



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday evening, June 1, 2020

Day 23

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Party standings:

United Conservative: 63

New Democrat: 24

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Monday, June 1, 2020

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. members. Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 15 Choice in Education Act, 2020

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education has risen to speak.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise and move second reading of Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation shows that our government is committed to offering a number of education options that allow parents to select the path they feel will best help their children reach their full potential because at our government's core we recognize that parents, not politicians, know what is best for their children. Let me explain how this will be done.

This act would amend the preamble of the Education Act to include recognition of section 26(3) of the universal declaration of human rights, which states, "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." This amendment will continue school choice and affirm parents' rights as primary decision-makers in their child's education. It will support the range of choices within the current education system, ensuring Alberta continues to have one of the best-funded public education systems in Canada. The act also clearly articulates support for all types of schooling, and in Alberta our successful history of choice includes public and separate schools, francophone schools, charter schools, independent schools, home education, and early childhood education.

Let's first look at independent schools. The act will protect the status of independent schools and recognizes that these schools provide parents and students with choices in education. It amends the Education Act to recognize that independent schools are an integral part of the education system. It is important to note, though, that this amendment does not change how these schools are funded and does not affect funding for public education.

The legislation will also amend the Education Act to permit an update to the charter schools regulation, which will allow a charter school application to be made to the Education minister. The Education Act currently requires that boards of a school division in which a charter school would like to be established have to be approached with a request for an alternative program. An application can then only be made to the Education minister if that school board has refused to establish an alternative program.

As we've seen over the years, this can be an intimidating prospect for a group of parents. Approaching a school division is not easy, especially if the board moves slowly in their review and decision, which can often be the case. In our government's eyes this is not an efficient process, and the red tape involved can often squash a charter application before it even really starts, so we are proposing a change to the process. That said, there will still be checks and balances to ensure that charter application is appropriate, which includes consulting with the local school board.

The Choice in Education Act would also amend the Education Act in the charter schools regulation to allow for the establishment

of charter schools that expressly focus on vocation-based education, which follows through on another important commitment made by our government.

The act will allow for us to provide new options for parents who choose to home-school their children. This act will also allow us to alter the home education regulation so that parents of home-schooled students will be able to choose a nonfunded pathway that will require them to provide notification once a year of the intent to home-school and include a home education plan. This change has come about due to the many parents who approached government over the years with a desire for this option.

In fact, we held a wide engagement with our education system partners as we developed the Choice in Education Act. My department held webinars and individual in-person meetings with education partners. We also heard from Alberta students at both the summer student advisory panel and the Minister's Youth Council. In addition, my department held a month-long online public survey which received more than 50,000 complete responses. We heard loud and clear that survey respondents value choice in education and are satisfied with the choices offered by our current system. In fact, 62 per cent of respondents were either very or somewhat satisfied with the current amount of choice in education.

Mr. Speaker, I want to touch upon some comments made in the public realm, in particular by NDP affiliate Gil McGowan, the president of a labour group who has two seats on the NDP's provincial council. This individual characterized this legislation as: "Paves the way for nutbar religious charter schools & home-schooling . . . They're trying to create an army of brainwashed right-wing warriors." Perhaps this individual also meant to lump in separate and independent schools in this category as well because they also offer a religious education. It's tough, really, to know. Regardless, this is a slap in the face to any parent who chooses to educate their child outside of a non-denominational public school for whatever reason, and it certainly shows how certain segments of the population stereotype and look down upon the rest of the tens of thousands of parents who choose a different option.

Mr. Speaker, critics of this bill also point to the fact that 93 per cent of students attend a public school. This number includes 176,000 students whose parents have chosen a Catholic education. This is true. I'm proud to say these children are able to attend strong, robust, diverse public and separate schools. But these critics use the percentage because it allows them to diminish the sheer number of parents who are choosing an education outside of the public and separate systems. This year we have 10,000 students attending charter schools with thousands more on a waiting list. Thirty-three thousand students attend an independent school, plus an additional 7,000 children are in an independent early childhood services program, and 14,000 more students are home-schooled.

Mr. Speaker, I find it very upsetting that the wishes of the parents of almost 65,000 students are so easily dismissed and diminished. This would add up to more than 100,000 adult Albertans who are discredited at the wave of a hand. Our government will not dismiss these Albertans, and Bill 15 provides important protections for these parents without reducing the strength of our public education system, because this is not an either/or debate. We can have a strong and inclusive public education system that every parent should be proud to send their child to, and we can have a vibrant, robust set of other options available that parents can choose if they feel these options are more likely to lead to success for their children. It's not an us versus them; it is all options together.

Another stereotype that we often see is that charter and independent schools are only really available to the wealthy, that they are out of reach to most Albertans. This, again, is an important aspect of the narrative that critics of choice like to promote, but let

me share some statistics with the members of this House that pushes back against this notion. In the public survey I mentioned earlier, we asked about household incomes. For independent schools, 45 per cent of respondents said they had a household income of over \$100,000 a year; 13 per cent said they had a household income under \$60,000. Now, let's look at the public school respondents; 50 per cent said they had a household income of over \$100,000, and 10 per cent said they had an income under \$60,000. For charter schools, the stats between the two categories and public school respondents are practically identical. While this survey was a self-selected survey with 50,000 respondents, it does have enough weight to put a dent into the argument that independent and charter schools are only for the wealthy.

Mr. Speaker, our province's successful history and tradition of supporting school choice will continue under this legislation. In fact, I am proud to say that Alberta is the leader in choice available to families and provides parents with more opportunities for their children's education than anywhere else in this country.

Mr. Speaker, I am asking all members of this House for their support of Bill 15, the Choice and Education Act, 2020. Thank you.

7:40

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister. Prior to calling for individuals to join debate, for certainty I just want to be sure. I apologize. I don't think I heard it at the very start. However, you are moving second reading of Bill 15, correct?

Member LaGrange: That is correct.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any hon. members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Calgary-McCall.

The Acting Speaker: Calgary-McCall. My apologies.

Mr. Sabir: I rise to speak to the second reading of Bill 15. I represent a constituency that has a lot of newcomers, a young population, and I will talk a little bit more in detail about my constituency to make my point that what this government has done so far doesn't help those who are living in my constituency. What I am hearing from my constituents, what my colleagues are hearing from Albertans is that what they want first and foremost is a properly funded education system that has properly funded and sufficient staff, a modern curriculum, and supports for those who need extra support for their learning. That one is also particularly relevant to my riding as well.

My riding consists of primarily three neighbourhoods: Saddle Ridge, Taradale, and Martindale, roughly 20,000 population in all of them. As I indicated, in these neighbourhoods Albertans are paying roughly 30 per cent of their household income on their shelter, 30 per cent to provide for their shelter. When we look at the Calgary average, the average Calgarian pays 22 per cent of their income on their shelter needs, so you can already see the difference. Also, when it comes to their income, the Calgary average household income is around \$43,251, and the average for the entire riding of Calgary-McCall is around \$29,000, \$30,000, so there is that difference as well. There is a difference because most of these people are newcomers. They are first-generation immigrants, and that's why they're not in highly skilled jobs, hence this difference in average income between the average Calgary household income and income in these neighbourhoods.

What this also shows is that their buying power is less as compared to others in Calgary. What I've been hearing for the last

week or so is that the changes this government has brought forward, that this minister has brought forward are essentially shutting the doors of education on many of these families, or at least they will be struggling really hard to afford the additional fees that they have to bear because of this government's cuts to the Education budget.

Last week the Calgary board of education came up with a new transportation fee schedule which says that now parents across the city, including in my riding, will have to pay \$465 for yellow bus transportation in a mandated program. They will have to pay \$800 for a nonmandated program. For one-way transportation to send a kid to kindergarten, it will cost them \$400, and from grades 6 to 9 and 10 to 12 they will be paying \$77 per month. There are additional fees as well, and some of these parents are sending their kids to FFCA and other schools that are public but where transportation costs are not even covered.

When we are talking about choice in education, we need to make sure that with all the choice you are providing in terms of schools – charter schools, public schools, separate schools – these families and these parents are able to afford to send their kids to these schools. For many living in my riding, these fees, transportation costs, are fairly significant, and they have a direct bearing on children's access to education. So if we are really talking about choice in education, these parents, these families, those who live in my riding, those who live across the city, first and foremost, should be able to send their kids to school. Without fixing these issues, without reversing these cuts, these fees will make it difficult for thousands of families to access any education, much less to choose from the number of options that the minister has outlined. That's the number one issue that I am hearing from my constituents.

The second thing. The schools were closed down. Certainly, that was the right thing to do. Many parents were asking to do so to keep their kids safe, to keep children safe and contain the spread of COVID-19. As a result, kids are staying home. Kids had to stay home for the last couple of months. That was difficult for many parents for many reasons. Not all parents are equally equipped to provide educational support to their children.

7:50

On top of that, what happened? This government, via tweet, fired 25,000 education staff who were supposed to provide support to these students. If we are talking about choice in education, the basic thing that students need to have is staff, who they can learn from, who they can seek guidance from. You will have a hard time arguing that firing 25,000 education staff didn't impact student learning. Ask parents. It adversely impacted student learning in my riding, in my city, and across this province. Parents have been calling on this government and this minister for more supports, not fewer. Those are the kinds of things I am hearing in my riding.

Then, as I said, in the northeast in particular, my riding included, there are many families who are new to Canada. There are many families who are first-generation immigrants, and they often need extra supports when it comes to English as a second language, when it comes to learning in a new environment.

When we were in government, we started an initiative – it was around \$75 million, \$77 million towards the end of it – the classroom improvement fund. That was the kind of initiative that was designed to provide supports to those students who need extra help, who may need help with learning a new language, who may need help learning new skills. Those supports are no longer there.

Then there were other supports like program unit funding. A few weeks ago there was news as well. We heard from many Albertans, many Albertans with disabilities, that 70 per cent of that funding is gone. That was the kind of funding that was helping students,

individuals with special learning needs, with varying learning needs. Those supports are not there anymore.

And here we are. We're talking about choice in education. In order to provide any choice in education, first and foremost, we need a K to 12 education system which is fully funded. When we were in government, we supported choice in education. We supported choice in education by investing in schools. In those four years: 244 new or modernized schools. We invested in that infrastructure. We invested in new teachers. We opened new schools. Just in my riding of Calgary-McCall alone, from 2015 to 2019 there were six new schools that were opened, among them Nelson Mandela, Hugh A. Bennett, Peter Lougheed, Manmeet Singh Bhullar, Apostles of Jesus. Those are the schools that started in those four years. I represent a riding with a growing population, a young population, and for that reason all of these schools are almost at full capacity. When we built those schools, we provided funds there to fund staff, teachers, and roughly around \$2 billion was spent over four years in the education system.

Here we are seeing deep cuts to the Education budget, a reduction in staff, a reduction in supports at a time when we have more students in our education system, new students coming through our schools and needing more supports. When we talk about choice in education, I think that, first and foremost, it should mean that we are prioritizing children's education and that we are not making deep cuts to the education system, citing fiscal challenges. Students who are going through school now: they only have a certain window to learn, and once that's past, nothing can be done about it, as opposed to some debt that can be repaid down the road.

We had the same choice when we became government in 2015. After the first year there was a reduction of \$8 billion in nonrenewable royalty revenues. That was the hole in our budget. The choice was to cut from education, to cut from health care, to cut from the services that Albertans rely on, and we made a different choice because that's what our youth was entitled to. That's what parents wanted us to do.

8:00

Here we have a government that didn't blink for a second to give \$4.7 billion to the richest at the expense of cutting funds for kids' education by firing 25,000 education staff. That shows where their priorities lie. Through this bill, as I said . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, are there other members wishing to join debate? There will be a 29(2)(a) after the next speaker under I believe it is Standing Order 21. There will be another speaker for 15 minutes in the general debate and then 29(2)(a)s will then continue and flow from there on.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has risen to join debate.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise tonight to speak to this bill, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, this, of course, having been a bill that was promised in the United Conservative Party platform and has now been brought before the House. We have an opportunity to see a piece of the direction that this government seeks to go with the education system in the province of Alberta.

Now, as my colleague for Calgary-McCall so aptly laid out, certainly a troubling direction that we have seen from this particular government on the question of education is a defunding of the public, separate, and francophone school systems in the province of Alberta. Now, despite the frequent protestations of the minister and others in their caucus, they have cut funding for education in the

province of Alberta. Schools have less funding per student in total regardless of how they shuffle the numbers. Regardless of what claims they want to make, there is less to educate each student this year than there was last year or the year before. That is because they have chosen not to fund for education growth. That is because they have chosen to make cuts, again, as much as they may protest otherwise, to funding for students with special needs. Again, this is a government that is fond of the shell game and shuffling numbers, but we know what the realities are. We hear it from parents, we hear it from teachers, we hear it from the school boards, and we hear it from everyone except for the minister and the members of this government.

Now, this pertains directly to this bill, Mr. Speaker, because this government says that it wants to provide more choice, but indeed it is providing fewer resources for the schools we currently have to provide education to our students. So if they want to add more schools to that mix and indeed they want to find more places to direct the funding which they have already cut and limited to existing schools, we have to ask: what is the impact going to be on the quality of education for students?

Now, this government likes to talk about some sections of the U.N. charter on freedoms. They like to talk about the third point, parents [having the] prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Indeed, that is an important and fundamental right. There are two parts that come before that, Mr. Speaker.

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Now, I mention these other portions, Mr. Speaker, because I believe we have good reason to question: what is this government's view of education at all and, indeed, this particular Premier's? I am disturbed at times by some of the ideology I have heard put forward by this particular Premier about what he believes about the current education system and what that might mean for his intents when he attempts to reshape it through elements such as Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020.

I think, in particular, of the comments from the Premier, where he said:

I think it's the first generation to come through a schooling system where many of them have been hard-wired with collectivist ideas, with watching Michael Moore documentaries . . .

Though, Mr. Speaker, it appears that several conservatives are very happy with the latest Michael Moore documentary. Personally, I've never really been a fan, but to each their own.

. . . with identity politics from their primary and secondary schools to universities. That's kind of a cultural challenge for any conservative party, any party of the centre-right, and we've got to figure out how to break that nut.

It appears this Premier did not have probably, perhaps still does not have, a particularly high opinion of the education system as it exists. He believes that it existed or, at least for this current generation, that its goal was to promote – hardwire them, he says – collectivist ideas, identity politics. He says that it's a cultural challenge that a conservative party, any party of the centre-right, has to figure out how to break that nut. It's the view of the Premier

that he needs to, apparently, remake the education system to remove these collectivist ideas, identity politics. Now, indeed, we saw for many years – well, at least for a couple of years while this Premier was attempting to secure the leadership of the United Conservative Party and, indeed, after he had – him going on great diatribes about his concerns about the curriculum review that was taking place in the province of Alberta to align in many ways with the second part that I read here from the UN.

Again, this government is very fond of the third part, but the second part notes that we should be devoting education to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, promoting understanding, tolerance, and friendship amongst all nations, racial or religious groups. Now, this Premier took great exception to the work that was being done on the Alberta curriculum in that respect and indeed went well out of his way to misrepresent those very principles as they were being adapted and being included as part of the Alberta curriculum, because, again, as we see, this Premier has a very particular agenda for education, which is trying to break what he thinks are these collectivist ideas that are being inculcated, apparently, through the public school system.

So when we have a bill like Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, that indeed is at least partly the lens through which I'm going to view this legislation, this Premier has made very clear what his opinion is of our public education system. Indeed, this minister and this Premier have gone out of their way to try to pick and choose particular test questions or particular things to try to portray our schools as some sort of indoctrination centre. Now, indeed, that is not what I have heard from a vast majority of Alberta parents, and this government's own survey suggests nothing of the like.

We look at the results of the survey that this government put out, perhaps hoping to prove the necessity of these measures which they are bringing forward, but indeed this survey does not appear to do anything of the sort. A majority of parents, Mr. Speaker, were quite satisfied with the education system. Indeed, 64.2 per cent of parents were quite happy with the information available on the public school system, and 60.9 per cent were overall satisfied with the amount of choice available. In the separate school system 65.8 per cent were quite happy with the information available and 70.1 per cent with the amount of choice. In the francophone system: 63.2 per cent with the information available, 62.2 per cent with the amount of choice available. Even parents in the private system: 55 per cent were happy with the information available, 61 per cent with the amount of choice that they had. Home education: 56.9 per cent were satisfied with the information available, 65.4 per cent satisfied with the amount of choice available.

8:10

Indeed, in the five years that I've served as an MLA, Mr. Speaker, I have not heard from parents that their primary concern was that they were unable to access the kind of school they needed for their children. Indeed, as my colleague for Calgary-McCall so ably noted, the majority of concerns I have heard from parents have been around funding, and I can tell you that since this government came into power, the number of parents I've been hearing from on that has drastically increased. They are deeply concerned with the decisions and the choices that this government is making in regard to funding the education system. Indeed, in particular, parents of children with special needs are deeply concerned about how this government's choices on funding are impacting many of their choices as parents and limiting the options that they have to be able to access the supports that they need for their children. They are deeply afraid for what's going to happen to that as this government

continues on its mission of austerity when it comes to public education.

Now, to be clear, Mr. Speaker, I do not object to school choice. Indeed, I recognize the importance of having a variety of different school options available, like we currently have. Here in Edmonton-City Centre I have some excellent public schools offering a variety of different programs: Victoria school, which offers some excellent arts programs and other opportunities for students. I have St. Joseph high school in the separate system, which offers some fantastic vocational programs, some free-study style education programs, opportunities for students to get credits to work towards working as a health care aide. I have Centre High, which offers incredible opportunities for students who are looking to work on their education after they have graduated high school, and indeed has fantastic programs that allow them to get experience working in emergency services in conjunction with the Edmonton police, with EMS, and with the fire department. These programs currently exist, and there has been no problem with putting them into place.

Indeed, I have a fantastic charter school here in my constituency, Boyle Street Education Centre, which makes use of the charter model to provide more opportunity for students that struggle in the traditional system, students that may be struggling with homelessness, may be struggling with family situations, are facing other challenges and difficulties throughout their life. Mr. Speaker, while members of the government are supporting this, let's be clear: many of the changes they are making are in fact jeopardizing these very students. These are the sorts of students, for example, that would often be accessing government support because they are in care, so once they graduate, then this government, of course, would take two years off the support that would be available to them. Cuts in other social services, cuts in other programs like the CHEW project: that affects those students.

But, that said, the Boyle Street Education Centre itself is a fantastic model of a good use of the charter school system to provide more opportunity for students who need extra support in a model or in a format that they don't have the same opportunity to access within the current public or separate system. All of those choices, Mr. Speaker, exist under the current rules, exist under the current ability and the current process.

Now, the minister was speaking and she was saying that she feels that in the charter school process it could be intimidating for parents to have to approach a school division. How is it less intimidating, necessarily, Mr. Speaker, for them to have to approach a minister of the Crown, particularly when we have seen that when parents have spoken up to this particular minister of the Crown about the cuts that this government has made to PUF funding and other supports for special-needs students, they have faced the wrath of this government's paid political staff? Are only parents who agree with the government going to feel comfortable coming to the minister, then, to request their charter school? What about parents who don't agree with the characterization that this Premier has made of the education system, where he considers it to be inculcating collectivist ideas? So this government's friends may feel comfortable coming to the minister and making this request. Will all Albertans? Indeed, I am uncomfortable with how much power this government seems to want to put in its ministers' hands.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I believe the individual, the member, who caught my eye was the Member for Peace River.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to my hon. friends across the aisle for the very enlightening speeches. I think there's a lot that we can tie together between the two of them.

The concern seems to really focus around: properly fund education. That's what they'd like. So let's get a few numbers out there to talk about this to begin with. Right now, as far as I understand, from the most recent information I could get, according to the CTF, independent schools saved the government over eight years \$1.2 billion. That's no small number, and if we add home educators to that, it's \$707 million on top of that.

I believe the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall raised some very genuine and sincere concerns in his speech about funding education. He wants to make sure that the supports are there for students, especially for low income. I would agree. I can't speak for the minister, but I dare say that everyone in these ranks agrees. We want to properly fund education. So why would you prohibit, stop, or walk backwards one of the very things that can enable us to properly fund education? We're here in this Chamber with the opportunity to move forward the ability to fund education. That seems like a no-brainer as far as I can tell, Mr. Speaker.

I really am very grateful for the speech from the Member for Calgary-McCall, but I do take exception to one or two of his points, not the least of which was his characterization of the classroom improvement fund, which is a classic example of unintended consequences from government. The classroom improvement fund sucked teachers en masse out of my beautiful but remote northern communities and brought them all to the city centres of Calgary, Edmonton, and others for nothing more than a year, as we saw. For the record that money – I believe it's \$95 million – is now invested back into the education system, but it's not doing harm to my constituents. Instead, it's helping them. It's working towards a better education for them.

I also want to take up one point from the Member for Edmonton-City Centre, who brought into question the honour of our Premier in his outreach to new Canadians. It is laughable, Mr. Speaker, that the talking point on this bill is that the Premier of Alberta, a former minister of immigration, who upped immigration to Canada and new Canadians to its highest record at the time when he was serving, is somehow bigoted, somehow refutes the UN declaration of human rights in article 26(2). It is nonsensical. Nothing but the opposite could be more true. We saw him work to bring refugees from across the world – from Iraq, from Syria during crisis, even from Iran, gay Iranian refugees coming here in the underground rainbow railroad, as it was called – doing exemplary work, showing his humanity and the respect, the dignity of all human beings. I believe the member opposite ought to be ashamed of the comments he made. But I digress. There's more to be said on that.

But the point I really want to focus and close on is what the Member for Edmonton-City Centre said, and I'm paraphrasing here: "I support choice in education but just not too much choice. Just not too much. Don't let Albertans get a hold of it. Don't let parents really help their children, choose what works for them. I support choice but not choice that actually lowers the cost to taxpayers and increases educational possibilities. Not that much choice, just the comfortable choice that I've already accepted and that I wish I could walk back. The parents in my riding really like the choice they have. Just not too much, not so much choice as to cater to the needs of the special-needs students, for home educators who for whatever reason decide that my child needs more one-on-one attention with the parents. Not that much choice, Mr. Speaker. That's a bridge too far. We don't trust Albertans that much. Let's bring it back into the government. Let's, instead, say that we, these 87 members here, know better than all of our constituents what to do with their children."

8:20

Mr. Speaker, this is a province that has privatized liquor stores and government telephone communications because we believe we're not as good at running those as individuals are, as businesses are, as people who can make their own choices. But somehow we think the state should be nationalizing the family and education and the relationship between parents and children? It's inanity. It makes no sense. It's absolutely backwards.

I am afraid that the engagement that we're going to have from the members opposite throughout this debate is going to be tired, boring, rote talking points, attacks that have nothing to do with choice and parental authority, nothing to do with the idea that parents know better than we do how to educate their children. I really hope that's not the case, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has risen to join debate.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate everyone's insights that they've contributed so far in the debate on Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020. I will take an opportunity to respond to the Member for Peace River but, actually, after I've had a moment to kind of frame it in the way that I'm perceiving the issue when it comes to choice in education.

Of course, when it comes to the universal declaration of human rights and article 26, on the right to education, I'll just quote here from what I have in front of me, which is article 26(1).

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

"Equally accessible" are the words that I want to focus on right now for the time that I have allotted. You see, Mr. Speaker, when we look at how education is being privatized in other jurisdictions all around the world, what we see is an adverse effect to those populations that have more economic challenges. You only need to look south of the border, to the United States of America, where you see where they do have more choice in education. Now, I'm not saying that what the minister is proposing in this particular bill is exactly what's happening there. That's not what I'm saying. But what I'm saying is that this is a slippery slope that's just opening the door to potentially move us in the direction where we do have more private education here in the province of Alberta.

What's the adverse effect of that, Mr. Speaker? What we see are, specifically, black and Latino populations in the United States having less – less – accessibility to quality education. This is what we see. Now, here in the province of Alberta we do have equal problems, even under the current system, the way it exists right now, with specifically indigenous students within the education system. We also see that rural populations have less accessibility to education.

Now, I am only assuming that the members across the way believe that choice in education is the answer to these issues. But when we see it being implemented in other jurisdictions around the world, we see the adverse effects that I'm already talking about, where people who are economically challenged do not have the same access to the good, quality education that the universal declaration of human rights in article 26, subsection (1), actually states that every person should have.

What is under debate tonight – and I agree that we want to get past the rhetoric. We all want to get past the rhetoric, members, right? Let's get down to the analysis. Let's see what's actually

happening in other jurisdictions. You know, members here are, like, smiling at me. I can only assume that they're entertaining what I have to say, which is great. This is what we really need to start focusing on: what are the potential adverse effects of what is being proposed, and who will end up being negatively impacted by what is being proposed? This is what is the true concern, and these are the concerns that constituents of mine are actually coming with, calling my office about, talking to me about, people who are currently concerned about the state of education and how it's being underfunded by this current government.

You know, the Member for Edmonton-City Centre said it really well, that the hon. Minister of Education says that, no, we haven't cut funding to education. But that's not what's really happening in our schools. Students are having less funding than they had before per student. I know that you can move the money around. You can make it look like you've moved it around and make it look like: okay; well, we haven't underfunded it. But the truth is that, at the end of the day and specifically when it comes to the universal declaration of human rights, article 26, subsection (1), education should be equally accessible to all. I don't want to see an Alberta where particular ethnic groups or people who do not have the means cannot access good, quality education. This is the concern that we have before us.

Now, since being elected in 2015, I've had the honour and the pleasure of actually connecting with so many parents who have children with learning challenges, and I've worked so closely with them while we were in government, while the Alberta NDP were in government, getting them access to meetings with the Minister of Education, with the Minister of Advanced Education, and, of course, with the Minister of Health because there are intersections there of how, you know, current legislation and regulations actually impact children, students with learning challenges.

It's really important – it's really, really important – that, again, we're talking about: what are going to be the adverse effects of Bill 15 in terms of choice in education? And don't get me wrong. I understand that your particular perspective is that this is going to improve the situation. I get it. That's your perspective, okay? However, what I'm asking you to consider is: what are the adverse effects? What are you seeing in other jurisdictions with the move to privatize education? Essentially, that's what we're talking about here. That's what we're talking about here. That's what Albertans are talking about because that's what they see. That's what they see happening with this particular bill. What we see or what Albertans are really concerned about is the fact that this particular bill is going to bring in more American-style privatized education here to the province of Alberta. That's their analysis.

8:30

Now, you can, like, laugh in their face if you want, Member, you know, if you can laugh in the face of these Albertans who are concerned about this. But that is their true and honest, genuine, authentic concern about what is being proposed in this bill. Now, you can either listen to Albertans and what their concerns are and try to address them, address these concerns – if that's not the case, if American-style privatized education is not what you are proposing, then demonstrate that to Albertans, demonstrate that that is indeed the case, because that is the concern of parents that are contacting me through my constituency office. I can tell you that parents of children with learning challenges are even more concerned about that because they feel that they're not going to be able to have the same kind of access to the good quality education for their children under this new proposed, this potentially – under what will be the adverse effects of this bill. I want to make sure that

I continually say that. What will be the adverse effects of the implementation of this bill? That is their concern.

To the minister and to the other members within this House: I'm sure that you're being contacted, too, by parents who have children with learning challenges. At my office I often get e-mails from all across Alberta, from constituents from your ridings that will send e-mails to my office, copying me with their concerns. I can tell you that I know that there are parents out there of children with learning challenges that are concerned about this. I'm asking you: don't turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the concerns and the issues that they're bringing up. If you can demonstrate that the adverse effects that they're concerned about are not going to happen, then demonstrate it. That's all we're asking or, at least, all I'm asking for you to do. Through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Education I would ask that she speak to these parents because if they're contacting me, I am assuming that they're contacting the hon. minister.

Again, I want to go back to the fact that I helped so many parents with children with learning challenges and being able to get them to sit in the same room because so many of them have different priorities. So where you may think that you're addressing but one priority that they may have, that may not be the shared priorities of all the parents with children with learning challenges. I beg you, please, to sit down and listen to a wide cross-section of Alberta's population of parents with children with learning challenges so that you can get the holistic view, the holistic issues and concerns that they have, because one parent may have one concern over here or an issue and another parent may have a completely different issue and a concern all based on the reality and the experience that they've had.

I don't think it's too much to ask to be able to sit down with these parents and actually talk to them about their issues and concerns as it relates and address the reality that they are concerned with what's being suggested within this bill and what the adverse effects are going to be on their children, because the reality is that children with learning challenges, if you don't catch the problems that they have early enough, end up going through the education system and they end up having a very negative experience in the education system. There are so many challenges that lead to their own morale, their own spirit being negatively impacted, and they end up having other problems. You know, God forbid that these young children then turn into adults and then because of the fact that they didn't get the help, they didn't get that one teacher or that one school principal that was really able to help them through the challenges that they had while they were in the education system, then they end up having other greater social problems that then negatively impact our society as a whole.

It's important that – let me state this. I want you to convince me. Honestly, I want you to convince me that this won't have the adverse effects that these parents are concerned about because I want to be able to talk to these parents and say: look, this is what the hon. members from the other party are saying. You know, I pride myself on being a genuinely honest and just person at every moment that I can, like many of you members in here. You're all doing the same thing.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I believe the hon. member who caught my eye was the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Ms Issik: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened with interest to the previous speaker, and I must say there were some points raised that I really feel need to be addressed. One of them is around the needs of students with learning challenges and how somehow choice in education doesn't address that.

Well, I'd like to point out that there are many charter schools and many independent schools in our province whose sole goal is to specifically address that. Westmount charter school in Calgary: that school deals with students who have complex learning needs, including being gifted along with other learning needs, in combination. We have Rundle academy and Foothills Academy, who do a magnificent job with children, and they do it for children of all income groups. They actually have contributed to our entire province's inventory of best practices for dealing with learning disabilities and helping students be the best that they can possibly be. Those two institutions alone have contributed so much in Calgary that I can't even believe it.

We have Aurora here, an Edmonton charter school, that has, I think, about 30-plus per cent English as a second language students, who work in partnership with parents. That's part of the deal. When you go to Aurora, the parents have a deal with the school, and those parents participate fully in their children's education. They come from all over Edmonton to that school. Their rates of success are astronomical – astronomical – and their family household income is average, absolutely average for the city of Edmonton.

Same thing for foundations for the future charter school in Calgary: also magnificent in terms of dealing with children, teaching them a good, strong work ethic, working in partnership with their parents, and also with a student population with a high ESL rate. I love going to that school and seeing the diversity. It's amazing. These young people who just are learning together from every community in the city of Calgary: incredible. They've done such a good job that they have elementary schools, they have junior high schools, and they have a high school, and they have a waiting list.

8:40

That's why we need this bill. That's why we need to take the limits off charter schools. There are waiting lists for these kids to get into these schools. They need these schools, and they do a great job. In doing so, they take pressure off our public system. I'll tell you, I believe in school choice, but I chose public school for my own children. I moved into a neighbourhood specifically in Calgary so that my children could go to a specific high school because I love that high school so much. But I'll tell you what. If we didn't have choice in education, our public school system would be overrun.

I've got to tell you, the independent schools and the charter schools do a magnificent job of adding to the inventory of best practices that's so important for all of our teachers and students across this province. We have charter schools that have filled gaps in rural Alberta. We have an opportunity here to do amazing things for children, especially in rural Alberta. Especially in rural Alberta. Charter schools are so capable of adding so much richness to our rural school system and by doing so strengthening the entire rural school system. We cannot look at school choice as either/or; this is an "and" conversation. It's meaningful, and parents and children of Alberta deserve to have school choice.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, with 14 seconds left on 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, I see that the hon. Member for Calgary-Klein has got my attention.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yeah. I'm blown away a little bit tonight just hearing the conversation. I think I'm excited to an extent as well just to hear the general support for choice in school from the members opposite. I'm excited to hear that. I'm hoping . . .

Ms Pancholi: You guys didn't introduce choice. Like, it's been around forever.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: . . . that they're going to support this bill in understanding and hearing them talking about the importance of choice. I'm already hearing that we don't own school choice, so I'm glad you support it as well. Glad they support it. We know that choice in school is not new. It's been around a long time. We know other jurisdictions like B.C. and Quebec actually lead our country in regard to providing choice.

I think we've heard lots of examples today about the importance of choice and the value that it adds. I also think it's important to note that choice in school does not detract from the importance of public education. It actually can enhance it, as we've heard, and I think we've seen a great example of that here in Alberta over many, many decades of providing choice in school.

I also wanted to note, too – and I wasn't going to mention this, but I think it's worth noting as it's been brought up a few times – that I myself was diagnosed with a learning disability, and actually half of my brothers were diagnosed with learning disabilities. We were provided opportunities and choices – and I think we've heard one already with the Foothills Academy – that made a great impact in our lives.

I wanted to start talking about growing up in a house with five brothers. I can imagine, as a lot of people here who have siblings would know, that we were very different from one another. For anybody that's met the minister of environment, I think you can attest to the fact that he and I are very different, similar but very different, in so many ways. And I think contrary to what the minister might say as well, our parents loved us all equally – at least they would never admit publicly that they had a favourite – and as a result they raised us all equally, but they raised us differently. They adapted to the needs of us individually as well as communally, and this was especially apparent in regard to our schooling, our education.

My parents picked schools based on my brothers' and my needs. Because of this, I feel the education I received was a well-rounded one. I had the pleasure of attending public schools for many years, but I also attended schools where I attended the Catholic school system – I actually graduated out of the Catholic school system from high school – and I was also enrolled for a period of time with independent schools and private schools in Calgary.

My own brothers who struggled with severe learning disabilities, as I mentioned, actually credit their ability to attend Foothills Academy with saving their lives. We were not rich, and I don't think that was a prerequisite to be able to attend that school – we were actually the children of a street pastor, so I can assure you we didn't have a lot of money – but my parents were able to secure a place for them in that school. One of those brothers went on to graduate with honours and is now, in fact, a teacher at CBE. He graduated all of his diplomas in the high 90s and honours out of the University of Calgary. My parents had the freedom to choose a path through school that played to my strengths and played to the strengths of my brothers, schools that built on our individual strengths rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

I've held to that approach with my own children. As a father of four I love all of my children equally, but I cherish them all in turn for who they are as themselves. I've seen as they've grown – all too quickly, I might add – that they've taken to different subjects in different ways and to different situations with their own unique personalities. As a parent it is my job to raise my kids, to teach them, but to also guide them to the places and the people who can teach what I cannot. That is why I'm in firm support of parents'

choice in this bill. I'm equally – and I know this government is as well – for a strong public system as one choice amongst others.

The members opposite have stood in this Chamber – we've heard it today and in the echo chambers of social media – and have accused this government of empowering parental choice at the expense of the public system. That, Mr. Speaker, is not at all what this bill will accomplish. This bill will cement for parents the right to choose where to send their children, and that right has long been a part of Alberta's history, an important part of our history. Francophone schools are a perfect example of Albertans' right to choose alternative education choices from the public system, and for the eternity of Alberta's history, the francophone schools have flourished alongside of the public option, allowing for continued use of one of Canada's official languages to be learned en masse here in Alberta.

This equally applies to charter schools, independent schools, especially who have educational programs that have been the experts in the field, and without them the option would mean that our public system would be in the position of reinventing a much less efficient, much more expensive wheel.

A couple of examples. We've heard one today, Boyle Street Education. Their mission is to inspire and support education success and social development of youth who have previously experienced interruption in their former learning, as we heard today, often folks, young people that are experiencing homelessness. This is obviously something that's close and important in my heart.

Calgary Arts Academy: their mission is to provide instruction that is delivered through arts immersion. Art forms serve as the foundation of learning as curriculum concepts are taught and learned. And I know we've heard a lot about the importance of the arts in this Chamber.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School: their mission is to holistically nurture, guide, and challenge each child's spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional self through traditional indigenous teachings.

I know I've connected with the youth urban society in my own constituency, talking about how we can better help indigenous youth in our communities connect in the classroom as we know often they fall through the cracks. It's important that we make sure that we have supports and programs in our system that help to connect with those kids and help them to grow and know who they are and connect them with their culture and be all that they can be.

On the independent school front schools like the Janus Academy, which is recognized as a leader in specialized education and the facilitation of lifelong community integrations with persons with autism, and – we've heard today already – the Foothills Academy, whose mission is to facilitate learning in person, primarily youth and children identified as having learning disabilities, by providing quality education programs and a supportive environment for families and staff.

Here I must reassure my colleagues on both sides of this Chamber because we've heard concern. The public system is not going away, neither is it withering on the vine. It is instead, and should be, a strong choice, a choice amongst many but one that a parent can in good conscience say: this is what's best for my child right now where they are in their life. Public schools who gain money and students by default are subject to the inertia and the inefficiency of being in the monopoly position. A strong public system is amongst the various options for parental choice and should attract families based on their merits and not because they have no say in the matter.

I believe in parental choice but not unfettered parental choice. Every one of the education choices available must still meet the requirements of the Alberta curriculum so that we do not have

students who fall through the cracks. I am confident that the Department of Education and the minister can walk that line in respecting parental choice while still ensuring that Alberta students meet the standards laid down and that our Albertan future is not stifled from the lack of options, nor smothered under the wave of ill-defined and undisciplined school choices.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

8:50

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available should anybody be looking to join for five minutes of questions or comments.

Seeing none, are there any hon. members looking to join debate on the bill proper? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has risen.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's always a pleasure to rise in this place and speak to a bill, even when the bill is not so pleasurable, such as this one. I rise today to speak to Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, and let me just say that this is a fundamentally flawed bill.

We've heard from a number of members from both sides of the House today, and it seems that members of the government caucus and members of the government backbench here simply don't even understand how this bill affects education. Perhaps they don't even understand how the education system here in this province fundamentally works, or they are intentionally dismantling it. It's one or the other, Mr. Speaker. They either know what they're doing or they don't.

But we can move forward and talk about some of the finer points of this bill, because what we've seen is that this bill essentially does nothing to actually protect our publicly funded education system. It does nothing to ensure that families have affordable education. It does nothing to ensure that families have diversity in their education. It does nothing to ensure any of these things.

In fact, instead what this does is it brings in an American-style private education system here in Alberta, and it's being used to justify devastating cuts across the entire sector. That's what this bill does, Mr. Speaker. It's pretty clear when you look at the budget in black and white. You can see that members across the way have spoken about how important it is to have things like funding for students with special needs, students with developmental disabilities, and so on and so on. Then why do they support a minister and a budget and a bill which cut those exact supports all across this province? Every single student who receives special-needs supports received less this year under this minister, under this government – every single student – particularly those that were in need of early intervention. Those in kindergarten, for example, lost their PUF funding. That was something that this minister brought in and is now trying to cover with this bill.

When they say that this bill brings in more choice, more protections for these students, what they're actually saying is that they are taking out of the pockets of every single Alberta family. They are taking that funding away from every single Alberta family that needs it, and instead they are going to put it into a risky privatization manoeuvre out of an ideological agenda. Mr. Speaker, it is very clear what is happening here. It is very clear that these members either do not understand that that is what they are doing, that is what their government intends to do, that is what this minister intends to do, that is what is in this bill in black and white. It is very clear that that is the case. Instead, these members are either ignorant or they simply don't care.

Mr. Schow: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: A point of order has been called. I believe the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika would like to debate that.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Schow: Yeah. I'm rising on a point of order, 23(j). Calling members of this side of the House ignorant, suggesting that we haven't read the bill or calling into question the integrity of the members: I mean this is all language that's going to create disorder in this Chamber. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has suggested that we should have a robust debate tonight and really wants to be convinced. I've got to tell you that I'm not being convinced by that kind of language that we're going to get anywhere near robust or civil debate.

I ask you, through you to that member, to retract that comment and maybe elevate his level of debate.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has risen to respond.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member was looking to make some very important points about this bill, and was making an argument in this case. I believe this is a point of debate, a matter of debate about what motivated this government in bringing things forward, and so this is not a point of order.

The Acting Speaker: At this stage I believe that the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has crossed a line with regard to insulting language. I would ask that he retract the comment regarding ignorance and then please continue while taking into account, noting that the goal of this honourable House is to ensure effective debate through all sides. As such, if somebody enters into their debate with the idea of making comments with the expectation that perhaps that would create disorder, as the comments so obviously have, then that would be something that in future I may have to stand and call to order quicker than waiting for an hon. member to call a point of order.

Please, if the hon. member would retract and then please continue.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, I misspoke when I said that they were ignorant. Indeed, what I should have been saying is that they may be unaware of what is in the bill and that we can assist them in trying to educate how this bill will affect Albertans.

Debate Continued

Mr. Dang: Obviously, I'm trying to make the point here that there are going to be adverse effects to this bill. There are going to be adverse effects that are going to affect every single family with a student in the education system. They're going to affect every single family that has a student that needs additional funding, that needs additional supports.

Indeed, it appears that the members opposite need to understand and have this more robust debate. They need to be willing to engage in these types of points, Mr. Speaker, because we're talking about how the funding for education is essential, and we're talking about how this bill does nothing to support that funding. What we're talking about here is: how does this bill actually impact these families? That's the type of conversation we're trying to have. That's what we're trying to engage in, and if the members opposite don't want to engage in that matter, that's okay.

What we've seen instead is that over and over again supports for special-needs students, supports for students with developmental disabilities have had cuts. We've seen that these programs have received less and less funding, particularly in this budget. We saw thousands of parents send letters, e-mails, phone correspondence. Even some of them came to this very Legislature, Mr. Speaker, and they had those discussions, and they spoke out vocally about how this was going to impact their lives, how this was going to impact their children, how this was going to impact their families.

And what we saw from this government was shameful. What we saw was that they did not listen. What we saw was that they ignored those. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, in my office and in many of my colleagues' offices we received many e-mails and phone calls saying that they were not even getting a response from their UCP MLAs, that they couldn't even get a courtesy reply from their UCP MLAs regarding these issues, about why things like their PUF funding had been cut, about things like why they no longer had EAs in their classrooms, about things like why they simply didn't have the supports that they did six months ago, right?

Mr. Speaker, this bill does nothing to address any of that. When the government gets up and government members get up and they speak about how choice in education will solve all these things and they're going to bring in these types of robust programs that will solve all these things, it simply isn't true, right? When we look at the programs that are being brought in, when we look at the ways that the funding is being allocated, when we look at what this bill actually brings in, it brings in the ability for some schools to refuse entry to any student. That's what this bill brings in, right? Students that have particularly high needs, particularly high costs associated with those: this bill allows those students to be refused access to education, and that's the type of thing that we're talking about.

So we need to talk about how it simply isn't true, the premise that this government is moving forward with. It simply isn't true. We have this understanding that every single student has the right to an education that's free and has the right and is obligated to have this education and be able to support themselves and then have this knowledge brought to them because we know that every single Albertan deserves to be able to make a life for themselves, Mr. Speaker.

I don't think it's true when this government talks about this huge consultation they've done, right? Sure, there are 55,000 completed responses in this online survey, this self-selected online survey, Mr. Speaker. You know, it's become pretty clear that they don't understand. Even when the minister says the words "self-selected" herself, she doesn't understand what that actually means from a statistical standpoint. I would suggest that statistics will say that that means it's a nonrandom sample. It means that those responses cannot be applied generally across the population. It would mean that those responses cannot be used to generally apply policy across the population.

Indeed, we actually looked at the responses themselves, and we looked at the breakdowns that the government have provided, and they're not even that compelling, right? Like, it doesn't make any sense because they use this noncompelling argument with a statistically invalid survey method. It's shocking when we see this government say, "We've done this robust consultation," and then we get e-mails in our offices, we get phone calls in our offices from people who say: well, we don't even get a response from our UCP MLA; we don't even get a phone call back from our UCP MLA. They won't even listen to them, right?

9:00

That's the type of thing that we're hearing every single day, Mr. Speaker. That's the type of thing we heard when they cut PUF. That's the type of thing we heard when EAs were fired. That's the type of thing we heard when thousands of staff were fired by this minister just weeks ago. This bill, the bill that protects choice in education: it doesn't protect any of those people. It doesn't protect any of the families that had their EAs laid off weeks ago. It doesn't protect any of the families that had their funding cut weeks ago, that had their PUF programming cut weeks ago. It doesn't support any of those families. Every single Albertan that needs those supports, that had been laid off and had those supports cut just a few days ago by this minister, receives none of it. This bill protects none of them.

This bill actually makes it worse for them because it reallocates money away from their school system. It reallocates money away from their programming. It actually makes it harder for the vast majority of Albertan students to receive the programming they need. It actually makes it harder for the vast majority of Albertan students to receive smaller class sizes, to receive individual supports if they need those supports, to receive any type of programming that would be personalized or would actually provide them with a better opportunity to succeed in the school system, right?

That's what this bill actually does. It actually does the opposite of all the stated goals that the minister has brought forward. It's pretty clear. You can look at the things, the invalid survey that the minister brings up, and you can see that the vast majority of Albertans are actually satisfied with the way the independent and separate school systems and the public school systems are currently set up, right? That's what the survey actually says. Then the minister goes on and says: look, they're all satisfied, so we should shake it up and take funding away from the majority of people who are already satisfied; that's going to be the best way to do it. That's what this minister is actually suggesting when she waves around this statistically invalid survey.

That's what she's using. She's using a noncompelling argument to further herself without an actual statistical argument. It's shocking because this minister either doesn't know how to read the survey in front of her, the talking points in front of her that say self-selected and actually tell her that they're not valid surveys – it actually says so in her speaking notes, Mr. Speaker. It's shocking. This bill, Bill 15, clearly is not going to be able to do any of those stated goals, right? It's hilarious. It would be hilarious if thousands of people weren't going to suffer for it, if thousands of families weren't going to receive less funding, if thousands of families weren't going to have fewer supports in their classrooms, have fewer EAs, have fewer supports, larger class sizes, all these things happening. It would be hilarious if those families weren't the ones that had to suffer for it, people that can't get a response from a UCP MLA, people that are across this entire province. Indeed, we see that in the majority of cases they live in UCP ridings. That's the case. The majority of people who are complaining about this live in UCP ridings. So it's shocking.

Mr. Speaker, I think we had a petition here a few weeks ago against basically this very bill, right? It was a petition that was tabled here, and I believe there were thousands of responses to it saying that the types of funding that are important to Albertans, the types of funding that are important to Albertans in terms of specific supports, making sure that we have specific persons in classrooms, specific educational assistants in classrooms, ensuring that we have these specific things in our publicly funded education systems, those specific types of supports – there were thousands of people

who were opposed to the changes that are being brought forward in this bill.

The government talks about how they've done this comprehensive consultation. The government talks about how they've done this big consultation, that they've talked to everybody. Then why, Mr. Speaker, do so many parents, so many teachers, and indeed so many students come and complain and say, "This isn't going to work; this is going to make it worse"? Why is that the case? I would challenge the minister to perhaps get up and say specifically how many teachers have said that they're onboard with this, right? How many teachers have said they're onboard compared to those who are not? That's a really important question. How many parents have said that they're onboard with this versus the ones that aren't? Those numbers: the minister, I'm sure, has them through the action tracking system, ARTS. I'm sure that the minister knows exactly how many e-mails she gets that say thumbs-up Bill 15 and thumbs-down Bill 15.

If the minister would just table the numbers – we don't need the actual correspondence – and say how many people love your bill and how many people don't, that would tell us a lot. That would tell this House a lot. It would tell this House whether people actually support this government, because it appears that they don't. When we hear from our constituents, when we hear from your constituents, indeed, the government members' constituents, we overwhelmingly hear that it's negative, right? People write us and say...

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt; however, I just want to ensure, a reminder to all members of the House, when you are making your points throughout your debate, that your comments are made through the chair.

If the hon. Member for Edmonton-South could please continue.

Mr. Dang: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Of course, to you and through you at all times.

Very clearly, we can see that Albertans did not expect this when they voted for the Conservatives, right? Very clearly, Albertans did not expect to receive such a shocking piece of legislation that completely dismantles the ability to have a strong education system in our province, to have such devastating cuts brought through the entire education system, to have such a devastating attack on publicly funded education.

[The Speaker in the chair]

When we talk about publicly funded education, of course, we include our separate schools, our public schools, and our independent schools as well, right? They're all publicly funded, and indeed many of the schools are funded at 75 per cent of our fully public and independent institutions. But what we see instead is this government deciding that there are going to be winners and losers, and indeed the vast majority of Alberta's families are going to be losers, right? That's the type of decision that was made. That's the type of decision that they made when they decided to bring in this legislation and attack Alberta families and defund the vast majority of Alberta families and decrease the supports for the vast majority of Alberta families.

That's why just a few weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, on the heels of laying off thousands of education workers across every corner of this province, in every single constituency somebody was laid off in the education system, and somebody is no longer receiving the supports they needed to ensure that their child could get through school, right? Those families across the entire province will no longer see support, and this minister says that this bill will suddenly, magically change that. What would have changed that is if the

government had decided to properly fund education. What would have changed that is if the government did not try to intentionally dismantle the education system and instead decided to say: well, we should put funding where those families are, and we should have that funding for all those students.

Mr. Speaker, in this very survey that the minister likes to tout so loudly, the majority of families were already satisfied, right? Like, that is the shocking part, that the minister decided that we are going to change this huge choice thing. We're going to bring in this huge, massive change that doesn't actually accomplish any of the stated goals, that doesn't actually achieve anything the minister wants to achieve. The minister, I think, needs to go back for some more briefings on this because, pretty clearly, when you look at the bill, when you look at what the bill intends to do, when you look at what the bill manages to do, what it does is that it brings in an American-style education system. It brings in an American-style education system, where the outcomes are worse, where students learn less, where students pay more, families pay more, and we get less out of it. That's the outcome that's going to come from this bill. I mean, the minister should have a department that should have told her that.

We can look at this, and we can see the devastating cuts to the public system, the devastating attack across this public system. We can look at the correspondence. We can look at how families have said again and again that this is not the right solution. We can look at how families have said again and again that this will actually make matters harder for them after already being cut, after already losing things like PUF, after already losing things like EAs and other supports. This is just going to make it worse.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage members of the government to get up and speak to this.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Peace River has risen.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, I feel like I won the lottery. Sometimes I'm concerned, and I wonder whether or not the Member for Edmonton-South and the Member for Edmonton-City Centre are in a competition for the most and the least words spoken per minute in the House. It is difficult for me to keep track from start to finish of his speech. I keep on thinking, as I want to rise to questions and comments, what I will question or comment on.

I think the highlight, the high point, for me, is his concern of consultation surrounding this government and education and the fears that parents or educational groups might have in speaking to the government. I remind the members opposite that they were part of a government, that member included in that caucus, which sued individuals in this province, forced them to shut down for a time because of their choice in education. Who is not trustworthy when it comes to the choice in education in this province, Mr. Speaker? It's evident it's the members opposite.

It is sad to see them speaking not only so quickly but, I think, with false statements, I'll say, Mr. Speaker, surrounding choice in education and the funding of public education as we see right now. I think that if we look at consultation throughout, this minister has done an exemplary job of listening to the needs of parents, particularly in my constituency but across the province, including the member opposite's constituency of Edmonton-South, and I know there are many parents who are happy to say: I want to choose to educate my kids according to the values of my beliefs, my ethnic culture, my particular socioeconomic situation, maybe the learning disabilities that that child has. It could be home education, independent schools, or other options that allow parents in his riding along with the rest of Alberta parents to be offered the same thing.

9:10

Whether we're talking about Bill 6 in the last government, suing home educators, or we're talking about the Bighorn, as my good friend from the great riding of Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre would say, there was zero consultation. There was no listening. The members opposite are concerned about us in government and on these benches listening? The only time the opposition NDP listened is when they were in government, constitutionally, after a vote they had to leave. That was the first time they listened, Mr. Speaker. Short of that, it was nothing but "my ideological way or the highway." And there are very many members of the home-schooling and home-educating community that felt the sharp end of that stick. It's a tragedy to see them trying to distort this now into some sort of question of whether or not we are listening to parents, whether we're listening to the needs of children. There's no doubt that we are.

I think it is absolutely important that we listen to the speeches from the members for Calgary-Glenmore and Calgary-Klein: beautiful, earnest, heartfelt sentiments, in the comments and questions of those members and the speech that the member made, about the importance of choice in education in their ridings and in their particular lives.

I'm concerned that we're going to continue to see the same tired talking points from the opposition, where they say: "We agree with choice in education, Mr. Speaker. We agree. Just don't do too much of it. We don't want to trust Albertans too much. It's a real concern if we really let them get a hold of deciding what goes on in the education of their family, of their children, let them decide what's going on in their day-to-day lives. We have to make sure the government is in there setting things right for those parents, whether or not it's helpful." That's my concern, Mr. Speaker.

With that, I'll leave my comments there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to address some of the comments made by the Member for Peace River. You know, for his own education, because perhaps the news articles didn't make it out to Ontario when he was living there at the time that this occurred, we sued the Home Education Association because of corruption. It was found that the administrators of that home-schooling education system were taking pay for themselves that would make members of the Premier's office blush. That is not the way that the home-schooling education dollars were intended to be used.

Mr. Williams: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: A point of order has been called. The hon. Member for Peace River.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on a point of order under 23(h), "makes allegations against another Member." I have never lived in Ontario, at no point, and I want the House record to reflect that, though it's a beautiful province. I'd ask the member opposite to please withdraw those false statements.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: I don't know what the Member for Peace River has against people from Ontario. Anyway, the point I was trying to make, Mr. Speaker . . .

The Speaker: Sorry. I'm not sure if you're adding comment to the point of order which had been called. Whether or not it's a point of order has yet to be determined. If you'd like to provide comment, great. If not, I'm more than happy to rule on the point of order. Whatever your preference is.

The hon. deputy Opposition House leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising on this point of order, makes allegations against another member. Mistaking where someone may have lived would not be an allegation unless there's an implied negative connotation to living in that place, which I do not think that there was. I do not think there is a point of order here.

The Speaker: The Speaker is prepared to rule. I appreciate your willingness to have a submission to this very lofty point of order before the Assembly, but I think that I'll agree with the deputy Official Opposition House Leader that this is not a point of order. We can continue with 29(2)(a). I consider this matter dealt with.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your wise ruling.

I just wanted to continue with the point that I was trying to make, that the Home Education Association that the Member for Peace River was referring to, of course, was brought under investigation by the Education department in this province for the mishandling of funds. That was the issue. I know that members in the party opposite like to portray that as an attack on home education, but it was not. It was an investigation into making sure that public education dollars were being properly spent. In fact, when that investigation was completed, it was found that that money was not being used properly, and that's why we took action.

The Speaker: Unfortunately, the time allotted for 29(2)(a) has expired.

We are back on second reading of Bill 15. I see the hon. Government House Leader is on his feet to join the debate.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to rise on this important piece of legislation. I also want to, through you, Mr. Speaker, to the hon. the Education minister, thank her for the opportunity to debate this piece of legislation in this House tonight. This probably actually does not come as a surprise to you, but I do hope that all members of the House will support this important legislation.

I was listening with interest earlier this evening to the hon. Member for Edmonton-South – hopefully, I got that right, Mr. Speaker – referring to the fact that all of my constituents and all of his constituents and all Albertans don't want this legislation, that somehow this is some idea that the Education minister just brought to this House on her own that was offside with Albertans.

Nothing could be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker, as you would well know because you participated in the last campaign in this province. This was one of the most popular platform commitments that the United Conservative Party ran on. In fact, the only thing at the now Premier's town halls or rallies across the province that would get louder applause than this were our calls to fire Justin Trudeau as the Prime Minister of this country and our commitment to get rid of the NDP as the government of this province. By far this would come about third. Maybe getting rid of the NDP's carbon tax was probably a close tie when you were there, but it was immensely popular and very much something that Albertans wanted.

It was also something that was spelled out in the platform, in very clear language in the platform, something that we weren't ashamed of, Mr. Speaker, that in fact we're very, very proud of. We're happy to finally see this legislation here and another promise made and, I hope soon, a promise kept in front of this Chamber.

If the hon. member would like to come, any time that he would like to come, to Caroline, Eckville, Rocky Mountain House, Nordegg, Sundre, Bentley, Rimbey, Bluffton – I'm just naming a few – Winfield, Buck Lake, any of those towns inside my constituency, he's more than welcome to. I'm very happy to hold town halls, as the hon. the Justice minister knows. He's been to town halls with me in Rocky Mountain House. They're kind of my specialty. We turn them out, don't we?

Mr. Schweitzer: We'll get him a bus.

Mr. Jason Nixon: We'll be quite happy to get you a bus if you could come talk to them about your position on school choice and parent choice and check to see if we've misjudged where the people of Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre are, Mr. Speaker. I don't think that we have. I don't think that we have in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. But, you know, that's for each of us to go back and talk about with our constituents.

But what is important is that this was consulted on, unlike what the member has said, and it was voted on by the people of Alberta, who voted for this government with the largest vote total in the history of this province. Clearly, it was something that they supported, and clearly it's something that the minister has a responsibility to bring to this House and to honour, that commitment.

I have some concerns, though, with the hon. member's comments when it comes to – I may have the words slightly off, Mr. Speaker, but the gist of it was: that choice thing. That choice thing. That choice thing. Parental rights are not a choice thing. They are parental rights. They are something that this party will stand up for. School choice is something that Alberta's government will stand up for. Alberta parents can rest assured that Alberta now has a government that will stand with them and support their rights to make choices for their children, not for the NDP opposition to make choices for those children.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that it certainly shows that that hon. member has to appear to agree with some comments that we have seen from the party leadership of his party in the last few days. This is important to this bill because this is directly related to the opposition's thoughts when it comes to this legislation. Now, this has been well established in this House, an undebatable fact, that the unions have automatic spots on the NDP's board. Now, some of my new colleagues that have only been here with us for a year may not have seen some of the debates that took place through many of the electoral reform bills inside this Assembly, where we went over this in great detail, so for them – they may not know that. The other thing they may not know is that the NDP federal party and the NDP provincial party are exactly the same organization. They are the same organization legally. They are the same organization from their structure. They have to be a member of both to be a member of one, and they are completely connected.

9:20

Now, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of attending an NDP convention. Judging by your reaction, probably not. I have had to be an observer at the NDP convention. I have to say that they treated me very, very well. I think that that would have been two conventions ago. They had me and our long-time issues manager, Matt Wolf, and my press secretary, now press

secretary to the Premier, Christine Myatt. They treated us a little differently at NDP conventions than at ours. They put us in the middle, with a rope around all of us in the middle of the room, and we had to sit there. Mr. Speaker, you may not have noticed, but I stand out in a crowd. You know, I was in the middle of the NDP convention floor. Matt Wolf certainly stands out in a crowd; Christine Myatt, not so much. We stood through the convention or sat through the convention.

What I was shocked by was how much influence the unions actually had at that convention. That was something that was new to me. I had never been invited to an NDP convention, believe it or not, previously.

The Speaker: I'm hoping that the hon. Government House Leader is going to make this very political, perhaps, discussion about party matters relevant to the debate that is before us.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yes, Mr. Speaker. What's relevant to the debate in regard to that – I get it, Mr. Speaker. You wouldn't want to come to an NDP convention, so I was trying to illustrate it for you in great detail. But maybe one day you'll have the privilege.

I want to recognize Gil McGowan, the president of a labour group which has two seats on the NDP Provincial Council. This is directly related to what the hon. member has just said about this legislation. The leadership of his party said this. He characterized this legislation as "[paving] the way for nutbar religious charter schools & home-schooling" and "They're trying to create an army of brainwashed right-wing warriors." Now, I won't talk about Gil's comments any more than to quote that and to say that I condemn that categorically, and I sure hope that everybody in this Legislature does, including the NDP, though we still haven't seen them do it. When you see comments like that while debating this important piece of legislation that Albertans want before this House, comments like "that choice thing," you have to wonder how many of these members actually agree with their leadership of their party.

Mr. Speaker, I know for a fact that you were a home-schooled child. I've known you for years. You seem to be a great guy. I tried to home-school a kid once when I ran mountaineer lodge all those years ago. Man, that was way too much work for me. That was over one year.

The reality is that parents end up in spots where they have to make decisions. You chose to home-school your kids, Mr. Speaker, when you first came to this place. Famously, we used to enjoy it so much, sitting in the opposition benches when you were the Opposition House Leader and I was the whip, and we watched your little guys counting votes in the middle of the night or saying comments about legislation. They got to spend their school years in those years in a very unique environment. That worked for you and your family. That was a parent choice, and that is what this government is trying to protect.

We don't think, Mr. Speaker, that parents that want to send their kids to schools that are religious based, based on their religious beliefs, are nutbars, and I surely hope the opposition doesn't think that, even though the leadership of their party thinks that. We don't think that parents who have to home-school kids because they live in remote areas or they've chosen to take on different careers where there are unique circumstances like yours, where that may work better for your family, are nutbars, and we certainly hope that the opposition doesn't think that way.

The reality, though, Mr. Speaker, is that when you hear the opposition speak on this legislation – in all the years that I've been in this Chamber, any time that anything comes up with school choice or parental choice, they always speak about it with significantly negative language, like there's some great conspiracy

to parents wanting to make decisions for their children. That is something that the United Conservative Party and the Alberta government reject, and I can assure you that the vast majority of Albertans agree with us. This is one of the most popular pieces of legislation that I've seen hit the floor.

Never mind the campaign: in the last couple of weeks, calls from all over home. I was back home in Eckville, stopping at the GTI, right in the middle of my constituency. That's where we get gas. I know you know it well, Mr. Speaker. It's right in the middle. Headed out to highway 11 on my way down towards Sundre, I was picking up gas, and two mothers came up there and said: you go tell that Education minister that we thank her for bringing this legislation. That was a promise. This government will always keep its promises, and I want to assure Albertans, through you, Mr. Speaker, that this government will never act the way the opposition acts when it comes to school choice, and they can rest assured that they now have an Alberta government that will stand with parents each and every day.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Klein has risen to provide a brief question or comment.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to highlight, in hearing the member's speech, the importance of choice in school and a little bit about the conflict we've been hearing from members opposite in regard to their apparent support for choice in school but now bringing up the fact that choice in school is somehow going to completely destroy the public education system. I find that a little bit troubling because of their inability to basically pick a side on this one: either you support choice in school, or it's the devastation and destruction of the public education system. It's a little bit contradictory, and I'm quite concerned about that. I'm wondering what the member's thoughts are on that apparent contradiction that we're seeing here, on reflection, on this bill.

I was also thinking a little bit about some of the comments that we've heard tonight, and I appreciated the minister's discussion about members in his constituency and what we heard at the doors. I can assure you that at the doors in Calgary-Klein this was a big issue. I heard about it repetitively at the doors, actually, from people who might, you know, generally vote more to the left or NDP or Liberal but very concerned about their rights as parents and choice in school. That was definitely a major issue.

I mean, outside of when we were talking about jobs and the economy and pipelines and the previous government's absolutely terrible fiscal record and their destruction of our economy, they were talking about issues like choice in education. I appreciated the minister's reference to what he was hearing at the doors, and I want to echo that those were the same sentiments and concerns that I was hearing at the doors in Calgary-Klein. There was a relief amongst parents that this government and our platform were going to stand up and defend their parental rights for choice.

I also wanted to mention, too, the vast amount of choice – that's important – that currently exists in Calgary-Klein, from faith schools to schools for folks with autism to Catholic schools and public schools and just a large number of schools within my constituency that my constituents and their kids would attend.

Lastly, I was curious if the member could comment a bit. I was talking earlier, obviously, about my experience growing up and how that was different than his experience as we were different, and our parents treated us equally. I'm curious if the member can talk a little bit about the importance of choice in schools as he grew up. If he could talk a little bit about that for us today.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, that was a lot to unpack. I do appreciate all the questions. First, on the contradiction issue, I do agree that it's quite shocking, the contradiction the NDP always shows when it comes to this issue. Anything to do with home-schooling or school choice or parental choice: they can't pick a side on this issue. They try to walk the line as they try to appease I don't know who. They would know better than me. I don't really, despite going to NDP conventions, know a lot about NDP policy.

But the reality is that it's clear that they always try to walk a line. The reality is that we know that most of these members and many of the members of the NDP have spoken against home-schooling before. They've spoken against school choice before, including having protests and participating in protests on the very steps of the Legislature. The reality is that they recognize that parental choice is extremely popular with parents in the province, but they just fundamentally can't accept that some parents may want to send their kids to religious schools or choose to home-school them. I think that's very disappointing.

The reality, as the member said – and I said it in my comments – is that this was an extremely popular campaign platform commitment. You know, the hon. Minister of Education was a friend of mine long before she was the minister in this place, Mr. Speaker. In fact, she was one of my school trustees when I was the MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, before she came to this place. She always did great work for our students. It was always a pleasure to work with her in that capacity. She's an extremely honourable person dedicated to parental choice and school choice, who stood up for the separate school board system in her role as a trustee there for many years. It was always a pleasure to work with her. She's very honourable, again, coming with a commitment like this to this House that she's made to the people of Alberta. Congratulations, Mr. Speaker, through you to her, on that.

As for if we grew up differently, Mr. Speaker, there's no doubt about it. My little brother, the MLA for Calgary-Klein, and I are different individuals, but we did share a room for 16 years. We did have different needs when we were growing up. I assume our mom and dad would probably know a little bit better about that. They seemed to always treat all of us equally, but things were different. That's his point: parents need to make choices for kids.

9:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, this concludes 29(2)(a).

We are back on the bill, second reading of Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020. The hon. the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise to speak about Bill 15, that's before us in the Legislature. First of all, I think it's important to highlight for everybody's education the educational opportunities that are available for folks in the Edmonton-Gold Bar constituency. We have a number of public. We have a number of Catholic schools. We have a number of francophone schools. We have a charter school, the Suzuki Charter School, which does an excellent job of educating its students in music in addition to the core subjects. We also have a number of independent schools. We've got the Headway School, which focuses on educating students from the Sikh and Punjabi community in Edmonton. We also have an Islamic academy that has done a lot of work to take in Syrian refugees and assist them in learning the language and learning how to adjust to life in their new home here in Canada. We also have the Waldorf Independent School. Of course, you know, Waldorf is a popular educational methodology, and I'm pleased that that's an educational opportunity that exists for the students in my riding.

I think it's also important to highlight the level of choice that is available to students in the public system because what we've heard from a number of members opposite is the implication that the public choice, the public system only offers one kind of education, and that we need to allow charter and independent schools because otherwise these choices in education wouldn't exist. I think that nothing could be further from the truth. If you look at the offerings that are available just from Edmonton public alone in Edmonton-Gold Bar, we have French immersion opportunities available from kindergarten all the way to grade 9. We have German language education at the elementary school in Forest Heights. We have Mandarin language education for the middle-school ages at Ottewell school. We have a sports program available for students at Donnan. We have a sports and athletic program also available for students in high school and junior high at Vimy academy, and that's just off the top of my head.

I know that Avonmore school used to offer the Nellie McClung program. Unfortunately, that program is no longer offered at Avonmore school, but that was a choice that was available for students who were recently there.

So I think it's important to remind everybody who is listening to this debate that the level of choice that's available in the public education system is vast. It is sometimes disheartening to me to see the fact that some programs like the Islamic Academy and the Punjabi school have been shut out of the public system. I would certainly encourage anybody from the public school board who is listening to this debate to work with the schools in those neighbourhoods to see if there is a way that they could be offered a public school system because it's important that if the choice that the members opposite are advocating is to be meaningful, it needs to be meaningful in that the quality of the education has to be of similar standards. Certainly, if we brought everybody up to public school funding levels and public school staffing levels, education quality would increase commensurately.

I think it's also important to highlight how good Alberta's school system is because I know that the members opposite have tried to make a lot of hay over lighting what little hair they have left on their heads on fire about the problems that supposedly exist in the education system here in Alberta. I note with some curiosity that the PISA scores were released in the fall of 2019 under this minister's watch. The PISA scores, of course, tabulate educational achievement for 15-year-olds in a number of countries around the world, primarily the countries that belong to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Canada as a whole placed very well. I think we were fourth or fifth overall in our achievements in reading, writing, math, and science. But if Alberta were separated from the rest of Canada, we would have the third-best school system in the entire world according to the PISA scores. I think that is no small achievement and one that we should be proud of.

So it concerns me when members opposite try to imply or outright say directly that there are problems in the education system that need to be fixed, that Albertans are somehow suffering because of the current state of education in our province. You know, I just want to remind everybody that everybody around the world looks to Alberta's education system with envy and wonders what we're doing here that they could be doing as well. In fact – the Minister of Education, I'm sure, knows this – we export our educational curriculum to other countries so that it can be used abroad. That's how well regarded our educational curriculum is.

That's not to say that we can't improve the system, Mr. Speaker. None of my colleagues here on this side would advocate for stagnation. None of us want to rest on our laurels. We recognize that if we want to continue to have one of the best education systems

in the world, we need to be changing. We need to be making sure that our curriculum is current, that any people who are falling through the gaps have the resources that they need to be able to be successful in school.

I think it's important to remind everybody of what actually determines student success in school. The underlying theme from a number of the comments that we've heard from members opposite is that students will excel if they have the right education that's offered to them, and I would agree to a point, Mr. Speaker, that the type of program that a student is enrolled in will affect their overall outcome. I have three children. My oldest excelled when she was in a program that allowed her to focus on physical education. My other two children have excelled when they were able to focus on musical education. Those choices are important, but they're not the overwhelming determinant of how well a student does in school.

So what is that overwhelming determinant? It's income, Mr. Speaker. The household income of a student will determine that student's success far more than any other factor that can be looked at in that student's environment. So if we want to improve the overall outcomes of our education system, we need to address the issue of income inequality in Alberta. I don't need to remind everybody, but I will anyway, that Alberta has the highest level of income inequality of any province in the country, and certainly if you look internationally, Alberta has a level of income inequality that rivals many American states. This is one of the reasons that we are held behind in educational outcomes. If we wanted to take meaningful action to improve educational outcomes in our system, we wouldn't be fiddling around with preambles to the existing Education Act; we would be taking meaningful action to address the issue of income inequality in this province.

Our caucus has suggested a number of things in the past. We certainly tried to address income inequality when we were in government by raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, something that the current government quickly moved to reduce. We not only increased minimum wage to address the lowest paid among us here in the province; we also took steps to improve labour legislation so that people could more easily form unions because we know that unionized labour is able to earn better income, better benefits, better working conditions for the people that they represent.

9:40

If we address the issue of income inequality, Mr. Speaker, we will do far more to address educational outcomes in our system than by mucking around with preambles to the Education Act because, as my colleagues here have highlighted, you know, the choice is only meaningful to people who have the resources to be able to access that choice. We've certainly heard about independent and charter schools who do excellent work at no cost to their students, but that's not the case for all of them. Some independent schools charge quite high tuition. So why is it that we want to reinforce a system where the rich can access a system that's just a little bit better than what everyday Albertans can afford to pay?

I know that the minister claimed that the respondents of the survey from independent schools had income levels that were similar to income levels of respondents that came from public schools, but that's only indicative of the fact that households that earn \$100,000 or more have the time and the ability to fill out surveys. It shouldn't be construed as the demographic picture of the public versus the independent schools.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in addition to the failure to address income inequality in this province, the government is attacking the resources that an education system needs to operate properly. We know in the last budget that in real terms this government has cut

education by \$21 million, because we anticipate enrolment will grow by 15,000 students over the next year. We also know that in order to make up for some of the shortfall that was created by this government's \$4.7 billion corporate handout, they're asking parents and schools to pay \$121 million more this year over last year. And we also know that this government is asking individual homeowners to pay more in property tax. Now, I appreciate that the property tax increases have been deferred temporarily during COVID, but that was the plan for educational funding that the government initially put forward in March.

So what is the result of this? The result is that we have over 25,000 educational assistants fired in a single day by surprise, on a Saturday no less. Talk about a way to harsh a weekend, learning that you're out of a job or that your students, your own children won't have the educational assistance that they need.

Mr. Speaker, you know, all of us here are advocating for a better education system. On our side we're saying that a meaningful choice in education has to come along with the proper supports for students.

This government has acted, prior to the pandemic, to cut funding severely to all of our schools. Public, separate, francophone, charter, independent: all subject to cuts in this minister's last budget. And we know that the need for investment in education is only going to increase because of the pandemic that we're currently in. The minister has directed that schools should return or look at how to return to in-class instruction in the fall, and I've had an endless parade of parents and teachers and other educational stakeholders come to my office and ask how they're possibly going to do that given the current funding and resources that are available to them. Let me tell you that in my riding we have public and separate and francophone and charter schools that are cramming them in 30 to a classroom, and we can't possibly conduct education properly with that lack of funding.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Calgary-South East has risen to provide a brief question or comment.

Mr. Jones: Through you, Mr. Speaker, I'm just wondering if the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar agrees with the president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, who characterized Albertan parents that choose a religious school or to home-school from a religious perspective as nutbars. Are these religious schools nutbars, are the teachers nutbars, or are the children brainwashed nutbars?

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition deputy House leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under 29(2)(a) I really appreciated the comments and the stories that my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar was telling, and particularly what seemed to be a really in-depth knowledge of his constituency and all of the various programs that are currently offered in that Edmonton-Gold Bar constituency. He was able to list programs from the public system, from the francophone system, from charter schools, several of which I've actually had the opportunity to visit as well. Understanding that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar spends a significant amount of his time engaging with constituents, going to events, touring the facilities in his riding to understand the challenges that parents are having – he himself being a parent and talking about the various learning opportunities that have benefited his children, I think, has really helped me to consider Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, that we have before us today.

So under 29(2)(a) and reflecting upon everything that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had been discussing, a few of the

points that he made really stood out to me: the need to properly fund the education system being one of the primary, making sure that we are investing in growth for our province, making sure that we are making the investment for the children in our province. I think that those comments came very clearly through to me, so I appreciate the opportunity under 29(2)(a) to reflect and comment on what my colleagues have been bringing forward in their debate on this very important bill that was only recently introduced, was introduced into this House just last week.

This is certainly my first opportunity to be able to speak to Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, so I really wanted to say how much I appreciated the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar's comments on this important piece of legislation, how well he understands his constituency, his own experiences as a parent, which are obviously informing his positions that he's bringing forward and the debate that he's engaging in here.

Other members of this Chamber have also entered into the debate, and I think I've heard a very common thread about wanting to do what's best for the kids of Alberta in this province. In the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar's comments I heard very clearly that funding education and ensuring that there are appropriate resources for our students is incredibly important as we move forward, making sure that we have educational assistants to support children, as an example. I share the dismay that members of my caucus have already expressed that so many educational assistants and other educational staff were let go during the pandemic when their support was needed for kids at home. I know that I personally have talked to a number of parents who were directly impacted by this change, parents who, in many cases, are trying to work from home as well as teach from home. So that is a concern.

The member also raised what's been happening through Education budget after Education budget as well as how the Choice in Education Act in its current form, as it has been brought forward, does nothing to reverse some of those funding changes and challenges that have been put forward onto the Alberta Education budget through subsequent UCP government budgets going forward.

So I really appreciated hearing more about the ability of the schools within the Edmonton-Gold Bar constituency, which is actually a neighbouring constituency to my own riding of Edmonton-Mill Woods – in fact, many of my constituents attend schools in the Gold Bar area. They will travel there particularly for some of those specialized programs, those programs of choice that we are debating, the Islamic Academy, being able to go and attend francophone schools. Each of these are really important, not only to my constituents but to those of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

9:50

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are back on the main bill, Bill 15, Choice in Education Act.

The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain has the call.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an absolute pleasure to rise here on Bill 15, Choice in Education Act. While door-knocking in my riding of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain and during 2017, 2018-19, supporting Alberta's long legacy of school choice is one of the ideas that came up most often at the doors. That's why I was so excited to see that this policy was such a major part of our platform. I'd like to thank the minister for bringing it forward tonight.

Mr. Speaker, you may actually find this interesting. This topic was so important to the residents of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain that I actually heard about it more than the issue of thousands of families being affected by the accelerated coal phase-out that was put in

place by the previous government. For the Education Act to surpass the anger that I felt regarding that issue shows how truly important this was in my area.

You know, parents having choices in the education of their children is not just a campaign promise. It's universally accepted as a human right, and it has been that way since the 1940s. That's why I find it so surprising that the members opposite are speaking so passionately and aggressively against this bill. Alberta's particular legacy on school choice is a strong one. Section 17 of the Alberta Act, the founding document of our province, makes a number of mentions to both public and separate school systems, constitutionally guaranteeing the rights, privileges, and funding of a separate school system. We are the only province that supports charter schools, and they offer a wide variety of programs to Alberta students that would otherwise be inaccessible. I'd like to highlight quickly what each one of these programs actually provides to Albertans around the province.

The Choice in Education Act does a number of things to protect Alberta's long legacy of school choice. First, it affirms the primacy of parental choice in education and promises to maintain a strong public system while providing support for all types of schooling. This act, if passed, will support the creation of further charter schools in Alberta and protect the status and funding of independent schools. Finally, the act offers new options for parents who choose to home-school their children, which is extremely important for families in my riding.

Now, this bill does not need to be a partisan fight, as much as the opposition would want it to be. Charter schools, the category of schools that will see the most change under the proposed legislation, are fully funded and part of Alberta's public school system. Now, the schools follow Alberta's curriculum and allow for alternative approaches to education such as a greater focus on arts or academics.

Now, at this point, Mr. Speaker, I'd love to kind of tell some of the examples of some schools that are around the province. Some, surprisingly, are actually located in the ridings of the members opposite.

Now, the first school that I'd like to talk about and the incredible value it brings to its community is located in the great riding of Calgary-Klein. Almadina Language Charter Academy offers instruction to Albertans who are still learning English, helping them to keep up with their peers in other school systems who were born and raised speaking English. I mean, this is a valuable service that, you know, this charter school is offering to families in that riding.

You know, surprisingly, Aurora academic charter school provides an orderly and structured environment that helps children excel in a highly academic-oriented environment. It sounds like a great mission statement. They do fantastic work, and it's also located in Edmonton-Glenora. So I'm sure the members opposite, when they have the opportunity, are going to speak quite strongly in favour of the parents that have chosen that educational choice for their families.

You know, the one that I'm actually the most excited to talk about tonight, Mr. Speaker, is the Boyle Street Education Centre. It inspires and supports youth who have experienced interruptions in their formal learning. They provide access to indigenous cultural ceremonies, visits from counsellors and nurses, and modified learning plans for those with FASD and ADHD and other learning disorders. It's also located in Edmonton-City Centre. I know the member opposite spoke very passionately about public education, but I didn't hear the same fervor or passion about supporting the families that chose this educational choice. The students range in age from 14- to 19-year-olds that have a history in not succeeding in mainstream education programs. That is right from their website.

These are kids that need that extra help, and I'm thankful that the Boyle Street Education Centre is there to support those families.

The Calgary Arts Academy, located in Calgary-Buffalo, provides students the opportunity to learn through immersion in the arts. As someone that, you know, was passionate about the arts growing up and drama and music, this is the type of program that I wish I had access to growing up. This would have helped me immensely when I was going through the education system.

The Calgary Girls' School, located in what I was told is the most beautiful riding in Calgary, Calgary-Elbow, provides an excellent, safe environment designed to optimize the intellectual, creative, personal, and physical potential of young women. Mr. Speaker, I hear constantly from the members opposite. They say that they are all about empowering women – and I am, too – but when you're speaking against schools like this that are actively trying to support young women for rising up and being productive members of society, trying to empower them, I have no idea why the members opposite are trying to shut down schools like this so badly or not supporting them or supporting the families that choose to put their children there.

The Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence provides personalized and integrated programs for students who are intellectually capable but struggle in a traditional classroom: another example, Mr. Speaker, of a charter school that is taking care of those families whose kids perhaps have fallen through the gap. They're looking to this government for support.

Connect Charter School seeks to promote innovation through inquiry-based learning. It's located in the fantastic riding of Calgary-Glenmore, which the member spoke so eloquently about before.

The Foundations for the Future Charter Academy seeks to provide excellence in student achievement and character development through innovative teaching and learning styles. Mr. Speaker, I know individuals who have interacted with students from FFCA and say that they are some of the kindest and most respectful people you will ever meet anywhere. That amazing charter school is located in Calgary-Bow.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School – and this is very close to me – is located just southwest of my riding, and it allows children to learn through traditional indigenous teachings. This just isn't a success of the charter school system. This is an important part of reconciliation. You know, the members opposite have talked many times about reconciliation, and that is something I feel full-heartedly for, especially with bands such as Enoch First Nation and Paul band located just to the west. Here you have a school that is specializing in that to help bridge those gaps, to heal those wounds. Again, I am wondering why members opposite are speaking so strongly against this type of education. Shameful, Mr. Speaker.

New Horizons charter school enables gifted students to learn in an environment that fosters social and emotional support for each student, another example of families that have chosen a different educational path.

Now, this is another one that I'm actually quite proud to talk about. It's the Suzuki Charter School. It's an incredible school that helps to foster not just academic success but also works to help students reach their musical potential through mastery learning. That amazing school is located in Edmonton-Gold Bar. The member opposite spoke very eloquently about, again, different educational choices, but, I mean, there are families here that are looking for support. They're looking for a government that is willing to support their educational choice, and I don't know why members opposite are so afraid to simply say: being a little different is okay.

The last school I'd like to talk about tonight is located, actually, in the second-most beautiful riding in the entire province, right behind Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. It's in the amazing riding of Grande Prairie-Wapiti. It's Valhalla Community School. It provides a focus on rural leadership, putting an emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and experimental learning. It's another fantastic example of parents choosing a different educational model.

This bill strengthens the system that led to the creation of schools like these and aims to increase access to even more schools that are able to cater to the needs of individual students. This will provide parents with more options, increase flexibility in our system, and better serve our children. There are 19,000 students on wait-lists to attend charter schools across the province. Our hope is to see that wait-list shrink as students are put into spaces that serve them best.

Mr. Speaker, parents know their children best. I don't know why that is so hard for the opposite members to say. That's why we need to reduce that wait-list and see more Albertan children being placed in what parents recognize as the best situation for them. Alberta's students deserve an excellent, world-class education that will equip them intellectually, socially, and with job-ready skills for life. This act advances this goal and continues to deliver on the promises our government made to Albertans. Promise made; promise kept.

Thank you.

10:00

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I typically try to go back and forth between the government and the opposition on 29(2)(a). Unfortunately, I believe that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar concluded 29(2)(a) upon the previous speaker – oh, correction: the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods – which would remain as a member from the Official Opposition. As such, the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland will be able to provide a brief question or comment.

Mr. Getson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, sometimes we're born lucky, and sometimes we're good looking, and today it feels like both with this COVID haircut I've got going.

The Speaker: Or neither could be.

Mr. Getson: Or none. It could be the complete opposite.

I've listened here intently to debate. It's been very interesting. Minister, thank you so much for bringing this forward. I've heard language here. Not to nail it down to one of the specific members opposite, but I heard "American-style education." I started to smile, and I looked it up online, and – what do you know? – it came down to American-style education. It was most schools trying to emulate that style of education, where you had a lot of free choice. You actually talked about your history. You brought up a lot of really good things.

The other thing that it really started to emulate, because it was, you know, kind of recent, was unschool learning. Apparently, the American-style education that we should be scared about is the same one that we're actually doing right now because of COVID. Apparently, if you have choice as parents and you get a chance to have your teachers working from a distance and they're actually providing the education material that the kids can keep up with at home, that is American-style education. So I'm not sure why we would be worried about it because we all seem to be doing it right now.

Pivoting on that certain point, it also comes up with a bunch of other things. It's almost similar to the Trudeau gun ban, where they're talking assault-style weapons. Are we going to talk assault-

style education if we give parents the choice? I'm not sure. That's maybe going a little bit outside of the bounds here.

When we're talking about that our education is the absolute best in the world or number three in the rankings of the world, I'm not sure where the data is coming from. All I know are the stories that I get from my constituents. This one lady, her name is Diana. She's from Romania. She's a mechanical engineer. She worked on large projects. She worked actually in the nuclear energy industry, very highly educated, very well respected in the industry. She was looking actually to go back to Romania. She had some issues on the home front, was looking to go back to Romania. She had two young girls, and she decided not to go because if she took her kids back to Romania, they would be about two years behind the rest of their class because of the difference in the styles of our education. This isn't uncommon.

When I talk to parents that are actually looking to self-educate, they're not the nutbars that they seem to get referred to. In fact, I know this specific individual that kind of was offended this morning, a constituent of my own. She has two doctorates. She's made this choice to now take three of her four children, have them educated at home because of the COVID item, so the first time ever that she'd be taking her children and not having them there. This person is pretty close to me because, well, she's my wife. We have four children, have gone through the public system the entire time, and because we choose this year, because of these events and potentially what's happening in the fall, to carry on and keep our three girls at home while our son still continues to go back to high school, apparently we're nut jobs, fringe, crazy. Crazy talk, right? That's the type of language that's being used out there. This divisiveness has to stop. I've gone on that I don't know how many times.

Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, between the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon we've got you surrounded. I think a lot of times we're talking to the same constituents and the choices out there. On the campaign trail I was getting one heck of an education. Again, Mr. Speaker, you know, my background was not education. I wasn't a minister here or a former minister. Many of my colleagues from the NDP are former ministers or carried former portfolios. I didn't have that background, but I'll tell you: I got an education. I didn't realize how much pressure that folks that made private choice – the charter schools or the religious-based schools or faith-based schools – were under. The home-schooling folks, they were coming up to me and saying: "This is going sideways. We feel like we won't have any choice anymore. Please help us." And that was one of our platform commitments, Mr. Speaker. So to the Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain: I want to see how many folks actually came up to you and were sharing the same story. Again, what I was getting from the constituents we shared was that it was not good. The old adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," well, we're giving folks some options because it seemed to be a little bent.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. He is absolutely correct that, you know, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain is kind of like the meat in the sandwich between the riding of Drayton Valley-Devon and Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. I have great neighbours surrounding my area.

You know, just to kind of echo some of his comments, in my area we have some amazing independent and charter schools, and I'm thankful everyday for the parents that have the ability to choose those educational options for their kids and their families.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General has risen on second reading of Bill 15.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've listened to two hours and 36 minutes of debate here so far today on this bill. I'm pleased with the progress that we're making. I move, though, to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 16 Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Schweitzer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to move second reading of Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020.

This bill and what we're trying to do here is improve the victims of crime fund here in the province of Alberta. Last year you heard in this House how many times we went from community to community talking to people about crime, rural crime in particular, and how so many people right now feel as though they are vulnerable in our province. I can't tell you how many times I heard of people who were breaking down in tears at these town halls because of the trauma that they've gone through, the mental anguish that they've gone through and that they suffer every single night, people that are literally sleeping with an axe under their bed because they don't feel safe.

What we're doing here, what we're trying to accomplish here, Mr. Speaker, is to make this better, to expand the scope of the victims of crime fund to include public safety. Albertans deserve to know that someone is coming when they call the police. They deserve to know that their case will be handled with due care by the prosecution. They deserve to have the confidence in the justice system that has broken down over time.

I'm hoping that we can get both sides of the aisle to support this bill, Mr. Speaker. I've invited the members opposite to come to town halls to hear about rural crime, to hear about victims across this province. For too long they've been victimized.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

What we're doing with this bill is to strengthen public safety in the province of Alberta by expanding the scope of the victims of crime fund to include public safety. By increasing the levy from 15 per cent to 20 per cent, that will allow us to spend more money on this necessary program. To go from \$40 million a year upwards to about \$60 million a year is what we're going to be spending going forward. That will allow us to fund additional prosecutors, to provide additional resources for the Alberta law enforcement response team, for our RAPID force to give the sheriffs across this province the tools that they need to support the police, as well as funding for drug treatment courts so we can provide the addicts that are struggling in this province, Mr. Speaker, with the tools that they need to get well through a court-supervised process and court-supervised system.

We've also asked two members of this Chamber, the Member for Airdrie-East and the Member for Grande Prairie, to be part of a working group to help us figure out the best path forward to deal with the financial benefit in the future. We've come up with a temporary measure as well for the financial benefit to make sure that we're there in a more streamlined process to make sure that victims have the necessary resources in a significant trauma situation. That's key to us. We want to make sure that we improve

this, and we can do so much better. This isn't an either/or debate. This is about how we create more and help make sure that we keep Albertans safe.

I'm proud to introduce and move second reading of this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any hon. members looking to join debate on second reading of Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020?

10:10

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and speak to Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020, as brought forward by the hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General. You know, this bill was very recently introduced in the Legislature with no opportunity, of course, for briefing by the opposition, so we are still working through this bill, but I have taken a look through it, and there are a number of issues and questions that I have with respect to this bill.

We know that obviously the government caucus platformed on, you know, fighting crime. Rural crime in particular is part of their platform, and I understand that this bill is part of that platform commitment or at least intended to fulfill that. But what the UCP platform did not make clear when it talked about getting tough on crime in Alberta was that it was going to use funds that were allocated to support victims of crime through agencies and individually to support their other commitments that they made with respect to crime. I think that's one of the biggest concerns here. When we're talking about crime, it is a very complex issue that addresses – well, it deals with safety, but it also deals with things such as financial background, socioeconomic status. We know that race is a huge issue when it comes to crime and who is disproportionately, perhaps, in the criminal justice system.

We know that we've heard this government bring forward bills with respect to human trafficking, domestic violence, and we know, I would assume, that by bringing forward some of those measures, it's not just about clamping down on the perpetrators but also on supporting victims. Unfortunately, what we see here with this victims of crime amendment act is that while it's called strengthening public safety, it's actually undercutting supports for victims. In particular, the victims of crime fund traditionally and historically has been used to support community organizations, indigenous communities, and victims' service programming for over two decades in this province, and the goal of that fund and that programming is to actually support and provide training for victims of serious crimes. But they are actually raiding it now. The government appears to be raiding that fund by removing eligibility for a lot of individual victims to support their other campaign commitments, particularly increasing the number of police, increasing the number of prosecutors.

We know that these were commitments, that although they've been speaking and touting these commitments and what they've brought forward, they didn't fund them. In fact, not only did they not fund them, but they took from other parts of our community that are responsible. They said, for example, to rural communities: we're going to increase police, but you're going to have to pay for it yourself. They get to pat themselves on the back and say: oh, look; we're increasing police, but we're not actually paying for it. Now we know that when it comes to increasing prosecutors and police, they're also not just asking municipalities to pay for it themselves; they're now asking victims to pay for it.

I can't imagine – well, actually, I can imagine because I feel like this is consistent with how this UCP government has presented all of their budget so far. Every budget they've rolled out, they have

been less than transparent. They've been basically committed to a shell game of moving funds around from one budget to another and saying, "Look what we did over here. Look what we did over here," but at the same time they're cutting funds from other places. They're not supporting getting tough on crime here by supporting the victims; they're increasing police and prosecutors on the backs of victims. I'm concerned that they're making these decisions without actually, once again, consulting with those that would be affected by the cuts to this fund.

I am deeply concerned, for example, that there are a number of organizations that I know provide services with respect to survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence. I've had the pleasure of meeting with some of these organizations, and they highlighted even last year when I met with them that this is a concern. They were already suspicious of how this government was going to pay for some of the commitments they'd made, and they highlighted that they believed that this fund was going to come under attack, and they were right. I imagine that either the government did not consult with those organizations or they heard that, too, and ignored them as we know they tend to do.

We found that certainly when it comes to education, for example, if people submit a survey and the minister doesn't like the organization that she believes – she has no proof – they're affiliated with, she'll just disregard it. I can only imagine that the same is true with respect to the consultation that was done with respect to this act, that they weren't listening to those organizations that directly provide services to victims.

You know, we see through this bill that a number of umbrella organizations have actually been defunded as a result of this. Currently the mandate of the victims of crime fund includes funding for a range of community-based organizations: nonprofit groups; community groups; indigenous tribal communities; police-based services, which includes nonprofit organizations with victims services units; municipalities; and, most importantly, it also provides funding directly to individual victims of violent crimes. It provides funding and supports for victims who may have suffered physical damage, emotional harm, property damage, and economic loss as a result of crime.

I want to actually comment on that piece a little bit first, about the victims of crimes, because back when I was in law school, I actually volunteered for a significant period of time with a clinic called the Barbra Schlifer clinic. I went to law school in Toronto, and while I was there, I volunteered at this clinic, which primarily serves survivors of sexual violence.

One of the key things that they found was that, particularly for women who are survivors of sexual violence, they weren't comfortable often accessing the criminal justice system because – I don't think it's a surprise to any in this House – the criminal justice system is not one that is very amenable or easy for a survivor of sexual violence to navigate. The standards of proof, the scrutiny to which a survivor is exposed to throughout that process is just as traumatizing in some cases as the assault. They have to relive it over and over and over again and be critiqued and be criticized, so many, many survivors of violence choose not to go that route because it is too difficult for them to do.

But what they did have – and it's a very similar fund to what we have in Alberta – in Ontario is that they had a criminal compensation board, which did very similar things here, which was that it actually provided some supports to those individuals who may not have been able to secure a criminal conviction but who had obviously suffered violence and assault and needed support and had at least begun a process. They found that that process of seeking

that support was much more meaningful to them than actually going through the criminal justice system.

We know how few cases of sexual violence and sexual assault are even reported, then how few are even prosecuted, and even fewer are actually successful in obtaining a conviction. So I know that for victims of sexual violence this kind of a fund is critical. It may be the only access to support that they can get to get some compensation for not only their economic loss but to access critical counselling services, mental health supports, and physical supports. It is absolutely a lifeline for so many of these victims. This was part of the existing victims of crime mandate. It appears now – and I appreciate that we're still working through this act – that what has actually happened under Bill 16 is that individual victims of violent crimes no longer have access. There's still some support that goes out to some agencies, not all agencies, but there's no longer that access for an individual victim to go out and to actually seek those supports.

This is, I believe, perhaps one of the greatest injustices of this bill. Apart from the fact, again, as I mentioned earlier, that this government is actually funding their own campaign commitments off the backs of the victims who they claimed that they were looking out for, apparently they're saying: "If you've already been victimized by crime, we're no longer here to support you. We will use that money, however, to fund more police and prosecutors, ostensibly to decrease the incidences of crime going forward, but if you've already been victimized, sorry; you're out of luck. We're not going to support you anymore." I think that's a really callous way to look at Albertans and to look at those who have been victimized by crime.

Now, I know the Minister of Justice has repeatedly mentioned his legendary town halls in Rocky Mountain House, and I won't presume to claim that I know exactly what he was hearing out there. I am an urban MLA. I represent an urban area. This is where I grew up. I'm not here to say that there isn't – and I think even under the NDP we recognized that there are very significant issues with rural crime, and I believe the minister when he says that. But I don't know that the rural communities are going to be happy to hear that this approach to attacking rural crime is at the expense of those who have already been victimized in their own communities. I think that that's where we have a real challenge between what we're hearing from the government about what they campaigned on and what they're actually delivering. Certainly, even last year when they tabled their 2019 budget, a lot of municipalities were certainly shocked to find out that they were going to be on the hook for the police officers that this governing party had campaigned on.

10:20

Once again, there's a lot of mistrust from Albertans towards this government because they say one thing and they do another thing. They may be able to check off a box, but they certainly weren't honest with Albertans about how they were going to achieve those campaign promises. Certainly, we've seen a number of instances already where this government has not even followed their campaign promises or that they've done things that they didn't promise at all.

At this point, over a year now, I don't think that many Albertans believe they got what they voted for. They certainly didn't vote for an attack on rural health care, which this government has launched relentlessly since they were elected. That certainly was not what those communities asked for. They certainly didn't ask for the Election Commissioner to be fired either. They certainly didn't ask for cuts to education and health care funding when this government stood up and campaigned and said that they wouldn't do that. They

even stood in this House and said that they would fund enrolment growth and then didn't do it.

There is a trust issue right now between Albertans and this government. Now it seems to go across every single aspect that this government touches on, whether it is education, whether it is health care, now whether it is justice or crime prevention. This government is not being honest with Albertans about how they are doing what they're doing and that they're taking from one pocket to put into another. I think that Albertans are already, very overwhelmingly so, particularly when I look at the e-mails that I get in my constituency office, disheartened, distrustful of this government and for good reason.

I want to talk a little bit further about some of the other provisions, well, questions, actually, that we will be posing as we go through debate on this bill. I talked about already my concern about consultation with respect to this bill because we don't believe that many of the organizations that serve victims in Alberta have been consulted properly. If they have, I'd like to hear from the minister as to which organizations they consulted with, why them, why not others. What did you learn from the consultations? I've actually received letters from victims services organizations who talked about their concern about this, so I'm thinking that the minister has not talked to them or is ignoring them.

I also would like to know a little bit about the changes to the reporting age for minors. One of the provisions of the existing legislation talked about how minors had, actually, a longer window when it came to accessing the victims of crime fund because we know that children might not be able to assert their rights until they're older, until they're more able to articulate what's happened. We know that that's the case when it comes to statutes of limitation with respect to crimes against minors, that the statute of limitations is much longer because we recognize that children may not be able to come forward, may not be able to even articulate what's happened until they're older and more mature. Therefore, that's a very important time. We need to make sure that minors have the opportunity to grow, to mature, to seek supports, to be able to even articulate what's happened to them, and then to be able to access supports as they need it such as those set out in the victims of crime fund.

But now we're seeing that with a change put forward in Bill 16, there's a shorter window of time in which minors may access the fund. They now have to file for access to the fund within two years after the alleged crime, and I have questions about that. I mean, is a 10-year-old supposed to seek access by the time they're 12? Are we really expecting that a minor, if a crime happened, especially if we're talking about heinous things such as child sexual assault – if we're saying that they have less time to access that support, I don't see how that's consistent at all with a government that's supposed to be looking after our most vulnerable, a government that brought forward a bill on human trafficking. I can't understand why we would limit the time that a child may access support from this fund.

In fact, with respect to human trafficking if a child has experienced human trafficking, do they have to fast-track their journey to healing through services in a significantly shorter time frame than previously noted? Again, we're hearing two different messages. When it comes to standing up and making statements that look good, that look like they're being strong and supporting victims of crime – human trafficking, domestic violence, sexual assault – this government is all shine, but there's nothing behind it. There are no resources behind it. In fact, when we see the nitty-gritty details, we know they're actually trying to limit access to people and to children who have been sexually assaulted or sexually abused. They're actually saying: we're giving you a shorter period of time. This is the same government that just a few weeks ago was

touting their human trafficking bill and talking about how much they care for vulnerable Albertans, yet here they are now trying to limit access of young children to supports of this fund.

I'd like to hear the minister speak to that. I hope that he can address that. Perhaps that's a misinterpretation of the bill. I would welcome it if that's the case because I don't think that that's what Albertans want. I don't think they want to see children's rights limited in this way. So I hope the minister will clarify that and perhaps would also consider, if that is what's in the bill, an amendment to change that.

I also have concerns about the financial amendments that have been made to the fund as a result of this bill. Will the grant funding that's been allocated to community organizations be moved to this new service model? Why can't the government just continue to fund those groups rather than find new organizations that have to build new relationships with communities that already have had something in place for years? It's interesting, that issue, because as the critic for Children's Services I watched just a few months ago while this very same issue arose in that context, which is that organizations had emerged in communities to support early prevention programming for children, that were responsive to the communities in which they served, organically they had come up as a result of parents or nonprofits who were contacted, who saw a need in a particular community, and they evolved and created organizations that served their community.

Instead, in the interest of efficiencies and saving money, this government collapsed and actually cancelled all the contracts with all those early prevention programs across the province, parent link centres all across the province, to create a new model, this hub-and-spoke model, that was really about efficiencies. What it ignored was the fact that these community organizations had developed for a reason. They knew their families, they knew the communities in which they were built, and they were responsive to them. We saw that overwhelmingly, all those organizations across the province, particularly in rural areas where there wasn't a diversity of options, where it wasn't easy to travel somewhere else to seek the supports you need. This government just cut those programs. Some of them survived and some of them didn't. Some of them have been centralized. It's all about efficiencies, but it's not actually what serves the communities.

Again, I find that remarkable. I am, I'd mentioned already, an urban representative MLA. In Edmonton, if you live in my riding and you don't have the services you need, you're fairly fortunate because you're in a major area, a more urban setting. There are options outside of your constituency which you can seek. However, in a rural area where the programming and supports and community organizations are further and farther between, if you don't have what you need in your community, you're going to have to travel a long distance to get it. You're going to have to do with what you have and not what you need. I believe that this is the same approach that this bill is taking. It's looking at community organizations with respect to efficiencies, not looking at them with respect to actually what serves the communities best. It's actually going to be demanding these community organizations that serve victims are required to now build from scratch in the interest of efficiencies.

Again, I welcome the minister's comments on this to see whether or not he has a different interpretation of what this does. But this is a complex bill, and it certainly sets out a lot of changes that I'm thinking this government is hoping will be buried, that a lot of people will not pay attention to.

I also note, for example – I spoke about the cuts to individual victims of crimes and my concern around that. One of the things that I was concerned about was that I noticed there were changes to eligibility requirements for individuals. Prior to this – I'll make sure

I have my information correct here – individuals, as I mentioned, could apply for support for physical damage, emotional harm, property damage, economic loss as a result of crime. You were considered to be a victim of one of the eligible offences, and if you were eligible, then you would fill out a witness benefit and a death benefit application, and you didn't have to wait for a charge or conviction to apply for financial benefits. Now the eligibility requirements say that in addition to reviewing grants for victim-serving organizations, the committee would also review and make funding recommendations for public safety initiatives. So it seems to be – again, I welcome comments from the minister as to whether or not this is the case – that you're no longer eligible as an individual victim.

I spoke, again, that this program is very similar to what is in other provinces, where particularly vulnerable victims cannot wait for a charge or a conviction before they can seek support. I mean, one of the reasons why we were seeing some modernization within our court systems, within our justice system is because we know that justice is not served swiftly right now in Alberta. We know that there's a lot to be done, and certainly, as a result of the pandemic, we've seen that the courts have had to shut down. I know that there are so many who will still be looking for... [Ms Pancholi's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

10:30

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

We are on second reading of Bill 16. Are there any hon. members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen to speak.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020. The name of the bill doesn't exactly do what is in the bill. What the bill is exactly doing is taking money from the victims of crime fund, and it's providing for this government's cuts to other areas such as policing and municipalities, the cuts that they made. This fund has been in place for over two decades and serves an important purpose. It was supporting community organizations and business communities and victim service programming, including training and services for victims of serious crimes.

The UCP, this government, has made it clear that public safety is an issue, and ensuring public safety is one of the fundamental responsibilities of any government. Safety has multiple aspects to it. One side of it is that government be able to properly fund policing, Crown services, and other services such as ALERT and RAPID response forces. At the same time, it's also an obligation of the government, when citizens fall victim to serious crimes, that government stands with them and provides needed and necessary supports to help them heal. That's the piece that this fund was dealing with. It was supporting victims of crimes that needed the necessary supports to heal. That was done through direct supports and grants to individuals. That was done through grants to community organizations, grants to band councils and to indigenous communities, and by supporting victim service programming.

What this piece of legislation is doing is taking money from victim services, the victims of crime fund, and filling in the holes that they created in policing budgets. I will particularly note that over the last year or so there has been an increase in crimes in and around northeast Calgary, and many community organizations and groups have asked this government to look into that issue, to address that issue. Once, in fact, the Minister of Justice attended a town hall at the Genesis Centre in northeast Calgary to hear directly

from those who were affected by those crimes. At the same time – I wasn't present personally at that town hall, but there were many individuals, many organization reps who were there, and I have had the opportunity to follow up with them and talk to them. Certainly, they were assured that government would take all steps needed and necessary to address that situation not only in the northeast but across this province.

However, those were just words because, if we talk about Calgary alone, their municipal leadership, the leadership of the police department, the fire department are all on the record as saying their budgets were cut by this government. The city of Calgary said many times that \$13 million was cut from their police funding. At a time when we are seeing a rise in crimes, at a time when people are asking for more supports, at a time when government is promising support, that was the most irresponsible thing to do, to cut from the policing budget. We raised that issue many times. Oftentimes government will just get up and deny that with a straight face.

The same thing happened with respect to rural crime. When we were in government, the then opposition, the UCP, would speak very passionately about rural crime issues. They advocated on behalf of their constituents and asked for more supports, and certainly I agree that it was the right thing to do. In response to those concerns, in response to those calls the then Justice minister, my colleague the MLA for Calgary-Mountain View, brought forward a plan that involved talking to those communities, that involved hearing those concerns and actually funding those on the ground, funding those efforts on the ground to reduce those crimes, that involved hiring more prosecutors, that involved investing in ALERT, in those programs. A year later, as time passed, we saw a reduction in rural crime.

10:40

But here what we are seeing is that even municipalities are seeing an increase in crime, and they are asking this government for more supports. They are cutting from their budgets, their police budgets, and on top they are now charging municipalities for policing costs. When they made those cuts, I think the Official Opposition reminded this government that somebody will have to pay for these cuts. In the case of rural municipalities, they charged those municipalities. Many organizations, law enforcement organizations, told this government that somebody will have to pay for these cuts. And unless we pay for these cuts, they won't be able to do their jobs without adequate and necessary resources.

Now what we are seeing here is that government is taking money from the victims of crime fund to make up for the cuts that they imposed on municipalities all across this province. As I said, policing and preventing crimes is one part of it, but when people fall victim to those crimes, it is also government's obligation to provide supports to those victims. In this case if government moves ahead with this bill, those victims will have less supports.

They have changed benefit levels. They have changed criteria to seek supports. They have made changes to the mandatory surcharge, how that was levied, and they are also eliminating injury and witness-to-homicide benefits, which means that the Criminal Injuries Review Board will be eliminated. Somehow the title of this bill and what they are trying to do through this piece of legislation: they are trying to make a correlation that deterring crime will indirectly help stop victimization, and that's how they decided to take money from this fund, take supports away from the victims that they need and rely on, the supports that have been in place for two decades.

We are talking about victims here who have experienced or witnessed violent crimes, which may cause them physical, emotional, and psychological injuries, which may need them to be

reimbursed for a funeral and other costs. Now all those victims who have those physical and emotional and psychological injuries will have less support available because of this bill. The government shouldn't be doing that.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available should anybody wish to make some brief comments or questions with regard to the recent speech. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has risen to speak.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank my colleague from Calgary-McCall for the comments and his initial impressions here at second reading of Bill 16, the Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020, because the victims of crime fund and its work in supporting community organizations, indigenous communities, and victim services programming for over two decades is so important. I was very much interested in my colleague's perspectives on this particular bill given his experience, his past work history, and given the various jobs that he has held in his work career. Just under the idea of some of the previous roles that he has played as well as what he has heard in his local community, I wondered if he could continue to expand on his thoughts on Bill 16, the Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, should he choose to respond. He does, and there are about three minutes and 50 seconds.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Member, for the question. I think that, in short, what this bill is doing – it goes like this. The UCP made cuts to policing budgets, to municipalities' budgets across this province. In some cases they started charging municipalities for policing costs. In others, municipalities downloaded those costs onto Albertans in their jurisdictions. But those cuts were so deep that there is still a need for the government to find some money to repair that damage. That's how they found this victims of crime fund. They are going after this, and they are taking benefits away from the victims of serious, serious crimes, who may have suffered physical, emotional, and psychological injuries and need support in dealing with that and healing from that. They are taking money away from that fund, taking away from victims, taking money from this fund to provide for their cuts.

They are changing many things, which will result in reduced services for victims of crimes. There were many nonprofit groups, community groups, indigenous groups, tribal councils who were getting support through this fund. Now the government will use this fund to provide for ALERT, RAPID response forces, drug treatment courts, hiring more Crown prosecutors, all of these things, which I support, that the government should have done, that the government should have supported, and that the government should not have cut the budget from because all of these services are important services. They are needed to deter crime. All these professionals who work within these departments, within these services deserve to have all the needed and necessary resources to get the job done. But the government took money away from them first, and now the government is taking from the victims of crime fund to pay for their cuts.

They are also changing the eligibility, who can apply to get funds from this. Previously, if you were a victim of one of the eligible offences listed in the victims of crime regulation, you could fill out the benefit application, and you didn't need to wait for a charge or conviction to apply for financial benefits. I think all you needed was that a professional . . .

10:50

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to join the debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen and has the call.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to thank my hon. colleagues from Edmonton-Whitemud and Calgary-McCall for their insightful interjections into this debate. I know that I have certainly heard a lot of interesting information from the contributions that they've made to the discussion so far. I can't hope to add much more, but I do believe that repetition is the essence of learning, so I will at least attempt to effectively summarize their points and reinforce some of the questions that, in particular, my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud, the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, made in her speech.

Now, as I read this bill, it's my understanding that the government is proposing to make changes to the victims of crime fund so that organizations that should normally be funded from other government revenues are now funded from the victims of crime fund. In addition to that, they are restricting the types of benefits that are paid out to individual victims from the victims of crime fund and changing some of the eligibility for applying to the victims of crime fund.

If I understand the arguments that the government is making to defend this decision, it's that they had run on a campaign promise of improving resources to police enforcement agencies so that they could tackle the issue of crime in Alberta.

First of all, I want to touch on a comment that my friend the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has made about representing an urban constituency and that certainly reinforced something my friend from Calgary-McCall said as well. I think that we hear from members of the UCP that because we're urban MLAs, we're not concerned about the issue of crime. Nothing could be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker.

I certainly represent an area where I hear from my constituents every day their concerns about crime. A number of neighbourhoods in my constituency border either the river valley or the Mill Creek ravine, and certainly the number of people who travel the corridors through those ravines and river valleys and into the residential neighbourhoods gives concern to the potential for being a victim of crime. I've certainly heard from members in the King Edward Park community, in the Bonnie Doon community, and in the Avonmore community, that border the Mill Creek ravine, as well as the Gold Bar and Capilano neighbourhoods, that border the river valley, that the increase in the traffic in the river valley has led to an increase in property crime.

I certainly have heard many stories of people who have had their houses and certainly their garages broken into. You know, that type of property crime has been rampant, and the perception is that it's on the rise. I don't know if the perception is borne out by the statistics, but certainly the perception in many of my neighbourhoods that I represent is that crime is on the increase in those communities.

Certainly, we are no stranger to violent crime in our own neighbourhoods, and there have been some stories lately of some horrendous violent crime carried out in the city of Edmonton. My heart goes out to the family of the little girl whose life was taken much too soon in the constituency of Edmonton-Mill Woods.

I hope that we can all agree that all of us, whether we represent an urban constituency or a rural constituency, have a concern for and are dedicated to reducing crime and supporting victims as much as we can. It's concerning to me that the government is funding its campaign promises to improve services that deter crime, like

funding ALERT, funding the RAPID team, funding the drug courts, and hiring more Crown prosecutors, and that that money is coming from the victims of crime fund when it used to come from general revenue.

Certainly, when we were in government, Mr. Speaker, we made significant investments in funding the ALERT team. We hired a number of Crown prosecutors, and we committed to constructing the Red Deer courthouse to make sure that we had adequate facilities for central Alberta to deal with justice issues in a new courthouse in that time. It's important to remember that none of that money came from the victims of crime fund itself. It came from general revenue because we believed that supporting victims of crime was an important part of the justice system and that the money shouldn't be taken from a fund dedicated to supporting victims of crime and used to fund other initiatives. We're not saying that those initiatives aren't worthy. We fully believe that funding ALERT and funding RAPID and funding drug courts and hiring Crown prosecutors are worthy initiatives, but it shouldn't come at the expense of the victims of crimes themselves, which is exactly what the government is proposing with this bill.

It's concerning to me, Mr. Speaker, that a number of the benefits that are available to individual victims of crime are being taken away. It looks like, according to my reading of the bill, victims of crime will still be able to apply for the death benefit and some supplemental benefits and that funding will continue for payments that were determined under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act, but it also looks to me like they're taking away the benefit paid out to victims of crime who experienced injuries. It looks to me like they're taking away the benefit paid out to people who were a witness to homicide. It looks like they're eliminating the death benefit that paid for funeral costs for homicide victims.

I would like the Minister of Justice or anybody from Executive Council to explain to me why funding for ALERT and RAPID and more Crown prosecutors and increased access to drug courts has to come at the cost of people who suffered injury in the process of crime. Why does funding for ALERT or RAPID or more Crown prosecutors or access to drug courts have to come at the expense of benefits paid to those who were a witness to homicide? Why does the funding for ALERT, RAPID, Crown prosecutors, and access to drug courts have to come at the expense of the death benefits for funeral costs for homicide victims?

Mr. Speaker, it seems profoundly unfair to me that people who have already suffered a great deal at the hands of someone who has intentionally done them harm will now have to suffer again because they no longer have access to the kinds of financial benefits that were previously available to them. I don't understand why the minister couldn't find some other sources of revenue to fund these worthy initiatives, and I certainly hope that the Minister of Justice or other members of Executive Council can get up and explain to us why this money has to come from the victims of crime fund and not from general revenue.

11:00

I suspect that the answer lies, in part, in the fact that they don't want to raise taxes on profitable corporations, so I hope the Minister of Justice or somebody else from Executive Council can tell me why they see fit to blow a \$4.7 billion hole in the budget. I understand that COVID has thrown a wrench into the entire financial picture of the province, but I don't understand why victims of crime are being asked to pay with their own benefits to fund ALERT, RAPID, the increase in the number of Crown prosecutors, access to drug courts, those other kinds of initiatives that the minister wants to support. Why do people who have already suffered at the hands of people who wanted to do them harm have

to suffer more? And we let those who have the ability to pay, profitable corporations – why do we let those people off the hook for contributing their fair share to policing in our communities? This doesn't seem fair to me, Mr. Speaker, and I would certainly like to hear somebody from the opposite side explain to the people of Alberta why they think this is fair, why they think that victims of crime have to pony up when there are lots of organizations that have the financial means and wherewithal to contribute a little bit more to policing in our communities and support victims of crime and the policing that we need to do.

Now, there were a number of questions that my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud raised in her debate that have yet to be answered by the Minister of Justice or anybody from Executive Council. With respect to the change to the reporting age for minors, it's my understanding that previously minors had a longer window when it came to accessing the victims of crime fund. Under this bill, if this bill were to pass, they're now expected to file within two years of suffering from an alleged crime. I don't understand why that change was necessary. My hon. colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud asked the question, and it has yet to be answered, so I'll repeat the question. Why are we making it harder for minors who are victims of crime to apply to the fund? I'm certain that there is some rationale that the Minister of Justice and the members of Executive Council have for making that decision, but unfortunately it hasn't been shared with us yet.

Now, with respect to some eligibility changes, again, we asked the question on whether or not the committee that oversees these eligibility criteria will now include individuals from community organizations to ensure that their needs are heard and if we will be able to guarantee a balance between two already heavily defunded sectors, that my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud raised.

We have some additional questions that have yet to be answered. Will the grant funding that has been allocated to community organizations be moved to this new service model that's being set up in association with this legislation? We also want to know why the government can't just continue to fund those groups rather than finding new organizations that have to build new relationships with communities that already have had something like this in place for years?

An important question that I think needs to be answered by the Minister of Justice or members of Executive Council is whether or not these kinds of organizations will have to compete for funding with other organizations like RAPID and ALERT. How will they ensure that the funding that's been allocated is equitable? You know, the fund has also been available to individual victims of violent crime to help deal with physical and psychological injuries, as I've mentioned before.

With the removal of those kinds of benefits, are there going to be any other avenues now for victims of crime to seek compensation for those harms that they've suffered, and will there be another source of funding for victims? Or are they turning victims to the civil court system to try to sue the people who have perpetrated great harm against them for compensation in court? Nobody thinks that that's a good way to deal with the compensation due to victims of crime, and in fact I suspect that's probably why the victims of crime fund was set up in the first place, so that victims of crime didn't have to go through the onerous process of suing the criminals who have harmed them in court for financial damages.

I look forward to the Minister of Justice or members from Executive Council answering those questions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, you've heard me a few times during question period mention a thing called NDP justice. You know, we've lived that in this Chamber when they were in government, when the seats up top here were filled full of people that had been victimized over and over and over again, time and time again, people that are living in such fear that they're sleeping with an axe under their bed, people that are living in fear in their communities, the mental anguish in their communities, where they're now living in fear of somebody driving down their dirt road. We invited every single member opposite to come hear about their legacy when it came to dealing with rural crime. And what did they do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I'm an urban MLA, Mr. Speaker. An urban MLA. Was I aware of rural crime? I heard about it from my colleagues, heard about it before I was elected. I didn't truly understand the issue, and I encourage people on the other side – I know that they only really have seats in urban centres, but I encourage you to come on down. I'll pay your way, even. I'll get you a bus. Would they even come? No. No, they wouldn't. They wouldn't come hear from people because they didn't want to hear about their record. They didn't want to hear about their record and how they had failed thousands upon thousands of Albertans, because that's literally how many people would come out to hear and have their voices heard. That was their frustration level, that thousands and thousands would come.

You want to talk about action, a government that is actually listening to Albertans? Let's just look at a few of the things that we did in our first year, Mr. Speaker. In addition to announcing today the creation of an Alberta parole board, if we can pass that legislation through this House – that's a big step. That's what rural Albertans are looking for. In addition to that, to crack down on illegal copper wire theft, illegal theft of goods, we cracked down on scrap metal dealers. We did that. They could have. They sat on that bill for four years. It sat there. It had already passed the House. They did nothing. They didn't listen. They sat in their ivory tower.

On top of that, drug treatment courts: for the first time ever we have a government-leading initiative on drug treatment courts. Where were they? They claimed they believed in it. They could have led on this. Instead, they let the judiciary lead. They didn't lead one bit on this file. It took a Conservative government to lead on a compassionate file like drug treatment courts.

They talk about: we need to help people get compensation. They sat again on the ability to bring in enhanced restitution powers. Why did they do that? We brought that in right away to give people the ability to go and get enhanced restitution powers so victims can recover what they've lost.

Community impact statements, the ability for a community to have their voice heard as a victim and to try and get a stronger penalty so that people understand the mental anguish that some of this has caused: we brought that in. They sat on their hands for four years and did nothing on this file for victims.

On top of that, you hear stories about people – they just want to know someone is going to come, because they underfunded police for so long over there. For an entire term they did nothing on this, really. So we put in place the RAPID force, that gave enhanced powers to our sheriffs so they could help respond to emergency situations. Again, the opposite side – this file had been consulted on for 20 years without resolution. Our government in our first year came to a historic new partnership with municipalities for the largest single investment in policing since the March West.

Now, that is what we've done in our first year, and we're not done yet, Mr. Speaker. More to come. And when we get into this, what we're doing here today with this is enhancing public safety. This isn't an either/or, like they're presenting. That's an absolutely false

argument. This is about more. We're going to be spending more, from \$40 million a year up to \$60 million a year now. This is about providing better service for Albertans, listening to Albertans.

11:10

I would encourage the urban MLAs, who kind of claim that I'm an urban MLA so I don't really understand this issue, to come to the town halls the next time we invite them. Hopefully, we can gather again soon in Alberta to have those types of town halls. They can come hear about NDP justice and how it let people down in their communities and how they failed those communities.

We're going to continue on this side of the aisle, Mr. Speaker, to listen to Albertans, listen to their priorities. When you talk to someone who's been victimized, when you talk to someone who has been just living in fear in their homes, they want to know the police are coming. They want to know that their case is going to be prosecuted. They want to feel safe again in their communities, and they've been failed for too long. Too long.

Shame on the NDP. They should support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Five seconds remain under 29(2)(a).

Seeing none, are there any hon. members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has risen.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise on Bill 16, the Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020. I think it's an interesting name. It's interesting when we look at the name of this bill. It's supposed to strengthen public safety and help all these victims of crime and all these great things – and the minister got up and lectured the opposition – and it's pretty clear that the bill does none of those things, right? It's pretty clear.

Members of the opposition here, my hon. colleagues here, have asked a number of, I think, very important questions to the minister today. The minister had the opportunity. He stood up in this place, but instead of answering those questions, instead of doing his job and actually debating in this place, instead of actually addressing the concerns of the Official Opposition, that was elected here to represent our constituents and all Albertans, Mr. Speaker, instead of doing that, he got up and made political talking points. He got up and decided that it was more important to talk about Rocky Mountain House and how he wanted to rent a bus over and over and over again than what was actually the substance of this bill, than what questions were actually directly addressed to him, and, through you, I think that's actually quite shameful. I think that's something that we should all be disappointed in in this place.

We've come here and we are here right now, at approximately 11:15 at night, debating this bill, knowing that it's an important issue, knowing that we want real answers to our questions, and instead of being able to actually speak cohesively to those questions, the minister gets up and spouts talking points. Mr. Speaker, that either shows the minister doesn't understand the bill, doesn't comprehensively understand the bill that he's bringing forward, or doesn't want to answer the questions of the Official Opposition, and that is indeed his job.

Our job here is to ask questions on legislation, debate legislation, understand the legislation, and provide alternatives and provide suggestions and amendments. That is the job of every single private member of this Assembly, opposition and government included, and the government's job, particularly the government member, the minister, who is sponsoring this bill, the Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, particularly that

minister – it is his job to get up and defend and debate those amendments and suggestions.

Now, we are unable to get any answers from this minister. He gets up and talks about buses over and over and over again. Well, instead of talking about buses, how about answering the questions? How about talking about the actual issues? Talk about what's in the bill. Talk about why there was money being taken away from social service organizations that are there to actually provide services to victims of crime, right? All these people that the minister is talking about: some of them will require certain services. That may be in need of funds for things like funerals, as my colleague has already mentioned. That could be things like different types of victim services for traumatic stress and for other physical stress and things like that, Mr. Speaker.

All of these are very legitimate questions that this bill will directly impact. It directly affects the amount of funding that will be available. This fund, which I believe is decades old, over two decades old now, Mr. Speaker, was originally intended to support these victims, right? That was the intent of this fund. It's in the name: the victims of crime fund. When we ask questions like, "Well, what is happening to these victims, why are there being changes made, and how come you're stealing from one hand to pay for the \$4.7 billion handout on the other?", these are very important questions that say: "What is going on? Why does the government think that it's okay to take away from victims to cover their corporate giveaway?" These are really important questions.

But instead of giving any real answers, this minister chooses to stand in this place and waste the time of this Assembly or to get up and talk about issues that are well past, talk about issues that he's been bringing up since last summer, I believe, Mr. Speaker, instead of actually addressing the bill, instead of actually addressing the questions that this opposition has been sent here by our constituents to ask, instead of actually answering questions like "What research has been done on the effectiveness of the victims of crime fund?" and instead of answering questions as to what effect the social service organizations that depend on this funding will receive or what proportions of these organizations will receive a reduction in funds. Instead of answering any of these questions – I don't even know if he has the notes on any of these questions while he's trying to debate this here tonight – he decides to get up and talk about buses. That's what's so shocking.

What's so shocking is that we are here debating a very serious bill. We're debating a bill that has significant consequences for people who need our support the most, the people that have been victims of quite often very serious crimes and are looking for some sort of disbursement to assist them with some of the things that they have gone through and perhaps try to move on with their lives and receive some sort of support. That could be in some cases direct disbursements, but I think that in the majority of cases it's through social service organizations, Mr. Speaker. In the majority of cases it's disbursed through organizations that do things like counselling, that do things like provide different types of mental support and different types of direct support as well. In the majority of the cases these organizations depend solely on government funding. Some of these organizations will depend solely on the victims of crime fund. How will they be affected?

Mr. Speaker, I think these are important questions. If the minister can't get up and say how much money is going to be reduced for these organizations, if the minister can't get up and name which Albertans he thinks don't deserve these funds, then I think that's a really important question we need answered before we can move forward with this bill.

This bill will directly take money away from those people. It will take money away from victims who need these services, services

for people who are victims, again, of major crimes, quite significant crimes. It's in the name of the fund. It's quite simple. I think that the minister should be quite ashamed for getting up here and speaking about how he knows as an MLA who has been across the province and has seen first-hand how this affects people. Great. So he's seen first-hand. Then perhaps he can tell those people first-hand that he wants to take away from their services after they've been a victim of crime.

Yes, we absolutely have a commitment here. We have a duty and an obligation to ensure that we do fight back against crime and that we do try to implement a rural crime strategy and a crime strategy across this province, indeed. Our government was starting some of that work, and we had seen significant reductions in rural crime. The statistics from Alberta Justice will show it, Mr. Speaker, and this minister is continuing some of that work and doing some other work as well.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, while we are trying to reduce the cases of crime and to support our policing services, instead of doing that, he decides: well, everyone who has already been a victim of crime and people who are going to be a victim of crime don't deserve as much. That's what this minister is saying with this bill. That's what I think he's saying. He's bringing forward a bill that actually takes money away from the services provided to victims of crime and the victims themselves. That's what this bill actually does.

When we look at the victims of crime fund, it is there specifically, or was there specifically, I guess – after we pass this bill, it won't be anymore – to support those people who were victims, whether they were in rural communities or urban communities. When they were victims of major crimes, they received some sort of support. That was the intent. Why is this minister getting up in this place and saying that those victims no longer deserve that support? Why is he saying that he could take away from that support and put it somewhere else?

Mr. Speaker, I know that this government needs to find a way to pay for their \$4.7 billion corporate handout. That's true. They blew a hole in the budget, and they don't know where to pull from. But it is wrong to take money out of the pockets of the victims. It is wrong to take money out of funds that were specifically designed for supporting victims. That is wrong. I don't know how else to put it. I think it's the simplest thing we can say. When you talk about the type of work we are sent here to do, it's to support the social services, it's to support Albertans, it's to support people who are victims of major crimes, and that's what we were trying to do with this fund. Instead, the minister has decided that that money should be taken out of it and should no longer be allocated.

We saw this coming, Mr. Speaker. It was in the budget. When we brought it up around the budget and it was first introduced, this minister basically waved it off as fearmongering. Now we see that that's not true; it wasn't fearmongering. It's absolutely true. This minister is raiding the victims of crime fund. This minister is raiding the victims of crime fund and taking away from every single Albertan who needs it. That is absolutely shameful. That's absolutely shocking.

11:20

We look at people, for example, who are victims of homicide, so families of people who are victims of homicide, and quite often they will need some disbursements, and quite often they will need things like mental support. Quite often they will need things like extended periods of support, and in some cases, where there's significant posttraumatic stress disorder, they could need support for many years, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I know people who have had access to these types of services and have used these services.

When we look at the types of services that are provided, these organizations are often solely government funded, right? It's often solely government funded. When we talk about those organizations and how they provide their services, it's through grants, right? It's through grants like the victims of crime fund. And they don't have other revenue streams. They're not charging the people who just had a sister who was murdered. They're not charging these people for these services. That is not the intent of these services. That is not what this government's intent should be. This government should be trying to support those organizations and saying: you are doing good work. We should be telling these organizations that they are doing good work and that they should continue to do that work.

Instead, this government has decided to take from their pockets, to reduce those grants. And we don't know by how much, in what amounts. This minister has the discretion, thanks to this bill, to raid the fund and use it for other purposes, Mr. Speaker. That's what's so shocking, that this minister won't get up and actually talk about what that means, won't actually get up and talk about what that difference will be for these victims, right? He won't actually tell us what the difference will be. How much will services be reduced? How many people will no longer be able to access counselling? How many people will no longer receive a disbursement for a funeral? How much less would that disbursement be? How many dollars less will these counselling services receive? Those are real questions that we need answered in this place before we can move forward with this bill. Those are real questions that we need answered in terms of compassion – right? – to understand what's going to happen to the Albertans who suffered from major crimes, from significant crimes.

When we're looking at things like these changes in eligibility, when we're looking at things like these other significant changes to the victims' fund, we need to know what the long-term effects will be, right? Mr. Speaker, there are going to be long-term effects. This is a significant change. This fund has largely been unchanged for two decades. It largely hasn't had significant changes for two decades. It largely has been able to provide supports for Albertans for two decades. But the government today is saying: that's not good enough, right? Instead, we should reduce those services. We should take away from those Albertans. We should tell people who have been victims of major crimes and their family members who need major supports – we should tell them that they don't need that any more. We're going to take that money, pay for our \$4.7 billion corporate handout, and try to cover off something else.

That's what this minister is doing by getting up and refusing to answer questions. When this minister refuses to answer legitimate questions from the opposition, refuses to talk about what the effects of attacking this fund are going to be, refuses to talk about what the intent of this fund even originally was, Mr. Speaker, and instead goes off on tirades about other issues that are completely unrelated to the victims of crime fund, that's what is shocking, right? That is absolutely shameful. It's shameful that this minister will not stand in this place and defend his attack on victims, will not get up in this place and defend his attack on families, will not get up in this place and defend his raiding of the social service organizations that so many Albertans rely on. That is absolutely shameful of this minister. It's something that I wouldn't even believe if it wasn't in front of me in black and white.

When we look at why we were sent here, when we look at why every single MLA was sent here, I don't think a single Albertan would say that it was to take money away from victims of crime. I think that is simply true. I don't think a single Albertan would say: let's take money out of the pockets of victims of crime, let's take money away from the support services of victims of crime, and let's take money away from the social service organizations that ensure

that victims of crime have things like counselling, have things like disbursements for funerals, things like all of those, Mr. Speaker. I don't think a single Albertan would tell us that that is the case. If you do think that your constituents think that's okay, that's okay. I mean, that's what you believe.

Mr. Speaker, I think Albertans will have a lot to say on this. I know that I received much correspondence asking me how this was even legal, right? Of course, many of my constituents are not lawyers, so they don't quite understand the nuances of the legislation here. Of course, the minister has the right to do this, to introduce this legislation and make these changes, but I don't think he has the compassion to look actual Albertans in the eye and say: we're going to take money away from victims, right? That's what we're talking about.

When people wrote me, they were in disbelief that this bill was actually coming forward. They could not believe that a government would actually take money out of social service organizations like this, that they would actually take money away from people who had suffered from things like homicides. That's the absolutely shocking part. Most Albertans can't even fathom that that would be proposed, and now we see it here in front of us in black and white. Now we see that indeed money is being taken away from the victims of crime fund for the first time in two decades. We see now that people, whether they are in rural or urban environments, no matter where they live in Alberta, if they have been a victim of a major crime, they will get less. They will have less support. They will have fewer services. They will have fewer organizations available to them. Mr. Speaker, that is extremely shocking. It's extremely shocking that this government has been so heartless.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen for questions and comments.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank my friend from Edmonton-South for – I want to double-check that because we often confuse Edmonton-South and Edmonton-South West in this Chamber, and I don't want to be guilty of that. I want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-South for his comments. I know that he has coolly and calmly explained a number of the concerns that he has identified with the bill, and I certainly know that I appreciate that I can always count on the Member for Edmonton-South to calm the waters here in the House with his speeches. I know that tension can run a little bit high, nerves can be fraught, and it's always a relief to hear the Member for Edmonton-South get up and apply the balm of his voice to the Legislature and the members herein so that cooler and more rational heads can prevail.

You know, given the measured pace and tone that the Member for Edmonton-South often speaks with, I'm concerned that 15 minutes is never enough time for him to fully express his ideas and get his points across, so I was wondering if the Member for Edmonton-South would like to take advantage of the additional time remaining under 29(2)(a) to perhaps fully elaborate on some of the points that he was not able to get across in the time allotted.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The floor will go to the hon. Member for Edmonton-South for a response.

Mr. Dang: Sure. How much time is left, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker: Three minutes.

Mr. Dang: Three minutes? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's always a pleasure to rise and have that extra three minutes. I mean, that extra time really can make all the difference. As you may have noticed, Mr. Speaker, I don't speak that quickly, so I need a bit of extra time to get all of my words out sometimes.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's pretty clear, when we look at this bill again and again, that it doesn't accomplish any of its stated goals, right? This bill states that it's going to do all of these things like strengthen public safety and help all these people, and it simply doesn't do that. It simply doesn't. When we look at the Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, that's simply a farce, because instead of strengthening public safety, what it does is that it takes away from victims and then covers off funding that was pulled to pay for the \$4.7 billion corporate handout. That's the plain black and white of it, right? The reality is that all of the funding that was supposed to be there for rural crime, that was there under the NDP government, that was showing reductions in rural crime, that was having a positive impact but instead was pulled, used to pay for a \$4.7 billion corporate handout, and now this government is scrambling to pay that off and to cover off all of these missing funds.

Instead of being able to actually strengthen public safety, what the government has managed to do is that they've hurt victims of crime. They've attacked victims of crime, and they've attacked a fund that has gone unchanged for over two decades. Then, on the other hand, they've scrambled to fill up a patchwork of funding that should have already been there, right? That's all this government has done. This government has done nothing other than scramble to backfill their \$4.7 billion corporate handout.

11:30

It's an absolute shocker. It's an absolute shame. It's an absolute shame that this minister will not get up in this place and defend himself, that he will not get up in this place and explain to Albertans why he is taking away from social service organizations, why he is taking away from victims of serious crimes. He will not get up in this place and explain to Albertans why those people who have experienced these serious crimes, those families who need certain disbursements, those families who need certain services can no longer receive those or will receive less of them. He will not even get up in this place and explain how much less they will receive, Mr. Speaker. That's what's absolutely shameful, because this place is not a place that is supposed to be full of rhetoric like the minister has brought to us. It's not a place that's supposed to be full of empty talking points like the minister has brought to us. Instead, he's supposed to answer questions about his legislation, the bill that he is sponsoring, bringing to this Chamber, suggesting that every single member in this place should vote for.

Instead of actually answering questions about the bill, he has gotten up and spoken about buses, Mr. Speaker. That's something that I think Albertans will be disappointed with. I know that I'm disappointed with it. I know that members of this opposition caucus are disappointed with it. I think that this minister should think very hard about what his job is in this place and that he should get up and apologize to Albertans and apologize to this House and do his job.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I will take the opportunity to remind hon. members that there are lounges available for discussions should those discussions be something that our hon. members would like to have and engage in.

If there are any members who are looking to join the debate – I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie is joining the debate.

Member Loyola: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In order to frame the contribution that I'd like to make to this debate, I just wanted to go back to: specifically, what are the rights of a person who is actually a victim of crime? The fact is that as a government we strive to make sure that this person is protected, their safety is taken into consideration, of course, and, most importantly, the keyword is that they be treated with dignity. Let's not forget that that's what the victims of crime fund is intended to do.

Then that begs the question: well, what are the protections and rights that a person who is a victim of crime has under, actually, the current legislation? While I'm going through what these protections and rights are, I would ask us all to contemplate, then, if the proposed changes are actually enhancing these rights and protections, or will they have a negative impact upon them? I'm reading right from the Alberta government web page just in order to help us frame this and consider what's actually happening here.

Alberta victims have protection under the Alberta Victims of Crime Act . . . Your rights include the following:

- you should be treated with courtesy, compassion and respect
- your privacy should be considered and respected to the greatest extent possible
- all reasonable measures should be taken to minimize inconvenience to you
- your safety and security should be considered at all stages of the criminal justice process
- you should be protected from intimidation and retaliation by all means necessary
- you should be given information about the criminal justice system, your role and opportunities to participate in criminal justice processes
- you should be given information about the status of the investigation, the scheduling, progress and final outcome of the proceedings and the status of the offender in the correctional system
- you should be given information about available victim assistance services, including victim impact statements, requesting restitution, means of obtaining financial reparation and other programs
- you should promptly receive financial benefits for the injuries that you have suffered
- if charges are laid, you have the right to prepare and give the court a victim impact statement that tells how the crime affected you
- you have the right to ask to read your victim impact statement out loud in court, or ask someone else to read it for you
- you have the right to not be contacted by inmates
- your views, concerns and representation are an important consideration in criminal justice processes
- you should be given information about how to complain when you believe that these principles have not been followed
- your needs, concerns and diversity should be considered in the development and delivery of programs, education, and training.

Under the current act, before the suggested changes that have been brought forward, there is a range of community-based organizations that actually help in providing the exact rights and protections that I just finished talking about. The fact is that nonprofit groups and community groups, including indigenous

communities, have access to funds that actually help provide these services and make sure that these people are actually receiving the rights that we as a government, as a society, deem absolutely essential under this piece of legislation. For police-based services a nonprofit organization with victims' services units helps provide this. Municipalities and bands and tribal councils are involved in the process. Then, of course, individual victims of violent crimes are helped with any physical damage, emotional harm, property damage, and any economic loss as a result of the crime.

What we see happening is that they're taking money from this victims of crime fund and they're allocating it towards ALERT, RAPID force, drug treatment courts, and hiring more Crown prosecutors, all of which are good things, right? However, the problem here is that they're taking the money from the victims of crime fund in order to provide further funding to these other aspects and these other priorities, and that's what's in question here before all of us today. Why does it need to be taken out of the victims of crime fund? I would argue that the rights and protections that I just finished going through would be negatively impacted by the money actually being taken from them, money being taken away from nonprofit organizations that are actually providing these services and helping the victims of crime.

I would like to hear directly from the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General, his response to actually defending what is being proposed in this piece of legislation. As an opposition it is our duty to actually come into this House and ask these questions, and I agree with the Member for Edmonton-South, I mean, the talking points that the minister gets up and talks about, buses, it's overplayed. Please. All right? It's frustrating. It's frustrating to get up in this House and ask questions, legitimate, authentic, and genuine questions, and . . . [interjection] I hear that, and don't get me wrong; I understand that there's frustration on both sides. I understand that.

But the reality is that we need to do what Albertans are asking, and when you're telling the Alberta public that you're going to take money out of the victims of crime fund, the inevitable question that they have is then: how are the rights and protections that we're supposed to be giving these people who actually experienced – and this is the kicker because, you know, the minister gets up and he talks about these rural communities and how they're being impacted. That victims of crime fund is actually supposed to be helping the same people that he's talking about in these rural communities that have been through the horrendous things that they've experienced. You're taking the money out of the victims of crime fund. While at one point you're saying that you're there defending the rights and protections that these very people from these rural communities should be afforded by our government, by our society, and then at the same time saying: no; we're going to take the money out of there and put it into these other things. So it doesn't match up for me, especially when the minister gets up and rehashes the same old talking points from before, from a year ago. I'm asking: please answer the questions that we have. Make clarifications so that we can understand. What's the rationale?

11:40

Under the current piece of legislation, it would be that you'd fill out a witness benefit and/or death benefit application; you do not have to wait for a charge or conviction to apply for financial benefits. One of the questions that I have for the minister is: is this going to be impacted with the proposed legislation that we have before us? I don't know. It's a genuine, honest question that I feel that constituents of mine, and not only of mine but all Albertans want to know the answer to.

Under the current financial benefits of the program, there are injury benefits. There's actually a one-time \$5,000 benefit that

would go to a witness of homicide, someone who was a witness to a homicide. Now, God forbid that someone, one of us would have to actually experience this first-hand. My heart goes out to the people who actually have had to live through that experience because I can imagine that it's severely traumatic. And I ask myself: okay, well, why take the money from that? Like, this is an individual that will honestly need other services, and even under the protection and rights that we're talking about.

My understanding – and this is the thing; correct me if I'm wrong. I want the minister to correct me if I'm wrong. My understanding is that this would come to an end. This benefit of \$5,000 to an individual who was a witness to homicide is actually going to be coming to an end. And I ask myself: is this dignified? Is this the way that we should be treating Albertans who actually lived through this experience? Don't take the money from there. Don't take the money from there.

There's a death benefit and a funeral cost for a homicide victim. My question is: will that continue? Yes or no? There are supplemental benefits for monthly payments for victims with severe injuries needing assistance for daily activities. If there's anything that would be a tragedy, it would be taking away this, taking away this right and protection from an Albertan that experiences crime, that because of a severe injury they need assistance for daily activities. And we're going to take that right away from them, because we're taking money out of this particular fund in order to put it into another program?

There's also the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act, a legacy program that ceased taking new applications in 1996, for applicants to receive lifetime benefits. All this will, as is my understanding, be impacted negatively. This is what I want the minister to get up and speak to in this House and put on the record: if this is indeed what is being proposed, then what is the rationale? If the minister is suggesting that taking the money from this area and putting it into another fund, in another program will actually enhance the protection and rights of Albertans in comparison, then I want to hear what that rationale is. And I don't think it's too much to ask.

One of the things that I wanted to touch upon is that this isn't the first piece of legislation or the first bill, proposed legislation, that we have in front of this House that is actually doing what I'm going to discuss. This is what, for me, is incredibly problematic, that what we're going to see now is the elimination of the injury and witness to homicide benefits. But, also, the board that operates to help out in these situations, the Criminal Injuries Review Board, which is an independent review body established under the Victims of Crime Act to conduct a review of decisions made under the victims of crime financial benefits: it's my understanding that this board will cease to exist.

This isn't the first example of this government eliminating agencies, boards, and commissions where Albertans have been selected to participate in the governing and aiding in the governing in this province, and this government is taking the power away and putting it in the hands of the minister. Correct me if I'm wrong, Minister, if I'm interpreting this wrong. This is something that is happening time and time and time and time again.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has risen for questions and comments.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank my colleague for Edmonton-Ellerslie for his comments. I think that they were very reasoned and thought out, and I think he had a few more comments he wanted to finish, so I'd like to give him that opportunity.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to respond.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my hon. colleague from Edmonton-South for giving me the opportunity to continue, because this is a warning that I make to Albertans. I know there are perhaps not a lot of Albertans watching us at this time of night, but just the same I'm going to speak to it.

Time and time and time and time again we see that this government is taking the power away from agencies, boards, and commissions, which were created in order to democratize the governing process, that is to say, to gain the insight and perspectives of other Albertans in helping this government make decisions that will actually benefit all the people of Alberta, Mr. Speaker. That is what the intention of these agencies, boards, and commissions is.

What we see this government doing time and time and time again is eliminating – and if they're not outright eliminating agencies, boards, and commissions, they're actually taking the power away from them and putting that power in the hands of the ministers that form this government, this cabinet. They're the ones that are taking all the power and making all the decisions. How is this enhancing our democracy, Mr. Speaker? That is the question that I have for this government. I'm pretty sure that when these same members were in opposition, they spoke specifically to this, many a time – many a time – criticizing if we as the previous government would take an action like this.

To me, it seems an injustice. It's an injustice that we're taking the democratic governing process away from other Albertans and putting it in the hands of just one person. That's what we see in this proposed bill. Correct me if I'm wrong, Minister; I'd like to hear your response to this. What is the justification? Mr. Speaker, I would like to hear from the minister: what is the justification, what is the rationale for eliminating this particular board, that helps in this process, that is intending to aid in the protection of rights of Albertans who have actually experienced a crime, who are themselves a victim of crime?

I'd like to give the minister this opportunity to get up and answer the questions that I have posed for him in this debate and not hear about buses, to hear about how these decisions, these proposed changes to this legislation, are actually going to help protect the rights of these victims of crime so that they would be treated with the dignity that they deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

11:50

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

About one minute remains under 29(2)(a).

Seeing as there are no takers for the remaining 29(2)(a) allotment of time, then I will invite members to speak again to the bill. I see the hon. Government House Leader has risen to speak.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this legislation. It comes as no surprise, I would imagine, to you that I certainly do support the legislation and would like to thank the hon. the Justice minister for bringing it forward to the Legislature this evening for an important debate.

I listened to the last NDP member speak on this piece of legislation with great interest for the last little while. I was quite shocked to hear some of his comments, to hear his opinion on how things progressed on this important file over the last several years inside this Chamber. The hon. member talks about the need to be courteous and compassionate to victims of crime, Mr. Speaker. Now, I certainly would agree with that statement, but I'm shocked to hear it from the NDP, who were far from that, from my

perspective and from my constituents' perspectives, when they had the pleasure of being on the government side of the House.

You know, some of my government colleagues now who were with me in opposition will recall a gentleman who lived in Leslieville, Alberta, just outside of Rocky Mountain House, just shy of 80 years old. He and his wife lived there together. He had a home invasion done on his home. Actually, what happened, Mr. Speaker, was that somebody robbed his shop. If you swing by his home, you'll see he does lots of woodwork within his retirement years in a beautiful shop back there. Somebody was robbing the shop. He heard noises outside, and he made a mistake. Quite honestly, he would tell you this afterwards. Nobody should be so scared that they have to go to their shop, but he ended up in a spot where he ended up being beaten in that garage almost to death, a horrific situation. He could barely make it back to the house to be able to get his wife to call an ambulance to come and help him. I talked to his son the next day, who arrived at the house shortly after the police did, thinking that his dad likely was not with them anymore given just how bad the blood and the scenario were within that shop.

Mr. Speaker, that's just one example of crimes that we would take to this place. The hon. member did say that we would speak about that in great detail, about what was happening to our constituents, and we could get no help from the government of the day. In fact, I brought and filled the galleries full of people from central Alberta. My counties ponied up the money to try to help victims of crime be able to get there from rural Alberta, and we filled them up. They were just full of farmers and people that had been robbed inside rural Alberta, who had been victims of rural crime repeatedly and were scared enough that they chose to come all the way to Edmonton. My constituents don't like to drive up to Edmonton, let alone to the Legislature, in the middle of a workday very often, but they were here for question period.

When I moved an emergency debate in this Legislature and talked about that very story and other stories that were happening to my constituents, did the NDP of the day show any courtesy or compassion to those people in the galleries? No. The now Leader of the Opposition, the then Premier, laughed when I brought forward that motion and then said that there was no rural crime problem despite the fact that the galleries were full of crime victims, Mr. Speaker.

Fast-forward to now. Now we've got a Minister of Justice – and I like to tease him, Mr. Speaker, when he travels around through rural Alberta. Good-natured teasing: I know he takes it that way. He comes to see the great places that we call home. I give him a hard time for being from downtown Calgary. In fact, I was introducing him in Rocky Mountain House not too long ago, and I gave him a hard time for being a Starbucks-drinking lawyer. There are not a lot of Starbucks-drinking lawyers in Rocky Mountain House. But that member came to my community and took the time to stand inside the community centre and other community centres all across this province and actually hear from victims of crime, actually hear the stories of what was taking place inside our communities.

Just south of Rocky Mountain House, in Caroline, the ATB bank – at this point, Mr. Speaker, we don't even know if we can keep a bank machine any more because every few weeks somebody wraps a chain around it with a big bulldozer that they've stolen from somewhere else and yanks the bank machine down the road, up to the point where they've got to pull the cash out every night from the machine. Across the street – and the Minister of Justice knows this story well because he met with them – is the store that holds that whole community, that whole village together. They keep driving trucks through the front window of that store, up to the point that that store owner can't even get insurance any more to be able

to keep that store. That's a real rural crime problem. Those are real victims.

That member can stand in the House on his high horse and act like he worked for the people of Alberta, act like he understood what was taking place with rural crime, Mr. Speaker, but here are the facts. Unlike the Justice minister, that member never took a moment to even come out to rural Alberta and talk to real victims of crime in rural Alberta. There are victims of crime in other cities as well, but we're talking primarily in his comments about rural crime. He never bothered. The former Minister of Justice, as far as I am aware, not once went to rural Alberta and stood inside a community centre with a mic and took questions from rural Albertans to understand what was taking place for them inside their communities.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, as you well know, during the height of what I would call the rural crime pandemic – and by far I am not saying that the rural crime issue is solved, but there was a period of time where it was really bad in our constituencies – we would travel around with Conservative Members of Parliament, who were in opposition at the time, and we would hold town halls with the RCMP present. To their credit, K Division would always send us senior-level RCMP officers to participate in that process with us. Opposition MLAs here inside the province of Alberta – not the NDP government MLAs; they wouldn't come – and opposition MPs, not government MPs – there weren't a lot of government MPs anywhere in the province at the time, not a lot of Liberal MPs, certainly not in rural Alberta – would hold community meetings, open mic meetings. Not once did an NDP member come to one of those, let alone a cabinet minister.

You know, I was in Bluffton at the height of that, just north of Rimbey, and a 98-year-old lady – I won't say her name – came to the mic and spent her time asking MP Calkins, up in that neck of the woods, and myself how she could arm herself and how and when she would be able to defend herself. Some people kind of thought that that was humorous, you know: you're up in Bluffton and you have a 98-year-old lady talking about buying a gun to defend herself. I didn't think it was humorous. She was born and raised – I know her well – on the farm that she lived on. Her husband had been gone for several years. She was still there in the same farmhouse where they'd been together. Her kids also live on the farm now, her son and daughter-in-law and their kids, but elsewhere on the farm. She is so scared in her home that she's coming out to a town hall after 98 years inside that community, asking how she gets a gun to defend herself and when she'd be able to defend herself because she's that scared, Mr. Speaker. That's shameful, and the NDP couldn't even bother to come and talk to them.

Now they want to stand inside the Assembly and act like they are somehow the great champion of crime victims and the great champion of rural crime victims, Mr. Speaker. It's ridiculous. If they truly had taken time to come and talk to Albertans, they would understand that the Minister of Justice is correct. What victims of crime want is us to deal with crime. What victims of crime want in all those town halls that I stood in was us to get officers there to be able to help them. What victims of crime want is us to take this seriously. What victims of crime want is judges to take property crime seriously. What victims of crime want, particularly in rural Alberta at the moment, is for somebody to say: yes, what's happening to you is wrong. Ninety-eight-year-old ladies who've lived in our communities for almost a century should not be so

scared that they have to go get a gun to be able to sleep at night, and that is what has been happening in our communities.

So I thank the Minister of Justice for taking the time to travel rural Alberta and learn about what has been taking place in those communities. I know it's had an impact on him. He has said that. You can't stand inside communities and hear about people having home invasions or being robbed multiple times in the same week and no police officers able to get to them.

He and I dealt with one just outside of Eckville, a dear friend of mine's daughter, a home invasion in the middle of the night, my worst nightmare because I live in a very remote place. I love living in a very remote place, as you know, Mr. Speaker, but when I'm up here, all the way away from my family, three, three and a half hours away from my family right now, I get scared that tonight will be the night that I get a call at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning to find out that my wife and kids have unfortunately experienced that and are in danger and that I can't get there to help them.

12:00

Well, in this case, that case outside of Eckville, that's exactly what happened to a dear friend of mine, whose daughter had to call him on the phone and tell him to come help, screaming for help, and then he had to listen on the phone to his daughter be beaten almost to death inside her own house. Those are rural crime victims. That's what the Minister of Justice is trying to deal with. That's who the NDP, when they came here to help, turned away from and never bothered. In fact, Mr. Speaker, as I said, the now Leader of the Opposition made clear that she did not think that there was a rural crime problem at the time despite the fact that the galleries were full of people saying: hey, we're being robbed.

Mr. Speaker, through you to the opposition, if you want to learn about rural crime, it's not too late. I mean, I understand that you lost every seat in rural Alberta. It was amazing that you had any in the first place. I never understood that, to be honest, but some of the northern seats decided to go NDP, and that's their choice. Democracy is never wrong, just like it wasn't wrong this time when they fired everybody from northern Alberta who got elected to the NDP caucus, because they wouldn't represent their constituents on things like rural crime.

But you can now come and learn. The Minister of Justice has offered. I mean, it's become kind of a routine to talk about the bus. I know that drives the NDP nuts, but I do think he's sincere in saying that he would give the opposition the opportunity to come out and see what we learned, because this is not a partisan issue, at the end of the day. This should be us: the government of Alberta, the Legislature, the opposition. Everybody should be united in trying to keep our victims safe.

I just can't be any more clear than to say that the opposition should take a step back. They want to reject everything. I get it. I was in opposition. I wanted to reject almost everything the NDP did, too. That's the instinct when you're in opposition. But take a step back. [interjection] No, I did. I actually voted for several things that the now opposition, when they were in government, brought forward, as did you, Mr. Speaker. There are good ideas that they did bring forward. They were few and far between, from my perspective, but that's fine. We're in disagreement on that, but how could we be in disagreement when it comes to protecting victims of crime?

Instead of just automatically rejecting what the Minister of Justice is saying, just like, Mr. Speaker, the opposition when they were in government rejected what the people of Alberta were saying, I suggest they take a step back, ask some reasonable questions. Don't pretend to be the champions of rural crime or rural crime victims, because you're not. And there's no point in them

pretending to be. It's not going to gain them any votes. I can assure you that rural Alberta knows the NDP are not their champions on anything, let alone on crime.

But if they took a couple of moments and stepped back, communicated with the Minister of Justice, they would understand that this is being brought in place to truly help victims of crime and to continue moving us forward on the rural crime file to be able to prevent rural crime in communities like where I come from and where many of our colleagues come from and where Albertans are being victimized, including your constituents, Mr. Speaker. You come from a large rural constituency, and I know the rural crime issue weighs on your constituents as much as it does on mine.

If they backed off, Mr. Speaker, just a little bit and looked at it, they'd be able to help come out with real solutions from this place for Albertans. There are enough bills that we can have partisan fights on. Trust me; there are more coming, I'm sure. But on this issue why don't we all work together and actually help rural crime victims. This is the opportunity for the NDP to rise in the House and ask rural Albertans to forgive them for abandoning them while they were being victimized all across this province. Their leader laughed at them, and they did nothing while they were in power.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika has risen.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening under 29(2)(a) and to respond to the hon. House leader and, as I like to say, Sundre's favourite son. Like the hon. House leader, I do live in rural Alberta, a place that I cherish and that is very near and dear to my heart. I love it there. It's quiet. It's peaceful. There's lots of land to go out and explore and take your family out and visit. But with that peace also comes the feeling that there's always something potentially looming that could come at you in the night, and I'm not immune to that myself. You know, one evening my car was broken into while I had just parked on the street. You'd think that, living in Cardston, such a thing in such a small, quaint town wasn't really possible, but, Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that it is. We take those things very seriously.

That's why I think that this is not a partisan issue. This is an issue that we should be able to come together and agree upon, specifically about keeping people safe. It takes real leadership. It does take real leadership to address this issue. I'm very grateful to our Minister of Justice for the steps that he's taking on this bill, because he's taking rural crime very seriously, something that you, Mr. Speaker, know very much about and, of course, the House leader and, you know, dozens of my colleagues here in this Chamber who are from rural Alberta. Now, that's not to say that the urban centres are immune to that. I actually got my car broken into when I was in Calgary. Again, we're not immune to it, but it's something that is a different kind of beast in rural Alberta.

I'm grateful for that leadership from the Premier, from the hon. House leader, and from the Minister of Justice in having the courage to put this forward, to really address this issue head-on, because I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, given the history of the members opposite, this was not going to be something they would actually look at seriously if they were re-elected. And given that now they lack any members in rural Alberta, I believe they also lack any credibility on this issue. I look at the Leader of the Opposition, who, as the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre said, laughed at him when he filled the galleries with people from rural Alberta, suggesting that this is such an important issue, and she didn't take it that seriously.

So who is it going to be, Mr. Speaker? Who is going to really take the leadership role across the aisle and take this seriously? Who is going to be the next person to actually stand up in the face of the labour unions and their Twitter trolls and say: “You know what? We need to agree on this issue and many others, for that matter.” I mean, I look across the aisle, and I just don’t see it. Who is going to be the leader? Who is going to step up and defend rural Alberta?

We’ve heard the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud talk a little bit about rural Alberta, saying that people in Rocky Mountain wouldn’t like to hear the things that we’re saying in this Chamber, what this bill proposes to do. Yet in the same breath she says that she hasn’t really been there, dare I say really never been to rural Alberta in general. Frankly, she talked about her time in law school in Toronto, suggesting – I know the law schools in Toronto. Those are pretty high-priced law schools, but, you know, that member also failed to understand one of the most fundamental pillars of the law, which is attorney-client privilege, which she wanted to get rid of in a recent bill committee we just had. I thought that was kind of shameful, so obviously it can’t be that member.

Who is going to take the lead on rural crime, Mr. Speaker? What about the Member for Lethbridge-West, someone who was the Minister of Environment and Parks? But her credibility is entirely shot after her attempt at consultation in rural Alberta made some, we’ll say, false accusations. So it can’t be that member.

Who is going to take the lead on rural crime? Rural crime is so important. You know, I just don’t see it. Maybe the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. Then again, you’re talking about several credit downgrades in a time of what could have been tremendous economic prosperity, so there’s no credibility there either.

Mr. Speaker, I just don’t see the leadership on this issue of rural crime, and I’m so grateful that on this side of the House we take it so seriously that we actually put a bill forward. I am shocked that the members opposite can’t just see through the partisan fog and come to an understanding that this is so important that we can’t neglect it any longer, as they had in the past.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It’s a pleasure to rise to speak to Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020, and to address some of the issues that have been raised in this House – a bit of a reality check, if you will – because both the minister who sponsored this bill, the Government House Leader, and others have spent a great deal of time in a fantasy world where zero action was taken over four years on any issues of rural crime, and that is demonstrably not true. We know that, and we know that through documents that have already been tabled in this House; for example, articles that show rural crime rates decreasing across the province thanks to the Alberta crime reduction strategy brought forward by our Minister of Justice. We know this based on estimates, based on that rural crime strategy.

Just partway through its implementation they had seen 480 fewer homes broken into, 3,500 fewer thefts, 1,200 fewer vehicles stolen, and a 10 per cent decrease in property crime in rural Alberta, directly as a result of investments made by our government that were voted against by the then members of the opposition, a rural crime strategy that involved additional RCMP officers, new Crown prosecutors, RCMP civilian personnel, new court judges, new court clerks, new bail clerks and did not involve paying for that by downloading the costs to municipalities or taking it from the

victims of crime fund. By investing in rural crime prevention and investing in police enforcement, we were able to make a very real change and dent.

12:10

The characterization by those members of the debates in this House around that time: they were in a very different place than I was, because our government responded very strongly on this issue, took it seriously, and respected those who came forward to tell their stories. I’m very pleased to be able to speak to the record of moving to take action and to address some of these issues.

Now, the victims of crime fund has been supporting community organizations, indigenous communities, and victim service programming for over two decades. Through the debate that has happened – and the bill debate so far this evening has been very enlightening to me, particularly when some of my colleagues were asking very relevant questions on this piece of legislation, very specific questions. I was very pleased to see the Minister of Justice rise under 29(2)(a) in what I thought would be the response to some of the questions, but that was not his intention. Instead, he rose to again smear, to deliver partisan lines, not to engage in an actual, truthful debate. That’s disappointing.

As someone who was previously in that role, I can tell you that I always felt that it was a big part of my job and a responsibility of mine to be able to defend a piece of legislation that I brought into this House, and I can guarantee you that I always did. Sometimes the same question would be asked repeatedly after an answer had been provided, in which case maybe just providing the answer once would be sufficient, but the minister has not provided answers to reasonably asked questions, and that is a detriment to this process and to this Chamber.

At this moment, Mr. Speaker, I am going to move an amendment.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

If the LASS wants to go ahead and grab the amendment and bring it to me, then I’ll get you to proceed.

Ms Gray: May I provide the original?

The Speaker: Yeah. That’s probably fine. Thank you. Just give us a moment to continue. You can have a seat, if you want, while we get this part organized.

Hon. members, the amendment will be referred to as REF1. If you would like to receive a copy delivered to your seat, please indicate so by raising your hand. If not, the additional copies will be placed on the tabling table.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to proceed.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020, be amended by deleting all of the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 16, Victims of Crime (Strengthening Public Safety) Amendment Act, 2020, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

Mr. Speaker, I move this amendment for a number of reasons, but chief among them would be the need for us to have a real conversation and debate on this piece of legislation. As we’ve seen from the back and forth at second reading tonight, the Minister of Justice seems reluctant in this Chamber to respond to the questions that he’s being reasonably asked by the members of the opposition. By moving it to the Standing Committee on Families and

Communities, not only would it be an environment hopefully more conducive to the conversation that I think is incredibly important on this important piece of legislation, but we would also be able to have presenters, stakeholders, and others come to speak to the changes.

I would note, Mr. Speaker, that this legislation and these changes to the victims of crime fund are currently happening during a time of deep unrest, a pandemic. It may be difficult for stakeholders and others to follow along and see what is happening, but if we were able to move this to the standing committee, where people would be able to video in to give their thoughts and perspectives, we would be able to hear from additional stakeholders, and we would be able to really consider what is happening in this legislation.

Based on the conversation that I've heard so far, the arguments put forward by both my colleagues and the members of the government caucus, I understand that funds previously dedicated to victims of crime are now going to be used to pay for additional policing and public safety initiatives, including ALERT, RAPID force, drug treatment courts, hiring more Crown prosecutors, all things that previously had not been funded out of the victims of crime fund. Instead, as an example, our previous government made an investment to hire additional Crown prosecutors, to fund the crime prevention initiatives that are necessary, and to not download the costs onto municipalities, thereby helping to offset the provincial government's budget, which, as previously discussed, has a \$4.7 billion hole in it based on decisions made by this government.

Regardless of this government's budgeting decisions, the fundamental principle of the fund has been to help subsidize the programming, training, and services for victims of serious crime. I'd like to thank the MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie for taking a moment to remind us all of the rights that victims of crime have within our system based on the legislation. We need to make sure that we are using the victims of crime fund as effectively as possible. We need to make sure that the victims are at the forefront of our decision-making as a province as we look at this fund, not the bottom line of a government who has made promises and is now looking for places to fund them out of.

I believe that this amendment that I have brought forward would give this Chamber an opportunity to more fully consider this piece of legislation, to be able to ask questions, as has been happening, and ideally hear responses from government members, from the sponsoring minister should he deign to reply to the Official Opposition, things that we would be able to really talk about in this standing committee in an environment where, to be honest, Mr. Speaker, we are currently unable to have all members of the opposition because of social distancing. From a public safety perspective, in a committee all members would be able to connect through teleconferencing should they choose to. I think that may be an advantage and something to consider at this time given world events and the state of things.

Some of the questions that our caucus has already raised are questions around who the government consulted with and how those consultations were reflected in the bill. We've heard concerns from stakeholders that services that they are providing may be getting defunded. What we've heard is that there's a lot of uncertainty right now, so finding out more from the groups that are impacted by this change would be incredibly important.

I have questions around the change to the reporting age for minors. In the situation where a minor has become a victim of a crime, previously they had a longer window. Under this legislation, as I understand it, they would be expected to file within two years after the alleged crime. That might be a difficult thing for a minor, depending on their age, depending on what's happening.

12:20

Why are we limiting access to the victims of crime fund? To me, in limiting the age, making it so that a six-year-old can only access this until they're eight, it seems like you're limiting the opportunity for someone who may need support, who does deserve within the province of Alberta to be fully supported, may make them ineligible. So if a minor who was previously able to access this fund is no longer able to, does that mean that they, in order to get compensation, would need to find a lawyer? These are some of the concerns I have. Making sure of the funding and how it's allocated, the model that is changing within this legislation, understanding the impacts to the organizations and to the services they deliver is incredibly important.

There are so many impacts to victims of violent crimes, and I want to commend those who work in this space, and I share my respect for all those who are doing what I'm sure is very difficult work: hearing those stories, supporting people, making sure they're getting access to the reparation, restitution, and ways to survive and to move past, to thrive. Access to training programs and education can be incredibly important. Making sure that that continues to be a strong and available support for victims of crime in Alberta is incredibly important.

Now, I understand that the government's purpose, in part, is to help fund the hiring of some of their previously promised initiatives like 50 new prosecutors, increased funding for ALERT, but pulling back on the financial benefits paid to victims of crime in order to provide more funds to the policing costs and some of these programs I do not think is the right decision to make. I think that the victims of crime fund in its current state, which I believe it has been in for over two decades, should be left in its current state. Additional dollars to fund campaign promises need to be sourced from other places.

We need to make sure that there are supports. We need to make sure that there is a strong system. We need to make sure that we are addressing crime issues across our province, and we need to make sure that we're investing in communities. Redirecting funds from the victims of crime fund concerns me and obviously has concerned a number of my colleagues, who've all raised very important questions on this issue.

My amendment essentially says: not that this is a bad idea, but let's move this into a committee environment; let's put this in a place where all members are able to participate, where we can call people who can come before the committee to tell us more about their perspectives. I know that in my constituency office I have seen a couple of requests with concerns. In a committee environment we would be better able to listen to those Albertans, respond to them, explain these changes, and hopefully come to a good solution.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment. I see the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has risen.

Mr. Getson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I heard some really fulsome debate here. I don't know that it would be warranted for this item to be sent back to committee.

Again, given the feedback that I had from my constituents in our areas, given the fact that when this Starbucks-wielding lawyer came up to our neck of the woods – and it's not that far out of town. That's the interesting part. We're talking rural crime. We're literally sitting on the outskirts of Edmonton. We're sitting on the outskirts of Morinville, St. Albert. There was one Edmonton city police officer there, who didn't say that he was Edmonton city police at the time because my constituent works in the city, who said: "We don't have a rural crime problem. We've got a drug problem."

In Edmonton what happens is that they actually have the EPS that go out. Folks in this city can get covered: within five to 10 minutes there can be a constable at their door to respond to a scene, maybe 15 minutes, depending on which neck of the woods you're at, apparently.

Mr. Schmidt: I live in central Edmonton, and I can't get . . .

Mr. Getson: Oh. Sorry. I'm not sure if the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar wants to speak. I can carry on, maybe.

The coverage is a little bit different. What happens out in our area, from the Edmonton city police – not necessarily from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who isn't in that service, but this gentleman is – from his words: we don't have a rural crime issue; we have a drug issue. In Edmonton they can respond to these calls. They can actually be there in quick time.

On the rural side you just go outside the Edmonton city limits – like, west Henday is a little bit further past there, and then you're in my area. What happens is that the criminal element heads out to our area because it's like a dog chasing 10 rabbits. They know that they can get out there, and they can be in and out, a quick dash. They can be back in the city and do their stuff. So they can do the smash and grab and do those things.

Minister, when you came out there, we were brand new on the scene. The Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods citing all of these great statistics that they have: that is not indicative of my experience and those folks in that town hall. I started off by asking: how many folks own firearms? Probably 80 per cent of the hands in the crowd went up. And what I had said – and this is probably the most politically incorrect thing at that time – was: Minister, we don't have a problem taking care of the four-legged coyotes; it's the two-legged ones we have issues with. That was the sense.

When you talk about impact statements and folks that are stressed, things getting stolen and broken in the middle of the night, what resonated with me again on that was that when I asked, "How many people have had rural crime issues?" probably about 70 per cent of the hands went up. I said: "Okay. Who's been broken into more than once? Twice? Three times? Four times?" By the time we got to the fourth or the fifth time, there was still 30 per cent of those hands that were up in that room, a room of about 400, 500 people. This is what we're talking about.

Quite frankly, in all sincerity and all honesty, we don't need another blessed committee to study this. We don't need to keep going back. The steps that we've taken so far are actually addressing the issues, from the feedback and the consultation that we had. If we're talking about nuances in the budgets, that's fine. We're looking at allocating funds and looking for efficiencies, et cetera. Again, the crux of the problem is: deal with the issue. Deal with the issue at hand. Deal with the rural crime items. This is only one of the things in the tool kit to do it. That's, unfortunately, I think where we keep getting fixated. The opposition keeps fixating on one point, and they're looking at it in singularity rather than the overall package and the keys that we're putting together here.

Minister, I really appreciate the efforts that you're doing, wholeheartedly from folks in my community. I know that when I go home at night, I text my wife first, before I get there, so that the dogs don't come out or other things that go bump in the night or there's not a phone call to the police. In my area when you make a call to those police services, it's not 15 minutes or half an hour; it's an hour, an hour and a half. We've got four or five constables covering an area that's – I don't know – larger than the city of Edmonton, vast. And when you have all of those two-legged coyotes running around in the dark, they've got you outnumbered six ways to Sunday.

It wasn't until you started integrating the services and the police forces that you stopped the metal theft that was taking place. That might seem innocuous to some of you, but that's your equipment. People are going out there in the middle of the night and smashing your equipment apart, cutting cables, pulling batteries, doing all those things, and using it – I don't know – for the drug trade and everything else that's going on. You have them so bold and brazen that they're pulling up in your shop, standing out there with weapons, and you've got people sitting in their homes with children there, and they can't do anything. They're on the phone, calling.

We don't need to send this back to committee. With all sincerity, let's move this forward. Let's take the bipartisan stuff out of this. Let's get things rolling because, by gosh, we need the help.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there are 10 seconds remaining under 29(2)(a) if anyone has an additional brief question or comment.

Seeing none, we are back on the main bill. I see the hon. Minister of Health has risen.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move that we adjourn debate on this matter.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

12:30

Bill 4 Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020

[Debated adjourned June 1]

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in debate on Bill 4? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, Member; however, unfortunately, you've already spoken to second reading of Bill 4.

Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate?

Mr. Sabir: It's my understanding that I only spoke for five minutes.

The Speaker: That may be correct. However, if a debate has been adjourned or there was an intervening speaker following those remarks, unfortunately, that has concluded the amount of time that you have to speak at second reading. There are a few exceptions, like if debate adjourned and you were in the Chamber on another occasion, you could rejoin the debate, but because it wasn't adjourned on you, then it means that your time has passed for debate.

But I saw the hon. Member for Edmonton-South was rising.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 4, the Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020. It's interesting that this was brought forward like this because it's unfortunate that the legislation with the "fixed budget period" being in the name doesn't actually have a fixed budget date in the legislation itself.

I think it's an interesting piece of legislation. It's an interesting name. When we look at this and we can see that it establishes a range of 28 possible dates – right? – I don't think that actually accomplishes the stated goal in the name, so it can be a little bit misleading, Mr. Speaker. I think that's something that's interesting.

It think it's interesting when this puts the Premier and this bill at odds, actually, with the blue ribbon panel that suggested such a

thing, right? Mr. Speaker, it's important because when we look at the bill being introduced, we look at the hon. Finance minister having brought this forward, that ostensibly everything this government is trying to do has this core backing, has this backing of: this blue ribbon panel told us to do this thing, so we want to move forward with this at breakneck speed without any consultation and ignoring the concerns of Albertans. That's okay. The government wants to do that, and they can get along with that.

But the MacKinnon panel recommended a hard, fixed, and predictable date for the budget every year, and this bill does nothing of the sort, right? Simply put, I think this is exceptionally weak legislation. I think it's actually a little bit disappointing because I think the government had a good opportunity here. They could have done a good job of this bill. They could have accomplished the stated goals. They could have put into legislation what they put into the name of the bill. Mr. Speaker, you know the saying, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and indeed the cover of this book doesn't tell quite the truth of what's inside, and that's a little bit disappointing.

I think in its current incarnation, in its current bill, it isn't a particularly bad bill. I don't think the government was quite ready when they brought it forward. I don't think it was a bill that was quite thought through yet, and that's why I'm pleased and I'm hoping we'll be able to see some amendments to this bill as we move forward with this. I'm hopeful that we'll be able to get some co-operation to say that this bill should do what it intends to do, which is to actually set some fixed budget dates.

Mr. Speaker, I know this wasn't thought through, and I know that it wasn't quite complete when it was brought forward. I think it's a little bit disappointing because we know this government has a history of not thinking through their legislation, right? We know this government has a history of not doing their homework. We know this government has a history of writing one thing in the title and then doing a completely different thing in the actual legislation, and I think that's a little bit disappointing. But this government is seeming to make a pattern of it, and it's strange when they seem to be making a pattern of, basically, not wanting to do the job that they were sent here to do – right? – not wanting to actually go and do the hard work.

Mr. Speaker, our party has been there, and this party had been there for 44 years before that, and it would seem that they should have learned something from their predecessors, but they didn't. They didn't learn that they have to come here with bills that are ready. They didn't learn that they had to come here with those that actually accomplished their stated goals.

You know, Mr. Speaker, they do a lot of things that aren't thought out. They do things like exploit a loophole in order to take taxpayer bailouts for their party. They do things like throw \$4.7 billion away to corporations, and then they do things like commission this blue ribbon panel, this MacKinnon panel, to come up with this recommendation on a fixed budget date. Can't get any more simple than that. One day a year we're going to do this budget, right? That's basically what the recommendation was for this bill, that's in the name, the fixed budget period amendment act. Like, it's right there in front of us. Black and white. Let's do this one thing, get it forward. It'll be an easy bill to pass. Oh, wait; except we actually forgot – the government forgot to put the clause into the bill that does the one thing it's supposed to do. Like, it's absolutely shocking. It's absolutely shocking that this government is unable to accomplish the one recommendation that is in the title of the bill. It's hilarious – right? – that this government doesn't actually seem to know what their own bills are supposed to be doing, what their own panel suggested to them. It was so simple that they wrote it into the title and then forgot to put it in the clauses.

So, Mr. Speaker, as we move forward with this bill, I'm looking forward to seeing some amendments. I'm looking forward to being able to have opportunities to have some vigorous debate about the individual clauses of this bill, because it would appear that the Finance minister when he introduced this bill did not take the time to formally review those clauses and compare them to the title he chose. I think that's a little bit unfortunate.

I think it's a pattern that this government doesn't think through things like raising income taxes on every single Albertan year after year. They don't think through things like laying off tens of thousands of public service workers. And, again, we see that they can't even get the title and the clauses to line up here. It's this reoccurring theme that this government will not do the homework. They won't do the hard work that's required to actually pass good legislation. Mr. Speaker, it's hilarious, because the government just doesn't seem to realize that sometimes the contradictions are really, really big between the name and the clauses – right? – and Albertans are going to realize, the opposition is going to realize.

So they tried to slide one under here, Mr. Speaker, and they got caught. They got caught saying that they didn't actually do the work. They didn't actually apply what the MacKinnon panel told them to do. I mean, it's interesting, because the legislation is so overwhelmingly weak, it lacks so much substance, that it doesn't include any incentives or even any sanctions, right?

So does the government intend to introduce any incentives or sanctions to ensure that cabinet actually abides by these fixed dates, which, again, aren't in the bill, but if a fixed date is going to be set, what happens if the Finance minister fails to table a budget? That's something I think this bill needs to address. Will the government be punished if they fail to table a budget on time? If Canadians fail to file their taxes, for example, on time, they are punished for that, right? Will this government be punished if they fail to show their books to Albertans? Will this government be incentivized to show their books to Albertans? Will this government have anything at all in this bill that actually lets us know that they want to be accountable? It doesn't appear in this bill. It doesn't appear that this government has thought through any of these issues. It doesn't appear that the government even understands why they brought forward this bill.

I'm looking forward to, hopefully, the Finance minister getting up and saying that he'll be bringing amendments forward perhaps himself to ensure that he follows his own legislation. Does the Finance minister intend to follow the legislation? I mean, that's very important, because the legislation itself does not compel him to do so. I think that would be very concerning. I think it would be very concerning that this bill basically has no substance to it, right? It doesn't set a date, it doesn't say that the minister or the government has to do what's set out in the bill and, basically, it doesn't actually provide any of the things stated. It's not in alignment with the recommendation of the MacKinnon panel; I believe it's recommendation 25 I've got here, Mr. Speaker. So, really, I don't think that this government has actually aligned itself with those recommendations.

They had this one job, basically, with this bill. The Finance minister had one job. Recommendation 25: come up with a way to set a fixed budget period. And then the minister does what? He doesn't set a fixed budget period; he introduces a bill that says he's setting a fixed budget period. Like, there was no more simple way to do it. Indeed, it's shocking – right? – because instead of setting one day, the minister gives himself 28 possible days. So when you say, "fixed budget," it really is nothing of the sort.

12:40

I mean, I'm pretty pleased to be able to say that I think that this government is showing its true colours here. It's showing its true

colours that the accountability simply isn't there. The accountability simply doesn't exist. It doesn't believe in the accountability, and that's why they won't fulfill their promises. They won't fulfill what their own blue ribbon panel asked them to do. They won't fulfill what is in the name of the actual bill, Mr. Speaker. It's shocking because when you bring forward something that should be so simple – right? – when you bring forward a piece of legislation that is indeed so short, when you bring forward a piece of legislation that really doesn't require a lot of deep thought, and you mess it up this badly, it really does speak to something.

Really, it was much harder to mess this up than it was, for example, taking thousands of dollars from federal taxpayers in rebates to pay their political staff. It was much harder to mess this up than it was to raise income taxes for every single Albertan every year. It was much harder to lay off thousands of public service workers, thousands of educational assistants and education workers in the last few weeks. It was much harder to do all those things, Mr. Speaker, than it was to mess up this bill, yet they've managed to do all of those things, right? Like, they've managed to not only mess up the simplest recommendation; they've also messed up every other thing.

I think this government is showing time and time again that they aren't putting their work in. They aren't doing the homework. They aren't actually taking this job seriously, and they're running this government without actually considering the consequences of their actions. Mr. Speaker, I know it may seem insignificant whether it's a fixed budget of one day or 28 days. I know that's what some government members are laughing about right now, but really it shows a pattern of behaviour. It shows a pattern of behaviour that this government cannot be trusted to keep their promises even when it's in black and white in front of them from the MacKinnon panel, even when it's something that they committed to and said: we will follow through with these recommendations. It becomes very clear that Albertans cannot trust this government.

It's something that when you look at it individually, Mr. Speaker, it looks relatively insignificant, but when you look at it as a package with all the other pieces of legislation that are being brought forward, with all the other issues that are being brought forward by this government, we can see time and time again that this government simply will not take this job seriously. They simply will not take the duties and their jobs that they must do in this Assembly seriously. They will not take what Albertans demand of them seriously, and that is something that is shocking. It's this pattern of behaviour, that this bill perpetuates, again and again and again, that we can see that no matter what the bill is, they will not actually go in and think thoroughly about the consequences. They will not actually go and think thoroughly about what the adverse effects may be, about what the implications of these bills and recommendations will be.

When we look at it and say that there are 28 possible dates, that means, really, that the Finance minister has basically as much time as he has always had in the past to bring in a budget, so it doesn't meet the recommendation at all. But it also puts in no consequences and no incentives for the minister to do these things, right? If the minister intends to actually bring in incentives or sanctions, then I invite him to get up in this place and speak to them. I think that that's going to be very important. I think it's important that when we talk about this type of legislation and when we talk about things that are so vacuous and exceedingly weak, we understand that when we pass laws here and when we pass bills here and when we move them through this system and when we move them through the democratic process, we are serious about the bills we are bringing forward, and it seems that this government is not. It seems that this government is treating this as a joke, right?

Mr. Speaker, that's what is so unusual about how this government has chosen to govern. They have chosen to go in and basically checked off a list of things and said, "We want to do all these things," without thinking about any of the consequences, without thinking of any of the impacts on actual, everyday Albertans, without thinking of any of the impacts on how government should operate. Instead, this government has just said: we're going to do all these things because they sound pretty good to us on a piece of paper.

That's what it seems like is becoming a recurring theme here, Mr. Speaker. It seems like that's becoming the pattern. It seems like that's how this government wants to operate. It seems like this Finance minister does not actually want to take this fixed budget period seriously and he doesn't actually want to take this fixed budget period as a bill to bring forward because it doesn't actually establish anything that he wouldn't have already done. The 28-day period is quite extensive, and it would have been a predictable period of time anyways.

Mr. Speaker, I think at this time we've spoken quite a bit, at length to this, and I think the government has quite a bit to think about. I'd like to move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 7 Responsible Energy Development Amendment Act, 2020

[Debate adjourned May 28: Ms Gray speaking]

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are at Bill 7, second reading. It was adjourned on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, which would provide her the opportunity to continue some debate should she choose to do so. I'm more than happy to see her moving to her chair. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has the call. Oh, and there are 11 minutes remaining.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I had already begun talking about this piece, so I don't believe I will use the full 11 minutes. My main concern with this piece of legislation is that it does not purport to solve that which it says it will solve. When it comes to delays and approvals, in the analysis that I have reviewed, including analysis from CAPP and other major industry stakeholders, nobody has said that it's because the government needed a bigger stick to make AER move faster; it was issues with communication, it was issues with lack of clear policy direction, logistics, not having online processes, which are already under way. Arbitrary deadlines being set by cabinet is nobody's solution.

When we look to the comparator jurisdictions that this legislation is attempting to help us catch up to, the comparator jurisdictions don't have arbitrary timelines imposed by politicians when things aren't moving fast enough. The reason they don't do that is because when that kind of an action is taken, it can undermine the integrity of the process, and when the integrity of the process is undermined, then it's opened up to court challenges and you actually have more uncertainty that gets introduced into it. We need to make sure that consultations with our indigenous peoples, consultations with landowners and environmental groups are done well, to the highest standard, and a timeline isn't the answer when we're talking about making sure that it is done well and done appropriately. It puts us at risk of court challenges, Mr. Speaker.

What the real issue is is the AER being equipped to do its job, having the resources that it needs, having improved communication processes when decisions are being made and policies are being reflected on, making sure that we are creating an environment that

bolsters investor confidence as well as public confidence. Right now with the interest globally investors and others are very interested in environmental, social, governance performance to the highest standards, so making sure that Alberta continues to do that is incredibly important. And it's not a matter of a cabinet imposing timelines on these projects, which is what this bill does. We need to have an integrated process, not forced timelines, because when those consultation requirements are not being met, that puts investment at risk, that puts the process at risk, and it opens up to court challenges, which we have seen.

I know members from my caucus and other opposition members have already spoken about these issues, so with my concerns having been added to the record, I will conclude my remarks there. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if there's a brief question or comment for the hon. member.

Seeing none, we are back on the bill. I see the hon. Minister of Infrastructure has risen.

Mr. Panda: On 29(2)(a).

The Speaker: Oh, on 29(2)(a). That's correct. That's fine. The hon. member has a brief question or comment on 29(2)(a). He's available to make it.

Mr. Panda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My hon. colleague there, she implied that timing is not everything, but timing is really the important factor here. We're not telling AER to say yes or no to any project, but we are asking them to provide regularity and time certainty.

12:50

The simple fact is that if there is no time certainty, and then if these projects get delayed by endless and meaningless consultations, when people are trying to delay the projects forever, in the meantime the market has moved. For the product you're trying to sell, the product you want to develop and sell, there won't be any market because somebody else has taken that market, so we don't have any market to sell to. That means your product will become redundant. If that is what my hon. colleague and her caucus members want to do, to leave it in the ground, then, yes, timing doesn't matter, but otherwise time does matter.

We are not telling AER not to do this job. We are telling them actually that we are enabling them with all the processes. That's why we have restructured the board. Now they have the availability to do the due diligence within their scope, but in a timely fashion; otherwise, investors won't have any certainty. They won't invest in Alberta; they'll go to other jurisdictions, which is what we have seen in the last four years.

Mr. Speaker, you'll remember that you and I sat on this side of the House. We had a front row witnessing investors fleeing Alberta. With that has gone jobs, and many people's lives and livelihoods were affected. We continue to have that problem for reasons that are outside of our control like the Saudis' and Russians' war on pricing. Those things we can't control; those geopolitical situations we can't control. But what we can control is to have a good process in Alberta to do proper due diligence without interference or without all these court cases. That's what investors are looking for from the government of Alberta. We campaigned on that. It's a promise we made to Albertans, and we're trying to keep that promise. That's why we have to pass this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. There's approximately a minute and 50 seconds remaining in 29(2)(a), should she desire.

Ms Gray: Thank you. I just want to say that this bill is addressing the symptom and not the cause. We're talking about communication issues, process issues. It's not the need for an arbitrary deadline, which actually increases the risk of court challenges, to address the point that the member has raised. If an arbitrary timeline is why something has been approved rather than because a complete consultation and process has been engaged in that is robust and will withstand any scrutiny, that's a completely different thing. So I suggest to the member that having cabinet impose timelines is not the solution to the problem.

We need to make sure that we are addressing the issues that, as an example, CAPP found when they did their 2019 review. I appreciate the intent of this bill and responsible energy development, but you're actually opening yourselves up to more risk when you are forcing a process to fit into the timeline rather than figuring out what the kinks are and working with the stakeholders to improve it.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else in the 30 seconds remaining that would like to provide a 30-second comment? The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate the debate on that. Honestly, I do. I understand the process and debottlenecking, but unfortunately without ever giving a timeline, people just work toward zero timeline. What is always found on projects of any sort, to get completion you have to have a targeted date. People have to be motivated with a timeline to be able to get to it, and guaranteed they'll find a way to get there if someone's over their shoulder, saying: "Get it done. We need this done. We need an answer, either yes or no, by this date." That's really to motivate the people through the process.

The Speaker: The time for 29(2)(a) has elapsed. Is there anyone else wishing to join in second reading of Bill 7? The hon. the Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 7, Responsible Energy Development Amendment Act. I'll preface it by saying that as Albertans we own a huge wealth of natural resources, an abundance of natural resources, that we have developed and used over the last five, six decades, and the prosperity we see around our province, the prosperity we see around this great country has something to do with these resources. As Albertans we have a vested interest in making sure that we develop our resources in a responsible manner.

I'm saying all that because too often the other side will get up and will somehow try to paint it as if we are against resource development and they somehow have a copyright on getting this right. That's why I think I will say that those constituents I represent, the constituents we represent on this side are all part owners of these resources, and they expect us to represent them when there are conversations about resource development because they have an ownership stake in these resources. It's important that they be heard, that their views be known, and that we do so in a way that we are developing this resource that Albertans own jointly, in a way that results in good jobs, that results in prosperity today and for coming generations.

As a province we have a long history of dealing with and developing these resources. That brings with it a lot of experience;

that brings with it people who have expertise in developing these resources in a responsible manner. In so doing, over time we have set up organizations, like the Alberta Energy Regulator, that regulate our resources in the best interests of all Albertans, and the expertise they have is well recognized or well known not only in the province but across this country and continent. Here we have a piece of legislation that will give this government authority over AER to set timelines for their decision-making.

I want to say at the outset that we are in favour of predictable processes. We are in favour of certainty for everyone involved in resource development. We have seen many projects go sideways or take decades and then fail. So when we are talking about setting timelines, when we are talking about providing certainty for everyone involved, I think we must look at those projects. We must learn what we did well, what didn't go so well.

1:00

If we talk about Energy East and the court decisions around that back in 2013-14, we will clearly see that the government of the day then didn't get the assessments right, didn't get indigenous consultations right, and the project ended up in the courts. The courts, based on the evidence available to them, concluded that the government of the day didn't get the process right and that they didn't get the consultations right. Those delays were fatal to that project.

Similarly, we have right now a project, TMX. When we became government, we singularly focused on that, knowing that the sector needs takeaway capacity. In order to develop our resources, we need takeaway capacity and new markets to be able to sell those resources. So we focused on that. We addressed issues relating to the environment, we addressed issues relating to indigenous consultations, and we worked with the federal government on that project. At one point that project was also challenged in the Federal Court, and the Federal Court of Appeal ended up sending that project back to the federal government to work on indigenous consultations. Then they went back to the table. They went back to indigenous communities, provided them with support to build capacity to participate, and they did those consultations. After those consultations, that project was approved, and now it's well under way.

The point of saying that is that whenever we are setting timelines, it's critically important that we also focus on getting these assessments right, getting these consultations right, because these consultations, specifically when it comes to indigenous consultation, are their constitutional right, and we must get that right in order to provide certainty for these projects.

While in theory now the cabinet, Executive Council, here will have the authority that they can set those timelines, from this legislation it's not exactly clear what criteria they will be using to come up with those timelines. How will those timelines be set, and what's the expertise that cabinet brings that the AER doesn't have in that they cannot set those timelines? What kind of evidence, advice will they be relying on? Will they be doing their own consultations to set these timelines and make sure that these timelines are reasonable and that the work that will be done within those timelines satisfies the requirements such as indigenous consultations?

Unless we have that information, we are just left speculating that if you are going to set some arbitrary timelines, we may be setting ourselves up for legal battles, for long legal battles and challenges that other projects have faced. We clearly have Northern Gateway, Trans Mountain, and now Keystone XL as case studies to look into those projects in detail and see where we are falling short and why these projects are ending up in courts.

Leaving these timelines for the government to set is also concerning for many other reasons. Just recently we heard a comment from the Minister of Energy that when people are not able to protest, when people are preoccupied by COVID-19, when Albertans are losing their lives and their livelihoods, she saw that as an opportunity to go ahead and build the pipeline. Will we be seeing timelines just set against that kind of backdrop, or will we be doing some actual work where we will be consulting experts, where we will be consulting indigenous communities? We don't have any information so far to help us understand how these timelines will be set.

As I said, we support timelines. We support certainty for these projects. We want our resources to be developed in a responsible manner, in a timely manner, so that there can be jobs for Albertans, much-needed jobs for Albertans.

There are also concerns when things are left with this government. They have done kinds of things that are a cause for concern for this opposition, for many Albertans. For instance, just recently they rolled back or suspended a number of environmental protections, environmental monitoring without consulting anyone. Under these circumstances I think we need this government to answer some of these concerns so that we will be able to understand how this will provide certainty.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or a comment.

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

1:10

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Member for Calgary-McCall for making his comments on the bill, and I want to pick up where he left off, with respect to environmental monitoring requirements.

It was, of course, of great concern to me to learn that the Alberta Energy Regulator had arbitrarily and unilaterally suspended all environmental monitoring requirements in the upstream oil and gas sector until further notice. You know, when asked about the rationale behind this and what kind of protections Albertans can count on when it comes to the environment, the minister of the environment denied that the AER had done the very thing that they had done. So it's very disappointing to me that members of the government either don't know or refuse to be honest about what's going on with the Alberta Energy Regulator and environmental monitoring in the upstream oil and gas industry. It's of great concern to a number of Albertans.

One of the things that I want to dispel right off the bat is, you know, the time-honoured trope here in this Legislature that because we're urban MLAs, we don't know what we're talking about and have no legitimate claim to be interested in these sorts of things. Certainly, the bulk of energy development happens in rural Alberta – I will grant that – but the neighbourhoods of Edmonton-Gold Bar border on two refineries and a number of tank farms and other energy installations that are fundamental to the operation of the energy industry here in Alberta, and the members of my constituency have a deep concern about what the Alberta Energy Regulator is doing or not doing to properly oversee the operations at these kinds of facilities, Mr. Speaker. So, you know, I don't want any member of the UCP to claim that we don't speak with any authority or legitimacy on the issue because none of our constituents are directly affected by the decisions that the Alberta Energy Regulator makes, because that's not true. We live with the decisions that the AER makes because those facilities are right next door to us.

With that being said, there have been a number of moves that this government and previous governments have made to restrict the ability of Albertans to have input into projects. Certainly, when projects are considered for a hearing, one of the things that the AER considers is the kind of environmental monitoring that needs to be included in the approval, if one is granted, and the conditions under which that monitoring must be undertaken. When Albertans are able to participate in the process fully, the project that comes out of the process is a better one because of it. Unfortunately, governments prior to this one have made the concerning decision to make it virtually impossible for Albertans to have their say on projects unless they're directly affected. They've so narrowly defined who can be considered directly affected by a project that it's virtually impossible for people to have standing in front of the Alberta Energy Regulator.

Now we see a government that's moving not only to, you know, reinforce these kinds of restrictions on who can have standing in front of the AER but also to limit the amount of time in which those people can have their say. And if anybody thinks that these kinds of delays are not a serious problem, I think I only need to remind the House that in 2018-2019 the Alberta Energy Regulator received a total of 44,476 applications for various energy development projects. Out of those 44,476 development projects, they held a total of two hearings, meaning that the Alberta Energy Regulator made a decision about the project with very limited input from Albertans on how that project should proceed. Moreover, the Energy Regulator already has the ability to set timelines for making these decisions. Now, some members opposite have said that, you know, we need to set timelines in order for people to accomplish a goal. We agree, but we would suggest that the Alberta Energy Regulator already has that ability, and, in fact, nothing that the government has said has proven, has indicated that the Energy Regulator needs to have those rules changed or, in fact, has done anything to justify concentrating this power into cabinet.

It's very concerning to me and to lots of folks that I represent, not just in Edmonton-Gold Bar but from folks that I've heard all around the province, that now not only do a very select few number of Albertans have the ability to have their say on the shape of an energy development project, that timeline is going to be potentially accelerated. I can't foresee a situation in which cabinet is saying: "Hey, Alberta Energy Regulator, you're taking far too little time with these decisions. You need to be more deliberative. Instead of a 90-day timeline, for example, we want you to take 180 days or 365 days." I don't anticipate that that's the intent of this bill, to lengthen the amount of time under which projects being considered by the Alberta Energy Regulator will be given. I anticipate that the intent of this bill is to shorten the amount of time that the Alberta Energy Regulator has to consider applications before it, so that will further exclude Albertans in the responsible development of our energy resources.

As my friend from Calgary-McCall indicated, the end result of that will ultimately be more court challenges and longer waiting times for potentially contentious issues. Certainly, with the government's move to open up vast tracts of land to open-pit coal mining that were previously closed because of government policy, we can only anticipate increased levels of contentiousness around a number of potential coal-mining projects. So if the intent of the government is to tie up important projects in court forever and ever, then congratulations. Mission accomplished. You know, I hope that they have money set aside for the lawyers that they'll need to pay to conduct all of these kinds of court trials.

But even if the move to reduce the amount of time that the AER could consider an application was deemed by the courts to be sufficient with respect to the consultation that they need to undertake, the Alberta Energy Regulator doesn't have the people

power in it right now to currently adequately deal with 44,476 applications a year. Just in February I received phone calls from my friends who work there, who listed dozens and dozens of people who were fired from their jobs. In fact, official records of the government suggest that 270 people have been laid off from the Alberta Energy Regulator compared to this time last year. I think that's a third, almost a third of the number of employees that the Energy Regulator had on its staff. Now, how on earth the Energy Regulator is going to be able to adequately review these projects, given whatever timelines cabinet seems to be intent to impose, with 30 per cent less staff than they had before is mind-boggling to me.

I hear members opposite saying that they need to be more efficient. Well, you know, I look forward to them going to their constituents who work for the Alberta Energy Regulator to tell them how they're doing their job wrong and how they could do their job better. I can tell the members opposite right now that my friends and colleagues who work at the Alberta Energy Regulator are so stressed that they do not have the adequate time and resources to review these projects, that it's essentially a giant rubber-stamping procedure. These are good people with skills and knowledge that they could bring to bear to make these projects better for the people of Alberta, but they can't do their jobs properly because this government refuses to provide them the adequate resources to do so, so thousands of projects proceed through the Alberta Energy Regulator every day without adequate scrutiny or review.

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The problem is only going to get worse. Imposing these arbitrary timelines will mean that more of these projects are sailing through without adequate review and will also be subject to court challenges. So I would suggest that instead of imposing these arbitrary timelines that cannot reasonably be met by the AER given the number of staff that it has and the number of applications that it has to deal with in a year, instead of making these meaningless pieces of legislation that impose arbitrary timelines to make it look like they're doing something, actually fund the Energy Regulator to do the job that it's supposed to do.

Instead of firing staff, hire more staff to look at these projects so that all Albertans can be assured that they're being carried out responsibly and in the public interest. Without that, people cannot trust the Energy Regulator to do its job properly. I don't think I need to remind anybody that the issue of trust in the Alberta Energy Regulator is a significant one. I have yet to meet the landowner who honestly believes that the Alberta Energy Regulator is looking out for their best interests, and I have yet to meet people who are involved with these kinds of things who think that the Alberta Energy Regulator has the resources that it needs to do its job adequately.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, I think that rather than voting in favour of this legislation, I would humbly suggest that members of Executive Council go back, properly fund the Alberta Energy Regulator, make sure that it has the staff that it needs to properly review these applications, and work to include more Albertans in the process of reviewing and having input into these energy development projects because they will be better projects that will be less contentious at the end of the day. It's more efficient to spend more time up front, making sure that we do it right the first time, than rushing the project through and then reviewing it in endless court battles.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I humbly urge all of my colleagues to consider how they're voting on this legislation. I certainly urge the government to go back to the drawing board and make sure that the Alberta Energy Regulator is a credible energy regulator and has the resources that it needs to do its job properly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to join debate on Bill 7 at second reading this evening or this morning?

If there is no one else, I am prepared to call the question or provide the Minister of Justice, who moved second reading on behalf of the Minister of Energy, to close debate. If the Minister of Justice would like to do that, he's welcome to do so.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a second time]

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Schweitzer: Mr. Speaker, now it's time for the most exciting part of the night. Pursuant to Standing Order 3(1.2) I wish to advise the Assembly that there shall be no morning sitting tomorrow, Tuesday, June 2, 2020.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m., Tuesday, June 2.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 1:26 a.m.]

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