . . elector addresses that include the dates, times and locations of all polling places, including for advance polls. Because Alberta does not have a fixed election date, our returning officers cannot arrange polling places before knowing the voting days. The soonest that Where-to-Vote cards can be sent to print is Day 7 post-writ. This results in the cards being received by electors between Day 15 and 20, which is likely to fall [well] after the first advance poll days.

Well, that certainly can't work. That doesn't make any sense for this bill to contain something like that. It must be amended.

In regards to ballots, the nomination period must close [by] (Day 10) prior to sending ballots to be printed with [the proper] candidates' names on them. Opening advance polls earlier results in as little as [only] four days to proof, print, and make ballots available to . . . advance poll locations. With rural and more remote areas, this timeline could not be achieved.

I underline that, ladies and gentlemen. He's saying that with rural and more remote areas this idea could not be done, yet it's in the bill. I cannot understand us proceeding with this bill in the fashion that we're doing, without sending it to committee so that we can get these corrections obtained but, moreover, hearing from the gentleman that has written this, the Chief Electoral Officer of Alberta.

Another concern he has is voting anywhere without tabulators. He's saying:

Proposed amendments to section 99 (Advance Polls) and proposed new sections . . . [regarding] (Special Mobile Poll), allow electors to vote for the candidates in their electoral division without being present in their polling subdivision. These changes are in alignment . . .

with what we were hoping to see as it goes.

However, without the ability to utilize tabulators and a tabulator ballot, the goals of improving efficiency and service to the elector will be eroded. The utilization of the vote tabulator would have allowed for ballot on demand to be printed at each location, and the tabulator could be programmed to read and report results from the 87 electoral divisions. Without authority for the use of tabulators, as noted above, a blank ballot may need to be utilized, and a manual method of noting and sorting the correct electoral division will need to be developed.

Imagine trying to sort that out at some or other voting station.

This process is anticipated to add additional timeframes and the results of elections across the province will likely be delayed.

As a matter of fact, he says:

In the recent BC provincial elections, this resulted in a delay in counting the "vote anywhere" ballots to 10 days after polling day.

It's absolutely ridiculous if we pursue this method of polling.

He also talks about voter assist terminals. He understands that there are some amendments to section 4

in regards to the use of . . . assist terminals [that] are intended to make voting more accessible to voters with a functional limitation that prevents them from voting independently.

That sounds like a good idea as it is.

10:20

He says, though:

Currently, the only voter assist technology that exists is specific to marking a tabulator ballot.

Without the ability to use those vote tabulators we just talked about, the provision for voting with assist terminals will not be able to be done. Uh-oh.

Mr. Cooper: Uh-oh.

Mr. Stier: Sounds to me – and the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, I think, seems to agree – that this seems like a major problem.

He goes on. The last point I'll make with regard to the comments from the electoral officer is this.

The proposed amendment to section 55 to change the announcement of the official results from the 10th to the 7th day following polling day shortens the allowable timeline. It will be a challenge, if not impracticable . . .

I'll say that again.

It will be a challenge, if not impracticable, for returning officers to comply with section 55 if the other amendments [he's talked about] remain unchanged.

He concludes with this, Madam Speaker, in his remarks. He has provided special remarks to the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, but he has not been consulted in relation to these problems in Bill 32. What more do we need in evidence to suggest that it's time to pull the string on this one, put on the brakes, and refer this to a committee?

Now, there are a number of points in the legislation that will strengthen voter engagement in Alberta and involve Alberta's newest voters through education and outreach. Those things, I think, we can support in this bill. But even if you do support the bill overall, as I've just outlined and I say again, there are still an awful lot of reasons to send this to committee. I don't think any member here would want to argue with the Chief Electoral Officer in Alberta on this point.

Madam Speaker, that concludes my remarks for this segment of my presentation. I think it's solid evidence that I have now presented – and it was introduced earlier by the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills – that we need to do a proper consultation on this for a change, not follow the normal NDP way of reviewing matters, pay attention to what the expert, the Chief Electoral Officer, has said, and vote positively to send this bill to committee.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a) the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, I'd just like to thank my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod for his comments and remarks. One thing that I found particularly interesting is how he wrapped up his speech speaking about the normal NDP way. This NDP government has become a say one thing, do another government. I think that is very, very clear in Bill 32 with respect to their lack of consultation with the Chief Electoral Officer that you, Member for Livingstone-Macleod, so eloquently indicated.

Another area where this NDP government is such a say one thing, do another government is that this NDP government likes to talk about getting dark money out of politics, but the reality, Madam Speaker, is that some of the biggest dark money in politics is NDP money. I'd just like to highlight that with some actual facts with respect to third-party advertisers. I know that my hon. colleague is also very interested and, quite likely, would like to provide comment if there's any time.

You know, Madam Speaker, in the first two quarters of 2017 the United Nurses of Alberta contributed over \$120,000 to the Alberta Federation of Labour's PAC, or third-party advertiser, as they actually are. [interjections] Just wait. We'll get there. We'll get there. The Health Sciences union contributed \$100,000 in the first two quarters; UFCW local 401, \$70,000 in the first two quarters; CUPE local 30 . . . [interjection] Pardon?

Mr. Clark: How much is in Alberta Can't Wait?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, I don't know. A lot. But we'll get there. There's a lot.

The good news is that for all third-party advertisers they're required to disclose their contributions, just like all third-party advertisers are. My point here is that the government likes to say one thing and do another. They have their PACs. They have their PACs, and they like to pretend that they don't.

Mr. McIver: That's orange money.

Mr. Cooper: This is orange money.

ATU local 583, over \$15,000 in the first two quarters; UFCW local 1118U, Red Deer, over \$12,000; CUPE local 30, Edmonton, just over \$10,000; CUPE local 37, Calgary, \$9,000, oh, just about \$10,000; communication workers union, Burnaby, British Columbia, outside of Alberta, Burnaby, Alberta, maybe – I wonder how the Telecommunications Workers Union of Alberta feels about Trans Mountain pipeline; I'm not sure – just over \$7,000. This all appears to be very, very, very dark money, Madam Speaker.

Ms McLean: That's not dark. It's right there.

Mr. Cooper: I hear the Minister of Service Alberta say that that's not dark money. Well, guess what? All PACs are required to publish their contributions.

Imagine that. Imagine, Madam Speaker. The government continues to say one thing and do another. I take great interest in the comments from my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod about how he has observed another area of the government saying one thing and doing another with respect to not consulting the most . . . [The time limit for questions and comments expired] Oh. That's unfortunate.

The Deputy Speaker: You've already spoken to the bill, hon. member; 29(2)(a) is finished.

Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak to the referral amendment on Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. I am a firm believer in sending Bill 32 to the Legislative Offices Committee and to do proper due diligence on this and to ensure that we have full transparency on the process and full input from Albertans on the direction that we hope to take their democracy forward with. I have the pleasure of serving on the Legislative Offices Committee, so we've heard a number of times from the Chief Electoral Officer.

I also had the privilege of serving on the Ethics and Accountability Committee, with an intent to improve the way our democracy functions within Alberta. What I found so disconcerting with the Ethics and Accountability Committee was that the government was very much on a track of: we're going to move forward only on the stuff that we're definitely in favour of. We saw many times where we had a committee that ended in a tie vote with the chair breaking the tie in favour of the governing party members on that committee. I

think what was quite evident was how the government was in the process of trying to stack the deck against the other parties within the democratic process in Alberta and in the meantime has created even more consequences that they were even warned about.

10:30

When we look at the discussion that we had in committee with regard to handing over the electoral system to possibly third-party entities – and that was brought out very clearly. I spoke on that in the September 19 meeting last year, what the government was proposing with regard to spending contribution limits coming across all parties, \$4,000 across all parties, and how it was very difficult to even enforce that. It was not only coming across all parties; it became \$4,000 limits on the party, on constituency associations, on nomination candidates, on leadership candidates.

Government sticking its fingers very much – a lot of overreach into all these different entities that helped to move our democracy forward in a very credible manner, and that's through political parties. Not only was the government intent on – and I believe that all parties were very much in favour of limiting political donations to a political party. But it becomes very difficult to all of a sudden work on policing or enforcing, for the Chief Electoral Officer to enforce the rules that were being put on the Chief Electoral Officer when it was cross-parties. So we were setting ourselves up to fail.

When we look at, then, the spending limits that were being put in place for individuals, for leadership candidates, for party candidates that are going to run an election process, those limitations in my opinion are tying the hands of individuals within constituencies to actually voice their concerns or to promote their freedom of expression. When we limit the amount that they put forward – agreed; we don't want to put it into the hands of a few within Alberta with large donations. But when we limit the ability of the political parties and the political candidates to fully utilize the money that they've been given for the purpose of spreading the message of that party or that candidate, I believe that's when you all of a sudden create the consequences that we're seeing before us now.

You know, I find it really quite concerning that now we get a letter from the Chief Electoral Officer with his concerns. We spent a lot of time with Mr. Glen Resler in the Ethics and Accountability Committee. He put forward many good recommendations that were being debated and discussed. He gave us a lot of good, credible front-line-worker type of feedback on how this can actually be implemented.

When I received this letter yesterday as a member of the Legislative Offices Committee – and to see that the consultation had not even gone as far as to ensure consulting with the Chief Electoral Officer on the ability to go forward in a way that has good policy and good policy input: I believe that there is a breakdown in consultation here. I believe that we have a situation where now the government is deciding that they know better. We've seen it in many different aspects where the government knows best. This NDP knows best. We had it many times in the Ethics and Accountability Committee on advice from the Chief Electoral Officer and others that were witnessing in the committee that – we would have the Wildrose Party, PC Party, Alberta Party, Liberal Party all very much in alignment with concerns that were being proposed, yet it would be voted down. This NDP government knows best.

Now we have a situation here where it's come to the attention that AFL has become a third-party PAC with some very significant contributions, and I just wonder if the United Nurses, all the nurses in Alberta, recognize that in this year they were contributing \$132,000 to the Alberta Federation of Labour's political action

committee. I just wonder if the Health Sciences Association of Alberta is being transparent enough with their members and if all of their members recognize and are informed that they gave \$111,000 in this year to the Alberta Federation of Labour political action committee.

What's really interesting about this report that we have before us from the Chief Electoral Officer is that all that money was primarily given in quarter 1 and quarter 2 this year, and all of a sudden it dried up in quarter 3. It leads me to question. Hmm. I wonder if this political action committee has received information from the government that they would make a decision that: well, we've got all the money that we're going to be able to spend, so we better just not bother taking any more donations. You've got to wonder where that money is going now. The concern we had in the Ethics and Accountability Committee was that the spending limits that we were putting on the political parties, the units that we have utilized within our democracy over the last hundred and some years, those spending limits would drive that money to other entities and possibly take it out of the realm of political parties, and I believe that is possibly what we're seeing here.

The NDP is promising to remove dark money from politics, and you would think the NDP are also going to remove the in-kind, personal support of staffers of the Alberta Federation of Labour from working on Alberta NDP campaigns or perhaps also the in-kind support the AFL provides the NDP by sitting on the NDP board. I sure would like to get Gil McGowan in here to committee and question him on these matters. After all, the NDP is restricting the AFL's ability to act as a political action committee, so I think it's prudent for us to get the feedback from the AFL as to what their concerns might be with Bill 32. There is a concern with Bill 32, if it does not go to committee, that we're not going to get transparent consultation and that Albertans will not get what I believe is the accountability of government to move forward in a very transparent manner.

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

So how about it? Let's send Bill 32 to committee so we can get Gil McGowan in there and talk to him about how the Alberta Federation of Labour perceives Bill 32 and possibly even ask the question of why the Alberta Federation of Labour's political action committee money all of a sudden dried up for quarter 3. Was there any kind of information that Gil McGowan had that most others did not have that made them decide to do business in a different manner?

The NDP want Bill 32 to go after something called super PACs. Super PACs are something that we see, I believe, in the United States. Very significant political donation units have possibly gotten in the way of good democracy, but I believe what we're doing here is the government trying to fix legislation that they had already presented and promised to Albertans that was going to fix big money. We called it at that time big money. Now it's all of a sudden become dark money. We have dark orange money. We have dark blue money, apparently. We've got all kinds of different coloured money. I believe that we have a duty to send this, refer this to committee so this discussion can be had in an open, transparent way and that all Albertans can have the ability to have some input into the discussion.

10:40

The NDP want to set the spending limits for third-party advertisers so that beginning on December 1 prior to an election year to the day the writ is dropped they can only spend \$150,000, and of that, no more than \$3,000 to any electoral division. That means third-party advertisers can only play in 50 of the total 87

constituencies. I'm not sure how that makes sense to the government and if they just took these numbers out of the sky, but you would think that they would have the ability to spend the \$3,000 in all 87 constituencies. I believe this is blatantly unfair and that the dollar amount should be raised by \$111,000, at least, to \$261,000 for a level playing field.

Again, we look at having a level playing field right across Alberta. We are talking in another bill with regard to rural-urban voice and effective representation, and now we are driving limits that will possibly change the playing field. We could raise it to \$435,000 and make the limit \$5,000 per constituency. I believe that could even be fair also. But to have limits in place and that political action committees are going to make decisions based off where they want to pursue their activity: I think we need to open the door, that they can actually fully utilize the money that's given to them and put forward, that they can fully be a voice for the people that are contributing their money and spread it right across Alberta without any hindrance.

The NDP also want to change the spending for the writ period. The day the writ is issued to the end of polling day the spending limit is, again, a mere \$150,000 and, again, no more than \$3,000 of that to any electoral division. I believe there, again, we have the numbers that don't quite jibe with what should probably be where they have the ability to spend equally across all constituencies without hindrance.

The NDP also state that third-party advertisers will now be prohibited from incurring an expense that would be a campaign expense . . .

The Acting Speaker: Any questions or comments under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just want to correct a couple of things that the member said and that have been said a couple of times across the way. I just want to preface this by saying that I've never been a member of any of the unions that are associated with the AFL. Actually, I was a member of Unifor for about a month when I worked with Château Laurier in Ottawa, but that was about it.

Mr. McIver: Which is it, yes or no? Yes or no? You said no, then you said yes.

Connolly: I've never been a member of a union in Alberta, which is all the unions that give money into the AFL. Because I was only there for a month, I think I paid \$3 in union dues, so there you go. [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, Calgary-Hawkwood has the floor.

Connolly: However, what I want to say is that I have been to the AFL convention as an MLA, and I can tell you that in order for them to give money to their political action committee – to begin with, the political action committee is not a part of the NDP, and we can show you this because the political action committee has done several campaigns against things that this government has been doing. That shows you that the money that's being spent by the AFL does not always support what this government does. It does support whatever the AFL would like to do, and that's what the political action committee is for. It's also voted on by the members of the AFL at the AFL annual convention, and all those unions who are members have to vote on whether or not to give money to the AFL through the political action committee. So there you are.

Mr. Nielsen: So they have to give permission?

Connolly: They do have to give permission. Thank you, Member for Edmonton-Decore. They have to give permission. They have to vote on it. It's a very democratic process.

And the reason you have the numbers on how much each union gave to the AFL is because it's very clear on the Elections Alberta website and because they are very open and transparent with not only their members but all Albertans.

So just all of that to say that we still do not know who Jason Kenney's donors are. If the opposition wants to talk about dark money and they are saying that we have the darkest money, the only reason they know about that money – it's not even going to us, and it's not even always associated with us or helping us – is because they can find it on the Elections Alberta website. If you are a member of a union that is a member of the AFL, you can just ask the AFL what their money is being spent on. It's very open, very transparent.

We don't know who's giving money to Alberta Can't Wait. We don't know who gave money to Unite Alberta. We don't know who gave money to almost all of those PACs that have been helping Jason Kenney and the UCP.

An Hon. Member: It's so dark that we can't see it.

Connolly: Exactly. It is so dark that we cannot see it.

They are not transparent to Albertans. They have been very untruthful to Albertans when Jason Kenney said that he would disclose his donors to Albertans several times. I am very concerned that the United Conservative Party don't actually know what they're talking about when it comes to this. They keep saying: dark money. They don't even understand what dark money means because they are the darkest party in this Legislature and, I would say, in all of Canada. We don't know who any of their funders are, and that is why we're putting this bill forward. We're not putting this bill forward to help us. We're not putting the bill forward to help the Alberta Party, the Liberals, the UCP. We're putting the bill forward to help all Albertans. We are making sure that this province is open and transparent with Albertans, that everything we do is seen by them, and that every single one of them is able to know who funded every campaign, who ran campaigns against each candidate, and how much money that candidate spent.

An Hon. Member: Albertans can't wait for Kenney to disclose his donors.

Connolly: Exactly.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud to support this bill, and I'm very concerned by the things that are being said.

An Hon. Member: It's garbage.

Connolly: Yeah, the garbage that's being spewed by the opposition. Quite frankly, it's untruthful, and they should be ashamed of themselves.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, refrain from using terms like "untruthful." It's been cited by a previous Speaker.

Connolly: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will do my best.

Quite frankly, Albertans deserve to have elections decided on the basis of who has the best ideas and not on who has access to the most money, and that is why we made our election system fairer by banning union and corporate donations and imposing strict spending and contribution limits. Now, they keep saying, "We know who sends the AFL their money" and "Do the union members

know that their unions are sending money to the AFL?" Yeah, because they have to vote on it at the AGM.

The Acting Speaker: I'll recognize the Member for Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on one of my favourite topics. One of the first things that we had the opportunity to do in this Assembly very shortly after the 2015 election was participate in the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, an all-party committee tasked with reviewing all aspects of Alberta's campaign finance laws, our Election Act, and the Conflicts of Interest Act. There were many, many different aspects of that committee. Now, it was a committee that was given one year in its mandate, and we, sadly, didn't get very far, unfortunately, before the committee was allowed to run its course.

What is so profoundly disappointing to me is that that committee is precisely where we should be having these sorts of discussions. The objective of a committee like that, an all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, should be to provide thoughtful consideration to all aspects of the legislation that is before that committee. One of the reasons that we send that sort of legislation to those sorts of committees is that they have the time to consider all of the possible consequences one way or the other, intended and otherwise.

10:50

We bring in experts, we listen to the Chief Electoral Officer, we listen to the Ethics Commissioner, we solicit input from the people of Alberta in terms of how they would like to see the election laws in this province changed and updated. Let me be very clear. After 43 and a half years of PC rule, it was long overdue to update those election laws. I don't think, actually, that anyone in this Chamber would disagree with that fact, that they had become out of date. They biased large organizations, allowed donation limits far in excess of what I think most Albertans would have considered reasonable. These are things that we were grappling with, but when we make those changes, changes have consequences. Sometimes those consequences are intended and stated and clear, sometimes those consequences are accidental and unintended, and sometimes those consequences are very intended but kind of hidden, secreted away. And perhaps sometimes when changes are made, those changes are made for reasons that a particular governing party may think are in their best interest.

That, I think, is what's happened in this case. The government used their majority on the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee to stack the deck in their favour or try to do so. [interjection] They tried to do that. They tried to do that, and I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that members on the opposition side, all of us – the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, the members from what is now the UCP, and myself – although we didn't agree on every single aspect of the changes that we would have preferred to see, we tried our utmost to hold the government back and say that with the changes you're making, while you might think they're in your best interest in doing so, there are some real risks to the changes you're making. That is why we are here debating Bill 32.

Bill 32 is a voluminous, large, wide-ranging, enormous, and very big attempt to fix the unintended consequences. What it is trying to do – this government, in restricting political activity in the way they did, created a monster. That monster is called PACs, or, colloquially, third-party advertisers according to the act. Having created a monster, we need to try to put that genie back into the bottle because these guys couldn't get their ducks in a row. I can't

think of any other analogies. Maybe: put lightning back in the bucket, whatever – I don't know – whatever it is.

The problem, Mr. Speaker, is that when these changes are made, they create knock-on effects and wide-ranging knock-on consequences. That has allowed PACs to spring up and what we refer to as dark money. Albertans know that's wrong. The challenge is that in a free and democratic society it's very difficult for a government to restrain or to constrict or limit an Albertan's ability to freely express themselves or freely associate with other people. So now here we are, trying to put this genie back into the bottle, and it's a really difficult thing to do now that they've been created.

I do have some concerns about this bill, about whether the limits on spending for third-party advertisers dating back to December 1, before the fixed election period, are in fact going to withstand a court challenge. I hope it does. I think it's not an unreasonable attempt to restrict third-party advertising leading into an election period, but it may not succeed given past precedent.

What is so troubling, Mr. Speaker, is, as we learned, the Chief Electoral Officer having written to the minister responsible for democratic renewal expressing his grave concerns about some aspects of this bill. What I am troubled to learn is that the Chief Electoral Officer was not actively consulted through the creation of Bill 32. I think one of the reasons we can see that that may be is that this government rushed to put some changes in place. One of the ways that we know that, a little hint as to how we know that this bill was so rushed, was that the bill was printed out on eight and a half by 11 paper. It was whacked together at the last minute.

Bill 30, on the other hand, is printed in the proper bill format, so we know that that's work that's been ongoing for a long time. We have some concerns with that. We can deal with that when debating Bill 30.

But Bill 32 was put together hastily, and in being put together hastily, the government either didn't have the opportunity or chose not to consult with the very people, the very organization that will be required to actually implement these proposed changes.

We're here debating the referral motion for Bill 32. I feel strongly that this government should have taken the opportunity, should have availed itself of the opportunity it had through the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, which had very capable members from all sides of the House on it willing and able to work very hard to think through the potential changes, to really work that through. This government had a generational opportunity to make lasting change that would positively impact democracy in Alberta by saying: "We're not just going to make changes that are to the benefit of the New Democratic Party. We're not going to make changes that we think are going to undercut other parties. No. We're going to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do."

This change, these changes, this bill that they brought forward to make the changes that we find ourselves with now had the opportunity for them to say, "This isn't about us; this will stand the test of time; these changes are going to serve Albertans" and defy the opposition to vote against it, because the opposition would have been a part of actually making those changes. For those of us on this side, although we may not have agreed on absolutely everything, if we had seen this government taking thoughtful time to actually make meaningful change that was in the best interest, truly, of the people of Alberta, of democracy, we would have voted enthusiastically in favour of those changes. This government would have deserved the praise it received for doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do, but they didn't do that.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

They decided to stack the deck and put rules in place they thought were to their benefit. What they did was that they created a monster called PACs. We have these millions of dollars flowing into Jason Kenney's PACs and UCP PACs, even Alberta Together, this Alberta Together group, which has no formal affiliation with the Alberta Party. I don't want Alberta Together to exist. I don't think it should have to exist.

I think Albertans know what political parties are. I think the Alberta Party should attract donations from Albertans. We should report those donations publicly. Our job is to elect MLAs. Our job is to form the next government. Albertans understand what that is. That's our job. We shouldn't have to have these shadow organizations. I don't like that they exist. I want nothing to do with it. I think the UCP and Jason Kenney and all of that group should also feel like those things shouldn't have to exist either. All the organizations that support the NDP shouldn't have to exist either. Political activity should exist within the political system as governed very strictly and appropriately by Elections Alberta.

But here we are. We have a bill before us, and we have a referral motion, which we're debating, on whether or not this should be referred to committee. As much as I think that we should take some time and should have taken the time back a year and a half, almost two years ago to really thoughtfully go through Alberta's election laws, we have to bring this bill to fruition in this session because there are changes that exist in this bill, especially as it relates to third-party advertisers and PACs, which will at least constrain those activities somewhat. It fixes things, sort of.

Now, we're spending a lot of time here at second reading on many different bills, this bill included, and I can assure you that we intend to bring forward some amendments to Bill 32. I would encourage other members to do the same because there is a lot that needs to be improved here.

Again, the Chief Electoral Officer has brought forward a number of points, I understand, in some correspondence with the minister very recently specifically as it relates to advance polling and a number of other things. He's used the words "unintended consequences," and I just want to reflect on that briefly. Where an officer of the Legislative Assembly is using words like "unintended consequences," they don't do this lightly. Their job is not to pick sides. They are the least partisan organization in this entire province. Their commitment is to democracy. They care about free and fair elections. They care about a fair process. That's all they care about. So to hear those sorts of comments while a bill is before the Legislature is actually quite remarkable. It is actually quite remarkable, and I look forward to digging a little deeper into that.

I just want to identify a couple of areas that, once we get this bill out of the referral and finally through second and into committee, I think we need to tackle. I'd like to see a definition of PAC. What exactly is a political action committee in the eyes of Elections Alberta? I understand that a third-party advertiser is a thing defined by the act, but I think those organizations that exist only to foster political activity should also be defined as distinct from political action committees.

Let's define even further what PACs can do and not do as it relates to political parties. There's an effort to address that in this bill by saying that the PACs cannot sell memberships, cannot fund raise, cannot do those sorts of things. I get that.

11:00

Another area that we talked a great deal about in the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee and one of the reasons that I find myself the MLA for Calgary-Elbow, I firmly believe, is the very necessary step to restrict government advertising during by-elections and general elections. I'm sure you

will all recall the story, in the 2014 by-election, of announcements of school portables being made in my constituency by the then government. It actually happened in two different schools in Calgary-Elbow. It's funny; the one that seemed to get all the news attention was the school that my kids went to, interestingly enough. That was quite an experience. That was quite an entrée into politics, I can assure you.

Ultimately, interestingly, it didn't work, actually. The polls around the school where most parents sent their kids actually voted more for me than they voted for the Minister of Education at the time, interestingly enough. Even then it didn't work. Ultimately, here I am, and he's not.

Government advertising. You know, one of the things that we need to think about is that while a by-election is on, this bill would restrict what the government can announce specific to a constituency – fair; I think that is certainly a very good idea – but it doesn't restrict broadly enough, I don't think, what governments can advertise outside of the constituency. For example, as we look at the Calgary-Lougheed by-election, the government has not made any specific announcements relating to what might be happening in Calgary-Lougheed, but there has been some talk about the cancer centre and those sorts of things that would perhaps seek to influence the voters of that constituency notwithstanding the fact that it might not be directly in that constituency. I'd like to see some more restrictions on that.

Spending limits, as I talked about earlier, around the election period may in fact be problematic as it relates to the courts. Again, governments created this monster, which is tough to deal with.

One way to help deal with that, I would suggest, is a fixed election date, not a range of dates. I think that will help. I suspect that if the courts look at the potential range of December 1 of the year prior to the fixed election period – we could be having an election as late as May or June according to the fixed election period. I suspect that the courts may say that that six-month window is probably too long.

I would like some clarity on whether out-of-province donations are, in fact, banned for third-party advertisers, how exactly that may work.

In the end, I don't actually support the referral motion. I will vote against that because I feel that the changes that this bill brings forward, the opportunity for us to bring further changes and amendments at the committee stage, should we find ourselves ever actually at the committee stage on this bill or any other bill that's currently before the Legislature – should that day eventually come, there is some opportunity here, I think, to make some very substantive and substantial improvements to this bill. We certainly intend to bring some amendments forward, and I suspect and wonder if perhaps the government would also consider the same given the feedback from the Chief Electoral Officer. But I don't feel that it's appropriate at this stage to kick the can even further down the road.

I do wonder what the agenda of the UCP is in bringing in the referral motion. Perhaps they would like to continue benefiting from the many PACs that back both their leader as well as their party.

You know, I don't think that I have any more time, so I'll sit down.

The Deputy Speaker: Under 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm Calgary-Hays, just for the record. Yesterday when I tried to correct that, I got a few things wrong, too, so I'll just leave that right where it is if that's okay.

Let me just say that I was interested in the remarks. I was particularly interested in the fact that the hon. independent Member for Calgary-Elbow first started arguing, really, in favour of the referral and then said that he wouldn't support it. You can hardly blame any of us in here for wondering what he was actually saying. It wasn't quite as confusing as the member opposite saying that he was in a union one second and not in the union the next second and never ever clarifying that.

But I'll go back to the hon. member that just finished speaking because he's talking about what the motivation for people is, and I would wonder if he'd like to reflect on the fact that it's possible that people's motivation is to, within the law, give their money to the political party, group, or individual that they support. I did say "within the law," which is important.

I wonder if the hon. member would like to reflect upon whether the problem is that the government, through this and past pieces of legislation, is looking for a way to look like they're doing the right thing while trying to cut off all the money, except for the money that's going to come to them, by trying to outlaw methods of people giving that want to give to other parties but don't want to give to them while looking like they're supporting democracy.

It's no wonder that they're on their second or third piece of legislation to do it because it's actually hard to do that, and I'd like the member to reflect on whether it's actually people's will to find a legal means to give money to the party and the people they support. I wonder if the hon. member wants to reflect upon the fact that the third-party advertisers, euphemistically called PACs – I'd like him to reflect upon whether the PACs are a result of people actually wanting to give money to the parties and people that they support rather than the parties and people that they don't support.

I'd like him to reflect upon the fact that even with the third-party advertisers – it's clear from those that I think are targeted by this legislation that at least some of the third-party advertisers actually have chosen to want to support the previous speaker's group. Good for him. Good for him. Some have wanted to support the party that I belong to, and good for them. And as it turns out, some actually, much surprisingly, to me – but that's the great thing about democracy – want to support the governing party. [interjections] I'm shocked at that, too. I appreciate the government members pounding on their desks. Apparently, not only me but the government members are surprised by that. They should be happy about that.

I'd ask the member to reflect upon whether people give money directly to a candidate, a campaign, a party, a third-party advertising group, or a PAC – I think that's a fairly legally undetermined word, to my knowledge, although I'm happy to be corrected on that. The fact is that, whether we should be looking for ways to allow people to legally express their support for a political party or person or whether the legislation is actually designed to cut off all but the orange money, certainly it seems like again the government is having a hard time looking democratic while trying to be self-serving. And while the member is reflecting upon that, I would like him to think about: if the third-party advertising is cut off, what model would the hon. member prefer . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka on the amendment.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I consider it an honour to be able to rise and speak to the current referral motion before the House, asking the House to actually refer Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, to committee so that it might be more fully and appropriately discussed and there might be some good progress come as a result of it.

I'd like to sort of focus my comments based on some of the insights received in the letter from the Chief Electoral Officer. The very first paragraph, which actually is a single sentence set aside and set apart by itself, is actually quite stunning. I used to read, way back in literature class, that the first sentence of a book is the most important sentence. Well, if the first sentence of a letter is the most important sentence, I truly commend the Chief Electoral Officer for what he's done here.

11:10

I would like to quote that first paragraph in one sentence. He says, "I have had a chance to review Bill 32 after first reading," period. That is an astounding statement, that the Chief Electoral Officer himself had not seen this bill until after it was presented in this House for first reading. That leaves me stunned. I find that unbelievable. I think that because of it, the Chief Electoral Officer was pushed to a desperate movement of having to actually write this kind of a letter to the government. It's almost unprecedented that the government's own chief agent in a particular portfolio needs to write and protest the actions of the government and what it's doing.

I'd like to actually reflect on that sentence a little bit and ask some questions about it. He says, "I have had a chance to review Bill 32 after first reading." If the Chief Electoral Officer has not seen the content of this bill until after it was presented in the House for first reading, I just wonder: who did see it first? I mean, this letter is addressed to the minister responsible for democratic renewal. So if she did not even permit him to see it, in what dark room did this thing get written? Why was he not actually involved in the concepts that were to craft the bill? I can't believe that the person most responsible to deal with this wasn't even given the opportunity to proofread it. In fact, he says, "I . . . had a chance to review [the bill] after first reading."

There is a serious disconnect here, that the very person in this province who is the most knowledgeable about elections and democracy in this province isn't even a part of the discussion. The reality is that this government may have a lot of zeal, but obviously the person who is the most knowledgeable, the most experienced, the most capable person to help them in writing the bill was excluded. A lot of zeal on the other side there but not much knowledge, obviously. A lot of mistakes result when those kinds of things happen. As the previous speaker just pointed out, we're now correcting with this bill the mistakes of the previous bill, and we're probably going to be correcting this one with another one.

If the Chief Electoral Officer had nothing to do with writing this bill, then I'd like to know who did. I just wonder if the minister that's supposedly responsible for democratic renewal could tell us that, but unfortunately I don't think that's going to happen. I don't know where they are. The reality is . . . [interjections] My apologies. Fine.

Who did contribute to writing the bill? I suspect that maybe it might have been a group of backbench MLAs, and while many of them may have had some significant career experience, I don't think, from their profiles, that any one of them could claim that in their previous career experience they're an expert in elections administration. I don't know who wrote this bill, but it certainly wasn't anybody from the Chief Electoral Officer's office who actually knows how this system works in this province.

The other reality here is that in a very, very clear way – and this is why this bill absolutely needs to go to committee – this government has not consulted. They don't consult with anybody about anything. It started with the very first of the bills that they presented. You know, there are a lot of groups and individuals in Alberta who have felt like they haven't been consulted but weren't really quite sure. The government keeps saying: oh, we consult; we

consult with everybody. But the reality is that many agencies have experienced this lack of consultation, and it's not their imagination. This is the reality. They don't consult. While we have a government that wants to plainly consult, obviously they haven't here.

While we have a government that wants to hand out platitudes and praise for our hard-working civil service, the reality is that they completely disrespect them. The one person that should have been at the elbow of the minister writing this bill wasn't even shown the thing until after it hit the floor in first reading, after it's all written, kind of sloppily printed on a photocopied bunch of paper because they're in such a rush to get it out. They save it till the end of session. They try to ram it through with morning sittings, afternoon sittings, night sittings. Next thing we'll probably have is weekend sittings. They push it through so quickly in such zeal to try and proclaim that they're making democracy better that nobody has time to even look at it, including their own experts.

I would like to actually look at some of the concerns of the Chief Electoral Officer. He says in his last paragraph, actually, as a wrap-up to his first sentence: "I have not been consulted in relation to policy direction leading up to Bill 32." So he not only didn't see it, as he says, but he makes it very clear that he was not consulted. Then he says in very diplomatic and careful language, but he says it anyway: "I have, however, had the opportunity to provide feedback on the workability of various proposals. The concerns I set out here reflect some of that feedback."

So here's his opportunity. After the thing is all said and done, he finally has to write a letter to this government. They won't sit down in a room with him and talk with him, so he puts it in writing and sends it to them with regard to the workability of this bill. Then he spends three pages detailing how it won't work, how it's so impractical and so poorly thought through that it just simply won't work. He is trying to provide feedback on what might make it work, but obviously it isn't going to work. So in order to try and make his point, he even attaches a detailed schedule, as an example from a by-election, of what has to happen on every single day in order to get an election process properly managed and properly cared for. He tries to provide some recommendations respecting all of these things but has some struggles.

Yeah, there are a few good things in the bill. There is a serious attempt here, I think, to try and improve the reality, but in fact the workability of it is dysfunctional, and I'm afraid that in many cases that's going to be the theme of NDP legislation. While it's got a lot of zeal behind it, a lot of passion to fix the world and change everything, it's so unworkable that even their own Chief Electoral Officer spends three pages writing and pointing out ways that the bill needs to change in order to make it something that's actually workable. This isn't the kind of legislation that Albertans are in need of. This is challenging.

He talks about the advance polling days. He refers to the fact that Alberta has a 28-day election period and there are a lot of activities that have to happen during that 28-day period, that some things cannot happen until other things happen, and that there's a very strict number of things that really need to be pushed through on this. With regard to the advance polling days he points out that the changes of pushing two new advance polling days two weeks before is actually almost entirely undoable because in order to get the ballots printed and everything created and to go through the proper – well, it starts with the nomination of candidates, and that has to be open for a certain period of time, and then it closes on day 10. Then they've got, like, just a couple of days and the ballots start to arrive at the returning officers' offices, but already, according to the schedule, there's supposed to be two advance polls happening.

So here we're going to have people supposed to be showing up for advance polls, but the notifications haven't gone out. The ballots

aren't necessarily even properly printed. He quite simply says: "While I support increased availability of advance polls, the earlier advance polling days do not leave sufficient time to notify electors adequately of the locations through the Where-to-Vote cards or to have candidate ballots printed." How are people supposed to show up at an advance poll when there hasn't been time to notify them of where it is and there's not enough time to print the proper ballots? What are they supposed to put their vote on, a ripped up piece of paper? How are they supposed to know?

11:20

I mean, this isn't me making this up. This is from the Chief Electoral Officer, who has to make this work. He says that it can't be done in a reasonable, respectful way. We're going to have people expecting to be able to vote, and there won't be proper ballots for them. They don't even know where to go, and they want to know. There's no time to notify them because you have to have a nomination process, and it takes time to get all these things done. It's going to create chaos.

As the Chief Electoral Officer says, these are issues of workability. They have nothing to do with politics or parties or visions of grandeur for some new democratic regime. It's unworkable. That's his point. How is this supposed to work? He's frustrated. I mean, I'm baffled by this, that we can create these kinds of bills that are so shoddy and unpolished. It's like the declining math skills in Alberta. The competency level is falling. We've got bills being pushed forward where even the most important person in the province to deal with this says that it isn't workable. That's my point.

Then he goes on and talks about the where-to-vote cards and the fact that because we don't have a fixed election date, the whole thing, again, is going to create chaos and is not going to work. He says that the soonest the cards are being received by the electors is between day 15 and 20, but on day 15 they're already supposed to be voting. Unbelievable. This is going to create chaos at election time for Alberta voters. This isn't a functioning, operable kind of idea here. It just isn't going to work in a very practical kind of way.

I mean, this bill has to be referred to committee. We have to give the Chief Electoral Officer, finally, the opportunity to engage in the process, to talk about what's possible and what's not possible. While I get that there are all kinds of zeal to somehow create this idea of a bill that claims to be an act to strengthen and protect democracy, in fact it's going to throw democracy into chaos. Many voters are going to feel cheated. Many voters are going to feel like the system is rigged against them because they didn't know where to vote on the day that they had to vote and there were not proper ballots. The whole system is going to lead to accusations of mismanaged voting and ballot process and procedure. This is a serious problem.

Then he talks about the ballots part and the requirement of 10 days for nominations to close, the process of figuring out, then, through that who the candidates are, putting on the candidates' names, getting them all printed up and created on a ballot. And he says, "Opening advance polls earlier results in as little as four days to proof, print, and make ballots available to all advance poll locations." That means everywhere in the province, not just here in the urban areas. And then he specifically identifies, "With rural and more remote areas, this timeline could not be achieved."

The Deputy Speaker: Questions or comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, I have to say, listening to my passionate colleague discuss some of the concerns

that the Chief Electoral Officer is bringing forward, that when it comes to the fact that I spent so much of my time on the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee with this gentleman, I've come to realize that this man isn't a passionate man. He's a man that will answer straightforward and be direct. He's not a guy that will overreact and try to get into the newspapers. [interjection] I'm talking about the Chief Electoral Officer, sir. The Chief Electoral Officer. I apologize if there's confusion.

The Chief Electoral Officer is a man that I spent almost a year with in committee meetings talking about ethics within Alberta, and for him to write a letter to government with concerns that he has not been consulted with is unbelievable. Now, I understand that he is independent. But you would think that what the government would do is it would take this proposed legislation and maybe see if it fits with what Alberta's current legislation requires moving forward. It's him that has to live with this legislation, so you would think that he would be involved, clearly, with the drafting portion of this or at least give an opinion on it. What we end up seeing, though, is a government that quickly pushed this legislation into a bill. The opposition repeatedly brought forward a lot of the concerns that were in this legislation, and now the government is shocked and dismayed that they're there.

Now, my question to the hon. member is: do you feel that this government has in any way, shape, or form done its due diligence and consulted with the stakeholders, especially the Chief Electoral Officer? I believe they have failed terribly when it comes to this.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Absolutely not. They have not consulted. The Chief Electoral Officer himself clearly complains about that, so I think that the problem there is patently obvious. No need to reinforce it. But what I would like to add to that is that neither have they consulted in terms of true democracy with regard to rural people. As the Chief Electoral Officer points out in his letter, with rural and remote areas this is absolutely impossible. It cannot be done. He says that it cannot be achieved.

This is an ongoing attack on rural people in Alberta. On one hand, we have an Electoral Boundaries Commission that clearly favours urban areas with five more MLAs even though they have lower numbers of individuals per riding and much smaller geographic areas to cover. [interjections] They have five more ridings in Edmonton and Calgary than all the rest of the province. [interjections] All right. I'll defer to three. It may be my mistake.

The reality is that not only do we have a lack of representation there; now we have discrimination when it comes to voting because there's going to be even more chaos in those rural areas. The Chief Electoral Officer says that it cannot be achieved. This is just not equitable. It's not just. We see this lack of equity for rural Alberta over and over and over again. It's true in the lottery funding that goes to them, it's true in the allocations of health care spending across the province, it's true in terms of electoral representatives, and now we have it coming true again here in terms of voting. Madam Speaker, this is an injustice that is being perpetrated again and again and again by this government that continually tramples on the rights of rural people and puts them at a disadvantage to the people in the urban areas.

Again, the Chief Electoral Officer has pointed it out to us, and I think it's something that absolutely has to go to committee because of that. I truly would think that any members on the other side who are not just being whipped by their own party would take an honest look at this and realize that there are significant challenges here

with the workability of this thing. It will not work, it cannot work, and the Chief Electoral Officer has made that very clear.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other hon. members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Chestermere-Rocky View.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am in favour of the referral motion with respect to Bill 32. I have so many things to say. I just don't even know where to start. It's been very, very interesting being in here this morning and listening to all this.

I just want to start off with a couple of things. This is what the last week and a half looks like in paper: Bill 30, almost 150 pages. The reason why I'm bringing this up, Madam Speaker, is to speak to the necessity for referral. One of the things on Bill 30 is – and there'll be a consistent theme, here – government overreach, leading questions within consultation, and specific letters coming into my office on lack of consultation.

11:30

Let's go to Bill 31. This one is the better deal for consumers. I think, probably, I can't even speak about this as well as I'd like to because the member for Vermilion spoke about that so beautifully. I'm sorry that I'm saying his area wrong right now. It'll come to me in a second here.

An Hon. Member: Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mrs. Aheer: Lloydminster. Thank you.

The impact of his words – because I don't know much about veterinary work, other than I love my veterinarian, and I think that he's, like, one of the best people I've ever met in my life. Our little fur babies in our household are very, very important to us, so those people are heroes in my mind, actually, in some respects because of what they've been able to do for our animals.

Having said that, though, the most important piece of that is that veterinarians were not consulted. There's another theme there, no consultation and, again, dropped in our laps in the last week and a half. This one is not quite as long; however, the impact of these things is huge. There we go.

Then we have Bill 32. I've got that one right in front of me, too. This came to us like this, ended up like this. Wow. That's recycling paper, and I have four of these on my desk, I might add.

Bill 32 is particularly interesting. We'll get to this one because it's what we're talking about today, but that's the weight of this one, again, in the last week and a half. The weight of these, just the weight: we'll get to that.

And then, interestingly enough, we've got Bill 33, which isn't as big; however, the impact of that bill is massive, not to mention the fact that we've had several applications not only from this side of the House but actually throughout the House about changes and amendments and things that need to happen within the electoral boundaries division to be able to make sure that this is a good decision.

I might add on that bill just one little thing, and I'm sure I'll have a chance to talk about that again. Taking three ridings from rural areas: we've all described why we think that that's not a good idea. I'd like to ask the urban MLAs how they would feel if that decision was reversed and we took three from you and put them with us. Just asking. It might have been something you wanted to think about within the consultation. Just saying. Those are 32 and 33.

Then we just got Bill 34. The reason I bring this up is because this is a massive amount of legislation and not minor legislation. We're talking about massive changes. We're talking about impacts.

Fundamentally, to go back to the beginning, this is not about us, folks, not about a single MLA in here, not about us at all. This is about the people we represent. I think what's so frustrating for me is that I – and I believe everybody in this House feels the same way – legitimately want to represent the people of the constituencies that we are privileged to represent. I don't doubt for one minute that every single person in here wants to do that. It can't only be on the opposition side that we have an issue with this, Madam Speaker. I am absolutely certain that opposition are not the only ones that are receiving a tremendous number of e-mails asking about this legislation, asking about the impact that it's going to have on them.

Just to give you an example, in Bill 33, in the electoral boundaries for the riding that I represent, this is the third major change in that riding in the last three changes. The third. And one of the things that the commissioner had said in the minority report, not that that's going to be listened to, is that consistency is important. Actually, that brings up my next point about listening to the experts.

There's one particular point I'd like to speak about, and that's with respect to the list of exemptions on the prohibition of government advertising during an election. These are really, really lengthy and extremely generous. I mean, oddly enough, it makes sense because it helps out the government. Essentially, the government is given this humongous amount of wiggle room. Actually, the member had mentioned earlier that there are these situations – for example, I mean, we have a by-election going on right now. Obviously, you can't announce that there's a school in that area. That is good. However, there are other announcements that are not within those areas that can be made in order to help out the government.

Now, if the government has a problem and an issue with things that have come before in other governments or anything like that, you know, it's fair to look at it and see if there is a way that you can change that to make the process more fair. I don't think any of us are going to dispute that. But when you're actually making the legislation be more accessible for the government and to be able to use taxpayer dollars to do that, I find that highly unethical. There are so many things that need to change, but, as the Member for Calgary-Elbow said, there's a huge monster at the end of this. A huge monster.

If we're truly, truly wanting to look at how funding is impacting how we run elections – I don't know – I would have asked the Chief Electoral Officer. You know what I find particularly interesting? The government now wants to have an independent electoral officer. What makes this any different? Are they going to listen to him or her, that person? Are they going to listen to that person? They're not listening to the one person right now who has a very, very thoughtful and common-sense approach to this entire process.

I was in my very first Legislative Offices Committee meeting last week. Very interesting. These are some of the most competent people I've ever met in my life. You know, they are working under very, very stringent budgets. They're completely transparent and accountable to every single dollar that goes across their plates. We are completely grateful to these folks and the work that they do with respect to the offices that they represent.

I find it interesting that we have an electoral officer that really, really gave some good feedback with respect to what the changes are and what was working and what's not. Then to not listen to him, and then to want to invoke another person to do a job that – I mean, an independent office is not a small undertaking. This is a good amount of money. The Member for Calgary-Hays was mentioning that just having a person that is called an independent even within the office is a million dollars. To set up an entire other office – I mean, I'm going to quote the government here in just a little bit – is a whole lot more.

As you can see and anybody who's watching at home who wants to see, this pile of paper: there's a really, really, really big theme here of a lot of very, very large and complicated and life-altering legislation. These aren't even the private members' bills. We have really excellent private members' bills that are also here, coming from the government and our side, that are mixed in with all of this legislation. I can't begin to explain how frustrating it is from the perspective of consultation on our part. Certainly, to be able to reach out and talk to people about the impacts it has on the people we represent is very, very difficult and certainly very frustrating.

One of the things I'd also like to bring up is that – again, I'd like to focus on the automatic registration of young voters. This piece is very, very interesting to me. I have some questions about that. I think probably most of us have had an opportunity to do this. You get invited into school, and you get to speak. Quite often, you know, they're asking you not only about what it is that you do and how you participate – you know, all of us get a chance to talk to these young people about the electoral process and about the right to vote and the importance of voting. Quite often what I'll say when I'm in those classrooms is that I talk about the country where my dad and my father-in-law and my mother-in-law originated from, which is India, and we talk about the electoral process there and about how democracy works in different countries. It's imperative that people understand how important it is to vote. I think we can be quite complacent here at times when it comes to voting because we're so privileged in this country. We're so lucky.

11:40

There are a lot of people, at least in my family as well, not able to read or write in any language, including their own. So when they are given the opportunity to vote, quite often there are things that are involved with getting their vote. Quite often they can't even write their names on anything signifying – they use an X or some sort of symbol in order to acknowledge who they are as human beings because they can't read or write in any language. You can imagine what that looks like from the democratic process. Quite often they may even not have the ability to go and vote as a result of the system that fails there. It fails especially people in poverty.

I tell this story to these young people in schools specifically to tell them and to explain to them about the importance of voting. I really like the idea that the government is wanting to engage at the ages of 16 and 17 to do that, but my question is: as well as understanding the privilege of being able to vote for the elected representatives, how are we within this legislation making sure that the youth are also receiving a balanced approach to the information from all parties? It's really important. I mean, when we go into schools, we want to really encourage people to vote, not necessarily to vote for any particular party, right? For most of us, if we're in our ridings and we were elected there, there are going to be a lot of people that are sort of onside with the stripe that you represent, at least largely, but our responsibility is actually to explain the process – right? – and the right to vote and the ability to vote and all those kinds of things.

So I'm curious. If we're talking about the information and about the young voters and their ability to vote, I'd like to ask these questions: how is that information being collected on these young people; by who; and what kind of information as a result of that will be provided to all political parties? Most importantly, that everybody has an understanding of how that data is being collected, not necessarily that it's being collected – because again I agree with the government; I think it's really important to engage these people – but just in terms of transparency and accountability that that information is shared with all parties in terms of the collection of that data.

Will the programming be made available to the public ahead of time for consultation and feedback just to ensure that there are no inherent biases? Now, if I was in government, I would expect that the opposition would ask me that as well, too, because if we're talking about all of these other things like money in politics and all of these other things, these dark horses, as they were, I think that it's a fair question to ask to make sure that this is a very balanced approach with our youth and that taxpayer dollars and advertising on behalf of the government are not being used to in any way influence. If that's not the case, then that's great and I'd love to stand corrected, but I just think that there needs to be things in place to make sure that that doesn't happen. The other piece, too, as we are dealing with 16- and 17-year-olds, is: how is that information going to be safeguarded, Madam Speaker?

The reason why I'm asking these questions is because these are things I think that should go through the Chief Electoral Officer in a committee to actually make sure we can reach out and talk to people maybe about other jurisdictions that have had success with this but also about some of the problems that we could have and the sensitivity around collecting data on our youth. We have a lot of space right now where we're very, very careful about how we collect data.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions or comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and just respond ever so briefly to the comments made by my hon. colleague the Member for Chestermere-Rocky View. You know, she raised some very, very important points this morning about the quality of individual that is the Chief Electoral Officer; about the importance of being respectful of private information, particularly that of minors; about how all of these things fit together, in particular how the government will engage with the process of making significant changes to the Election Act and the election contributions act. What we've seen from this government and what I think the member did such a great job of highlighting is a real lack of respect for the legislative office, in this case the legislative office of the Chief Electoral Officer.

You know, I know that I've had the pleasure of sitting on the Legislative Offices Committee over the past couple of years, and I know that Mr. Resler has done a fantastic job of guiding us through this important period of significant reform. I will be the first to acknowledge that we have changed a number of things around the way political parties are funded, around the way political parties can spend money, around nomination contestants, leadership, and the list goes on.

Some of those things have been very positive. In particular, a lot of the changes that are positive took place when the government listened to the Chief Electoral Officer. When they haven't listened or they've stopped listening to others, as was the case in the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, particularly when we arrived at the point of third-party advertisers, which is right around the time that the government decided to rush through the end of the committee and then not extend the mandate of the committee, they, in turn, wound up creating a lot of unintended consequences.

I find it so interesting that the Chief Electoral Officer in his letter to the minister spoke specifically about unintended consequences.

I wanted to bring to your attention potential unintended consequences of these particular proposals. If passed in its current form, I am concerned that Bill 32 will deteriorate the service provided to electors and increase the timelines for communicating results.

Many times when the government has actually listened to experts and legislative officers, they wound up getting many things correct. When they don't listen – and there are plenty of examples of them not listening – is exactly when the government gets themselves into a bad spot. That's exactly where we are today. The government goes around talking about how they'd like to strengthen and protect democracy in Alberta, but in actual fact they are going to deteriorate the services provided to electors. One might suggest that you could change the title of this particular piece of legislation to An Act That May Deteriorate the Services Provided to Electors because that's exactly what the Chief Electoral Officer has said. He says that if this is passed in its current form, it will end in exactly that.

I'm just curious to know if my hon. colleague from Chestermere-Rocky View would be willing and able to provide a few additional comments about some of the challenges around . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The time for Standing Order 29(2)(a) has expired.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

11:50

Mr. Panda: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this referral motion brought in by a very competent colleague of mine . . .

An Hon. Member: Highly competent.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

. . . from a mofussil town of my city of Calgary. She won't like it if we say that because for her Airdrie is the centre of the universe. She has been doing a great service to the public in the Airdrie constituency.

I commend her for bringing in this referral motion because the whole premise of it is to have greater consultation within the committee. Most of the previous speakers talked about having a quality debate in this House. Madam Speaker, yesterday we heard our House leader spend 90 minutes trying to, you know, bring that point out about having a quality debate.

Mr. Cooper: The best 90 minutes of my week.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

I know that the opposite side, you know, when our House leader tried to request yesterday in this House – he said that they have an obligation to represent the constituents that elected them, not to rubber-stamp what the front bench is saying, including the Deputy Premier trying to influence their backbenchers. That's not what they're supposed to do.

Ms Hoffman: What?

Mr. Panda: They're not supposed to rubber-stamp what the frontbenchers tell them to do. They are here to add value to the debate.

Having said that, Madam Speaker, I don't know how seriously they took that suggestion from our hon. House leader, but our deputy House leader is trying to do the same thing through this referral motion, explaining the importance of having consultation. This is the first time I heard that one of the important stakeholders, who is the Chief Electoral Officer of Alberta, who is supposed to be front and centre in these discussions, is not even aware and is not even consulted. That's an insult to democracy.

Mrs. Pitt: It's scary.

Mr. Panda: It's really scary. It's really scary to somebody like me, who came from the largest democracy in the world to a western democracy, where things should really work better for the sake of democracy, to preserve democracy. But these kinds of things shake the confidence of new Canadians like me, who come to these countries, western countries, with the hope of having a thriving democracy. It's not the case, it looks like.

I don't know why the government chose to do this. Like I said, our job is not to rubber-stamp, not even, you know, do that soft cushioning like the independent member, one of the previous speakers here, tried to do. Our job is to critically evaluate each and every bill that comes in front of this House and provide constructive feedback, which we are offering, but it's up to them whether they want to take it or not.

Ms Hoffman: Let's get it to committee.

Mr. Panda: Yeah. So why don't you accept to put it to the committee?

Ms Hoffman: To the stage of committee.

Mr. Panda: No. I'm talking about the standing committee. Our hon. deputy House leader is asking us to refer it to the standing committee, where we can have a quality debate like we had on the time change bill . . .

Mr. Cooper: Time waits for no man.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

. . . that your colleague brought in. Why are you afraid of that? Why are you afraid of that?

You're trying to bring in rules telling people that you care about democracy, that you care about closing the loopholes. Look at the CBC article. [interjections] Yeah. Your favourite, CBC. You saw it. Just google it. It will tell you that you're trying to arm-twist the chair of OHS to donate to your party. The chair of OHS has received letters from the NDP asking him to donate to your party. That shows the gap in your intentions.

Mr. Cooper: Sounds like dark money.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

An Hon. Member: Shameful.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, please.
Hon. member, through the chair, please.

Mr. Panda: Thank you, Madam Speaker. That gentleman actually spoke to the media, saying that he felt pressurized from the Premier's office that if he wants to continue in that arm's-distance position, he has to play ball with the ruling party. That tells something here. That actually tells that this party wants to do the same shady business, but then they want to tell the public, Albertans: "It is Jason Kenney's UCP which has something up there. We're trying to stop that." But in practice those are the ones who are actually doing things like this.

Like our hon. whip mentioned before, if Albertans are willingly contributing to a particular party, if they like the policies of that party and you are trying to artificially, you know, stop that party, that's not good democracy. Those things happen in countries like India, where I came from – I can understand that – but not here. I didn't expect that. Albertans deserve, really, better democracy.

We are a mature democracy. Canada is celebrating 150 years. We all said happy birthday to Canada on July 1, and today we are here in December, just before Christmas – everyone is in the Christmas mood here – and this government brings in these kinds of bills, hundreds of pages of bills that are rammed through here, putting undue pressure on the Official Opposition and on their own private members, backbenchers, to just overlook all the shortcomings and just rubber-stamp their legislation.

They don't have any time to consult anybody, including the Chief Electoral Officer. I was told by the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake – I've never met this gentleman, the electoral commissioner. But it seems my colleague from Bonnyville-Cold Lake worked with him for the last year on a particular committee. He seems to be a decent gentleman who is not there just to get some cheap publicity. He is there to contribute to preserve democracy. He is trying to do his job, and he's willing to contribute to this bill to make this bill better.

Mr. McIver: He's got to be included in the conversation.

Mr. Panda: Yeah.

Without including him in the conversation – he is supposed to be a main stakeholder. He's the one who is actually going to execute the rules they want to bring in, but if he's not at the table and if we are doing the same thing with him as we are doing with our colleagues in this House, not giving them enough time – I mean, for someone like me, coming from business, what I would like to see . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. member, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(2.1) the House stands adjourned until 1:30 this afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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