



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 23, 2021

Day 89

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and to her government, to Members of the Legislative Assembly, and to all in positions of responsibility the guidance of Your spirit. May they never lead the province wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideas but, laying aside all private interest and prejudice, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all.

Please be seated.

Members' Statements

Racism and Hate Promotion Prevention

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, this past Sunday was the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This is supposed to be a day where we need to come together and redouble our efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination. Two Muslim women were walking in broad daylight when one was attacked, punched and kicked, and had her hijab torn in Calgary. In the streets of Calgary we saw a rally where marchers bore symbols of hatred, intimidation, and anti-Semitism. The Calgary police responded to this disturbing rally with a clear and strong condemnation of racism and hatred while the Minister of Justice responded by thanking the police for balancing Charter rights.

Mr. Speaker, the Charter doesn't protect attempts to intimidate racialized Albertans with torch marches or symbols of hatred. At a time when Calgarians and Albertans are scared about these stories of violence and hatred in their streets, they were looking to their government to take action, but the UCP failed them.

The very next day my colleague from Edmonton-South moved a motion that would have condemned and banned symbols of hatred. Rather than supporting this motion and allowing it to pass quickly to show that the UCP stand with us in condemning these symbols of hatred, the UCP dithered. The UCP chose to debate a report on a bill, not even the bill itself but a report from a committee that recommended debating the bill in the future. For an hour UCP MLA after UCP MLA stood about and debated the merits of passing a bill that was not being opposed, running out the clock so they didn't have to speak about racism. Embarrassing and shameful conduct.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans are scared in their own cities and communities, and it's time for the UCP government to address the rise of Islamophobia and racism in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

COVID-19 Vaccines

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to inform Albertans about the importance of getting vaccinated. Vaccines are important because they protect our bodies from dangerous pathogens that are very harmful if left untreated. Vaccines help to produce the necessary antibodies within our immune system that help to fight these unwanted pathogens, which can make us deathly ill if left untreated.

While receiving the vaccine is a personal choice and would never be forced upon anyone, it is important to understand its importance in

fighting off dangerous viruses like COVID-19 and its related variants. I say this because our government has been doing so much to ensure the most vulnerable receive the vaccine in a safe and timely manner. That's why last week we announced the expansion of vaccine administration to more than 250 pharmacies across the province that are now offering inoculation services to eligible Albertans.

By rapidly expanding the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines throughout community pharmacies across the province, our government is doing everything we can to make vaccines available to as many Albertans as possible. Pharmacies in communities all over the province will now be equipped to administer vaccines to eligible Albertans.

I also want to thank the Premier and AHS for their work in securing a vaccination centre in the heart of northeast Calgary. The Genesis Centre is a state-of-the-art facility that has been underutilized as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Situated next to my riding, the centre is a place where residents enjoy a number of activities. While many of those activities are on hold, I was honoured to be part of their opening day.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler.

COVID-19 Related Restrictions in Drumheller-Stettler

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My intention this week was to give a statement to promote the upcoming 4-H show and sale season and to advocate for those trying to plan an outdoor event like a rodeo this coming spring and summer. That is still very important, but after the announcement yesterday not to move to step 3, I would rather address my constituents here in the House.

My riding is big and sparse and by no means impervious to COVID-19. We've recently had a large spike in cases in the Drumheller area stemming from the federal penitentiary. As of yesterday there were 61 cases in the town of Drumheller and 92 in total in the riding. Even with this new flare-up, the vast area of the province encompassing special areas 3 and 4, the county of Paintearth, and the MDs of Provost and Acadia have a grand total of zero cases. Even though there have been no cases or next to it for a year now, this huge area falls under the same restrictions as everywhere else in the province. Between November 24 and December 7 cases dropped in my riding from 86 to 62 while most areas of the province witnessed a rising trend, yet we were pulled into province-wide restrictions.

My constituents have been told that a return to a regional approach has not been possible due to our focus on hospitalizations, and even though our case count has been as low as eight in the entire riding, which is bigger than a third of Europe's countries, we are stuck as the fringe of the central and south health zones and can't potentially contribute even one hospitalization to a bottlenecked centralized system.

When I ran to represent the people of Drumheller-Stettler, I did not plan on a pandemic any more than anyone else in this room. I did, however, run on the knowledge and belief that rural and remote rural are different and through policy must be treated as such in regard to education or health care or COVID restrictions.

We have been in province-wide restrictions now for three and a half months. There are needles in arms and still no cases in big areas of the province like mine. It's time to stop punishing the areas that have done well and implement a reasonable regional approach immediately.

Renewable Energy Development

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, our NDP government saw an opportunity in renewable energies, an opportunity to attract investment, create

jobs, reduce emissions, and diversify our economy. That's why our government introduced the renewable electricity program as part of its strategy. In the first round alone the program attracted a billion dollars in private-sector investment, created over 500 jobs, and set a record for low energy prices in Canada. According to a recent study from the University of Calgary the program has already generated \$26 million in revenue for this government. As more projects come online, that revenue will only increase. That's worth repeating: the program made money, it attracted private investment, and it created jobs.

But instead of embracing the investment and the jobs that come with renewables, this government has turned its back by cancelling the REP program. According to AESO's most recent long-term forecast we will only reach 19 per cent of renewables by 2030. Not meeting our renewable targets means Alberta will lose out on investment and that we will lose out on jobs. Goldman Sachs predicts that renewables could see \$16 trillion in global investment through 2030. This is money looking for a home and jobs that we could have right here in Alberta.

Instead of taking action to attract this investment, the government members openly deny climate change and continue to fund an inquiry that peddles conspiracy theories. This government has chosen to put ideology ahead of the interests of working Albertans. We can support renewable energy while supporting our traditional energy sector. We proved that.

By thumbing its nose at renewables, this UCP government is walking away from investment and from jobs, jobs that Albertans need now.

COVID-19 Variant Genetic Sequencing

Ms Issik: Mr. Speaker, not a day goes by when we do not hear about a variant of the virus which causes COVID-19. The task of finding and tracking those viruses and variants falls to researchers and lab specialists who've become virus detectives. With a million dollars in funding now flowing from Genome Alberta and Genome Canada, our Alberta viral detective agency is making a significant contribution to the Canadian COVID-19 Genomics Network.

1:40

All viruses mutate, and each time they do, they develop a unique genetic signature. Sometimes those mutations create a variant of concern; sometimes they are harmless. Without genetic sequencing information we would not be able to identify and track strains that pose new challenges for diagnosing and treating COVID-19.

Alberta Precision Laboratories is where COVID-19 samples from people who have tested positive end up. APL is responsible for the province-wide sequencing program and can detect all known variants and spot new ones. Kanti Pabbaraju is the scientist who leads the emerging pathogens and research section of the Public Health Laboratory. Her team spent all of Christmas Eve working through the night to find the first confirmed case of the B.1.1.7 variant in Alberta. I'd like to thank Kanti's team for their work.

Sequencing results are used provincially to help researchers in public health understand how the virus is evolving. All provincial sequencing information is sent to the National Microbiology Laboratory to be included in the pan-Canadian monitoring effort and the international database for use by virus trackers around the world. APL is currently sequencing 27 per cent of the national total. That's a feather in their cap for our lab team.

The funding for Genome Alberta and Genome Canada is not only ensuring we can meet the challenge of monitoring variants now but is being used to increase our provincial capacity to deal with future

outbreaks of other viruses. Congratulations to everyone involved in the genetic sequencing of the COVID-19 virus.

School Construction Capital Plan and North Edmonton

Mr. Nielsen: My riding of Edmonton-Decore is home to 26 elementary, junior high, and high schools, both Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic. These schools serve thousands of students in north Edmonton, and I'm proud to represent these young people and their families. I believe it's essential that the students and their parents know I'm here to represent them and their interests here in this Chamber. It may be cliché, but I'm sure we can all agree that our youth represent the future of this province. We need to make sure these young people have the schools that they need, the tools and opportunities to thrive in a modern, rapidly changing world.

This starts, fundamentally, with education. I'm consistently impressed and inspired by the quality of education, compassion, and care from the teachers, administration, and staff in every single one of these schools. They are doing incredible work with very limited resources that this government has given them, especially during this pandemic, but they're running out of room to manoeuvre, in some cases quite literally.

M.E. LaZerte is at full capacity and has been for some time. Archbishop O'Leary has been forced to rely on unsafe portable units at the back of the school in order to keep up with student population yet turn away hundreds of students each year. Queen Elizabeth is simply over 60 years old. Every one of these high schools is facing overcrowding, big increases in class sizes, and no relief in sight.

It's been clear since day one that education is not a priority for this UCP government. The fact that all they've done in two years to address this crisis of overcrowding is funding design work for a new Catholic high school speaks volumes. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, that isn't even a real start. North Edmonton needs these schools, and they need them yesterday. Our communities are growing, many young families with school-age children. They need to go somewhere. They deserve the best quality education.

Thanking teachers for their hard work doesn't mean anything when you won't provide them with the funding for reasonable class sizes and school infrastructure. The lack of action is dangerous and the impacts on the students serious. When will this government step up for our children's future?

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

Addiction, Mental Health, and Homelessness Supports

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I remember it all too well, working the shelter floor and then hearing screaming out of nowhere coming from the middle of the floor. I went to look and saw a woman who started to swing wildly at those around her, unprovoked. Or another gentleman, convinced that he was the son of God sent on a mission here to Earth. Another gentleman would come back to the shelter after being on the street all day and tell elaborate tales about fighting crime and his involvement in undercover drug busts.

I could go on, story after story of people living on the street with serious mental illness. We had very few tools. Eventually, if someone became a risk to themselves or others, we called police. They were form 10-ed, brought to the hospital, only to be released back to us within a matter of weeks or sometimes days.

An investment in building mental health supports is an investment in homeless supports. I remember working with people

struggling with addiction begging for help, not wanting to live like this any longer, with no room for them to detox, no treatment spaces available, expected to stay sober in a shelter, continuously failed by gaps in service delivery, and with each failed response to their desperate cry for help, further hope was eroded. An investment in addiction supports is an investment in homeless supports.

I'm tired of the NDP continuing this narrative that we have cut homeless supports. This type of politicking and fearmongering for the vulnerable people is wrong. It's shameful. The truth is that investment in homeless supports has doubled in the last eight years. Our government significantly increased funds to implement a shelter COVID plan. They did a good job. Now we continue to fund homelessness and outreach supports at pre-pandemic levels, but at the same time we have added \$142 million to addiction and mental health supports. I'm proud of that. For the sake of the members opposite: an investment in mental health and addiction supports is an investment in homeless supports.

I look forward to seeing further integration of these resources with our homeless outreach and supports, with our sector.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Trades and Technologies Internship Program

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. For quite some time now I've had the opportunity to connect and work with a wonderful organization called Careers: the Next Generation. Careers is a unique charitable foundation raising youth awareness of career options and helping students earn while they learn through internship. The organization helps students make the link between their classroom education and their future workplace careers by allowing them to explore career options through paid workplace internships. Parents and high school students are understandably concerned about paying for education and the ability to find meaningful work in the rural communities they call home.

This is why I'm so excited about their youth internship incentive program, YIIP. The YIIP is designed to increase the number of employers supporting work-integrated learning internships in trades and technologies. This means providing financial incentives that will allow employers to achieve their goals while enhancing opportunities for youth that align with Alberta's need for more skilled workers. In addition, YIIP provides an incentive of up to \$3,600 to employers who are interested in helping to build Alberta's skilled trades workforce. I've been working with Andy Neigel, president and CEO of Careers, and Dave Brown, program co-ordinator, to help spread the good word of this wonderful program, which encourages young men and women to enter the skilled trades. Clayton Roe is our local with Battle River school division, who works with our students to find job placements and monitors their progress. We have been working collaboratively together to help students in the Camrose constituency as I hear from constituents that they are worried about the future of the youth in our community.

Mr. Speaker, we need more individuals in the skilled trades, and I'm proud to support an organization which seeks to build futures and grow our great, beautiful province. I encourage employers to take on a local student.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Foothills Lions Rugby Football Club

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, in a time when COVID has monopolized almost every conversation, I wanted to shift to a positive note and

express some positive recognition towards the Foothills Lions rugby club, based out of Okotoks. To give some background, the Foothills Lions are an inclusive rugby organization that spans from a senior men's team all the way to a junior girls team. The strength of Lions is not only their depth in programs but that they have built an environment for kids to develop within the sport to its highest level. I can name numerous former Foothills Lions players like Jeff Hassler, Keyara Wardley, Thomas Isherwood, and many more who have reached the top level of rugby in Canada, representing our country at the national level. Considering the fact that the Highwood area is such a small demographic, the amount of success from our area is nothing short of impressive.

It's clear to say that no matter what the age of the athlete, the organization knows how to create a strong sense of leadership, integrity, and work ethic in any player. The Foothills Lions undoubtedly sets its players up for success on the field and in the real world because of outstanding leadership and an emphasis on giving back to the community.

Now, I have to admit that I've never played officially, but I have had the chance to experience the 2015 Rugby World Cup in Wales and have played in the Calgary Stampede Sevens for the Rutters, from which I have two plates and five screws in my left ankle to prove it. Regardless of the physical nature of the game the camaraderie within rugby is unique to its culture. I'm extremely proud to have the Foothills Lions rugby club in Highwood, and although hockey has always been a dominant sport in Canada, I would advise everyone to keep an eye on the success of our local rugby talent and the progression of rugby in Canada and on the national stage.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition has the call.

COVID-19 Cases and Economic Relaunch Strategy

Ms Notley: Quote: once we hit a growth phase of this virus, our numbers will not stand still. Mr. Speaker, that's Dr. Hinshaw explaining why Alberta is holding off on step 3, which, by the way, was a very prudent decision by this government. However, at the same time, there is evidence that the highly contagious variant strains are spreading. Our province currently has the highest reported number of variant cases in Canada. There were 110 yesterday, and the numbers are growing. Can the Premier tell us what he is doing to protect Albertans from further spread of this terrible virus?

Mr. Kenney: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the important question, Mr. Speaker. As you know, we have in place extraordinary public health measures and have had since November of last year, which constitute major impairments on people's liberties and rights as well as their normal lives. We continue to monitor this day by day. We are concerned about the growth in cases overall, variant cases, and that's why we renew our call on Albertans to be especially careful. We just have a few more weeks before we get critical mass with the vaccine program.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, yesterday Dr. Hinshaw confirmed that restaurants are, in fact, a site of transmission. Quote: we have seen, for example, very rapid spread in some restaurants where individuals who have the variant were infectious and went to multiple restaurants and spread the virus very quickly in multiple

locations in one night. End quote. To the Premier. This is what's happening now under the status quo. It means that the numbers will rise. What is the Premier going to do to stop that, or is more people getting sick just acceptable collateral damage?

Mr. Kenney: Well, the last part of that question, sadly, typifies the divisive approach of the NDP to this pandemic from day one. Dr. Hinshaw is quite right about an individual who acted irresponsibly in that respect. It's also correct, Mr. Speaker, that according to our public health officials we are increasingly seeing noncompliance with the current public health measures, and the most important thing is that Albertans comply with the measures that currently exist. I'll point out that variant-driven growth is the case in many jurisdictions all across the northern hemisphere, where there is inadequate vaccine protection.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, if we do nothing, some doctors are predicting infections to reach 2,000 per day by mid-April. This means more people in hospital, more long-term health impacts, more deaths. Premier, for months we've been asking you to release updated modelling. We know that the variants have changed the modelling considerably. If you want to make it all about individual responsibility, Albertans will do the right thing if you tell them what will happen if they don't. Why won't you release the modelling? Give them the information.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, as I've told the Leader of the Opposition before, Alberta has not conducted long-term modelling since April of last year. I think that every model I have seen has been spectacularly wrong, most recently that of Dr. Tam, who indicated that by now we would have thousands of daily cases in Alberta. What's important, though, is that our transparency – we are more transparent than any other province at reporting metrics like R values, comorbidities, cases amongst health care workers. We have full genome sequencing and screening for new variants. We are being as open with Albertans as we possibly can be about the threat of COVID-19.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition for her second set of questions.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Other provinces have modelling; we do not.

Health Care Worker Contract Negotiations

Ms Notley: Now, when cases go up, so does the strain on our health care system and on our front-line health care staff. They've been working overtime for months to test, treat, triage hundreds of thousands of Albertans, so for the Finance minister to then accuse them of not, quote, putting Albertans first just because they don't agree with his plan to fire them down the road is beyond the pale. Will the Premier stand up today and apologize for this lack of respect demonstrated by the Finance minister?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm disappointed but not surprised that the leader of the NDP once again mischaracterizes the remarks of a minister. He said no such thing. He said that the government is putting Albertans first. We are seeking to delay collective bargaining to focus all of our collective attention and energies on the major challenge before us in controlling viral growth to keep Albertans and our health care system safe from the threat of this pandemic. We hope that the government unions will agree with us that now is not the time to enter into potentially contentious negotiations. We should all be focused on managing the crisis in front of us.

Ms Notley: Ah, Mr. Speaker. You know, Premier, be honest: for you, this has nothing to do with the health of Albertans. It's a negotiating tactic to strong-arm front-line health care workers by threatening mass firings to secure dramatic wage cuts. But even you folks don't want to say it in the middle of a pandemic, so you're demanding a delay. Albertans can see right through this rhetoric. Premier, why won't you put these Albertans first, these front-line workers in a pandemic, and negotiate with them respectfully? You know full well that your negotiators are not the ones who would be on the front line.

Speaker's Ruling

Addressing Questions through the Chair

The Speaker: I'd just provide a caution for the Leader of the Opposition, as I did last week, to speak through the chair. When you make statements like "you," that is not speaking through the chair. You could do that in a much more appropriate way.

Health Care Worker Contract Negotiations

(continued)

The Speaker: The Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No one is threatening mass layoffs. That is complete and total fabrication. It is part of the NDP's characteristic effort to spread fear amongst people. We have been clear that we're asking everybody who has had the benefit of the security of a government job to participate in a very small way in operating more efficiently, just as we as MLAs have done. Now is not the time to get into collective bargaining, when all of our collective attention should be focused on the enormous challenge of the end of this pandemic.

Ms Notley: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I had a chance to have a long conversation with an LPN over Christmas. She told me that more than half of her colleagues on her unit got COVID. She told me of the long hours that she had to work as a result. She told me of the heartbreak she felt as she listened to the last breath of patients night after night. Premier, this is the person your Finance minister is accusing of not putting the health of Albertans first. Why don't you apologize for those remarks and show her the respect she deserves by negotiating her contract now? Again, none of your negotiators and none of theirs are on the front line.

Mr. Kenney: First of all, because he made no such comment, Mr. Speaker. Secondly, we value enormously our health care workers, especially those on the front lines who have been coping with the pandemic. In fact, we just recently provided ex gratia payments to front-line nurses, for example, totalling over \$100 million, and we do look forward to negotiating the renewal of collective bargaining agreements in good faith that compensate those important workers fairly, even generously, but we don't believe that now is the optimum time to do so, in the midst of a pandemic.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition for her third set of questions.

COVID-19 in Schools

Ms Notley: Well, yesterday, on schools, the Premier said, "Less than a small fraction of 1 per cent of the 700,000 students in Alberta has been affected by in-classroom or in-school transmission." Not affected. Mr. Speaker, in November, when the Premier failed to contain the second wave, there were so many schools with outbreaks that they closed every junior and senior high school in

the province. More than 330,000 students were sent home; half the entire student population. Will the Premier apologize to these students for suggesting that they were not affected?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, just a stylistic comment: was that the Leader of the Opposition trying to imitate me, like in grade 2 or something? When will the NDP rise to the level of civility that Albertans expect of this place? The NDP and their special-interest allies have always wanted the schools to be closed. All they have done through the past year is to try and spread fear, panic, and hysteria. Schools around the world – it's been demonstrated – are safe for children. We've taken extraordinary measures to ensure that that is the case here in Alberta and will continue to do so.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government is lying. We asked the Premier to invest in keeping students in schools safely. They didn't. It got worse. "Less than a small fraction of 1 per cent of the 700,000 students in Alberta has been affected by in-classroom or in-school transmission." One in 3 teachers have been forced into quarantine or isolation, impacting the education of each and every one of their students. The Premier's comments diminish the reality of what children, their parents, and their teachers have been going through in this pandemic. Why won't he apologize?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, there is nothing to apologize for in putting children first to ensure that they had the benefit of in-classroom instruction. It's so remarkable. Not just here in Canada but around the world we see that with governments of a certain disposition, the first thing they did was to impair the life chances of children, particularly from disadvantaged homes, by shutting down in-classroom instruction. That's what the NDP – they didn't have a plan to open schools. They wanted us to build hundreds of schools, thousands of classrooms, and train and hire and certify thousands of teachers in a month this spring. They wanted to keep the schools closed.

2:00

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government is lying: "Less than a small fraction of 1 per cent of the 700,000 students in Alberta has been affected by in-classroom or in-school transmission." Brooke Pinsky's daughter is 13 years old. She has autism. She's nonverbal. Brooke was forced to hire her own educational assistant for her daughter because this Premier failed to create a safe learning environment. Will the Premier apologize to Brooke and her family and the families of 80,000 students with disabilities for saying that they were not affected?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I didn't say that no one has been affected in the school system in Alberta, but as of March 22, according to Alberta Education, there are 1,474 active cases of COVID-19 amongst staff and students. That is .2 per cent of the population of 720,000 staff and students. We should be concerned about those 1,400 cases, but we should not do what the NDP seeks to do constantly, which is to create fear and hysteria.

Arts, Cultural, and Community Organization Support

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, the decision to prevent step 3 opening has left many cultural and community venues across Alberta reeling. Alberta's NDP supports doing what is necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 and save lives, but places like concert and movie venues, banquet halls, and community centres need real support to survive. Most have been closed for the entire duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. To the Premier. It's clear this pandemic

is far from over. Why won't you step up to help these venues so that they can actually make it to reopening day?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a quick correction. On one hand the opposition is saying that everything needs to be shut down and that staying at step 2 was prudent, which I think was also a very good idea, and at the same time raising that we were supposed to move to step 3. It's a little bit confusing.

There are so many organizations that have been impacted. It's why we moved to the stabilize program, to make sure that nonprofits are going to be there. Also, organizations that are for profit will have the ability to make – they're able to apply for the SME grants and other grants that are available to small businesses.

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, the Premier hasn't even spent the money he promised small businesses. During supplementary supply estimates we uncovered that there is still more than \$130 million in funding for the relaunch grant that is sitting in a government bank account, that was supposed to be spent by the end of the fiscal year, next week. The government isn't even getting the money they promised out the door. Now the rise in COVID-19 variant cases has left even more uncertainty. To the Premier. You were right to slow your flawed reopening program; you were wrong to ignore the small businesses and community and cultural venues. Why won't you step up with new supports to help the owners of these important establishments today?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I simply will suggest this. The opposition works very fast and loose with the facts. The reality is this. Of our small-business relaunch grant, which provided \$575 million of funding, 99.09 per cent of that has already been earmarked in applications to support thousands and thousands of Alberta's small businesses and nonprofits.

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, the Premier doesn't even understand his own COVID-19 data, you know, the data he refuses to make public. Last week the Premier claimed that COVID-19 cases were plateauing and that we looked to be on track for step 3 reopening this week. Obviously, that wasn't true, and with the rise in COVID-19 variant cases, who knows when we will get to step 3. But the Premier's whimsical comments gave so many movie theatres, concert venues, and more hope that they could reopen their doors this week. Today they are still closed. Premier, why does your COVID-19 story change every day, and why won't you step up to support Albertans trying to navigate the confusion you're causing?

Mrs. Aheer: You know, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of organizations, businesses, people, families that are suffering right now as a result of COVID-19. I want to give a shout-out to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation for their incredible work in helping these businesses. But the word "whimsical" to be used in terms of COVID – we have lost lives, families. Businesses have been shut down. The entire world is turned upside down, and to assume that the decisions that have to be made with AHS, Dr. Hinshaw, and the Premier are being whimsical is nothing but tone deaf.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Calgary-Klein.

Community Grant Programs

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This month being Community Association Awareness Month, I would like to highlight their importance in providing a place for communities to gather and in meeting local need. The pandemic has been difficult for many. Community associations are no exception. It's times like these when we need to rely on these amazing local organizations. To the minister: how are we working to support the hundreds of amazing local organizations and their efforts to bring communities together?

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much to the member for the question. The department has committed \$37 million to the community initiatives program. This is about enabling vibrant and healthy communities across Alberta. The CIP provides funding to support eligible nonprofit organizations and community projects such as new programs, new initiatives, or community events. Especially during COVID, Mr. Speaker, it's been really important that we're able to help out those organizations with their programs, especially for some of their great grassroots work that they're doing for COVID help. Budget 2021 shifts the funding from the community facility enhancement program to the community initiatives program.

The Speaker: Calgary-Klein.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the minister for the response. Given that many of our community associations operate in aging infrastructure and given that the role of these local boards is to build community and create opportunity for people to gather and given that keeping their buildings updated, modern, and in some cases standing is critical to helping them serve in their communities, to the minister: in this temporary change with CFEP can there be a commitment that the funds will be shifted back?

Mrs. Aheer: Sorry; I couldn't quite hear the question. I think the question was if this is a temporary change. Yes, it is a temporary change. The commitment that the funds will be shifted back to CFEP in the next . . .

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

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. It's good to hear. That was my question. I'm happy to hear that the funds will be shifted back.

Given that the community initiatives program is another opportunity for community organizations to apply for project-based funding to enhance and enrich their communities and given that I was pleased to see an increase in this fund but also understand that this fund now encompasses a larger pool of organizations, can the minister further share her vision for these funds and the role community associations have in this regard?

Mrs. Aheer: It's hard to hear over on this side. There are a lot more streams, but there are still more project and operational dollars. We have the MIIG grants, stabilize program. These are really great grant streams, Mr. Speaker, to support and contribute to Alberta's recovery by protecting our lives and livelihoods while continuing our mandate to support the nonprofit and voluntary sector. Programs support organizations that contribute to creating opportunities and encourage their communities. These are project based, operating major cultural and sports events, MIIG, and advanced capacity advancement programs. These are all programs to help build community capacity.

Enhanced COVID-19 Business Benefit Program

Mr. Bilous: The government finally released the qualification requirements for the upcoming enhanced COVID-19 business benefit. Just looking at them, it's clear that this UCP government does not want to support Alberta businesses. There are pitfalls throughout the program to disqualify businesses. Entrepreneurs from across the province have been asking this government to lower the revenue loss threshold and remove the cap on support coverage. Your government clearly just ignored them. To the minister. With the case counts rising, it's more important to get money into the hands of struggling small businesses. Why did you stick with a program that businesses are saying is clearly flawed and doesn't provide enough support?

The Speaker: The Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board has risen.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We certainly recognize that small businesses have experienced great hardship during this pandemic. That's why we came out very early with relief, through deferred WCB premiums and abatement for small and medium-sized businesses, that amounted to over \$300 million of relief. That's why we've implemented the SME relaunch grant for a second payment for businesses affected and are lowering the threshold to 30 per cent so that more businesses can participate. Over 83,200 business applications have been submitted.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, given that this new support is supposed to help the hardest hit businesses and given that new small businesses are among those facing the most serious challenges because they do not have the revenue history to qualify for the majority of supports but given that the minister kept the same requirements for proof of lost revenue from the previous grant so that not one newer business will qualify, to the minister: why didn't your government increase requirements to include more new small businesses? Is it because you want to save money, or was it just easier to copy and paste the previous guidelines?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation continues to work with small businesses and hear from small businesses around support that may be needed. I do want to make the point. Over 83,000 applications have been received from small businesses seeking support, which total \$569 million of requested support of the \$575 million allocated. We're not done. We continue to listen to small businesses, and we will respond accordingly.

Mr. Bilous: Then get the money out the door.

Given that this new program states that eligible applicants must "open or plan to reopen as public health orders are lifted," therefore forcing small businesses to operate if they want to receive this new grant, and given that the minister is clearly aware there are Alberta small-business owners who are medically jeopardized or live with someone who has a pre-existing condition, forcing them to risk the lives of their loved ones in order to qualify for this new support, Minister, this is disgusting. Why are you holding back funds from those that made the decision to not put themselves, their families, or their staff's lives at risk?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, this government has supported small businesses at a much higher level than the other large provinces in the country. Based on Stats Canada and Alberta government data, on a per capita basis we have provided \$1,387 of economic recovery relief per Albertan. That compares to \$291 for B.C., \$485 for Ontario, and \$215 for Quebec. This government has provided significant relief to small-business owners. We continue to work with the small-business community, and we'll continue to support them as required.

Government Members' and Staff Members' Travel

Member Ceci: "I have not hugged my 92-year-old mother since March because I am following public health guidelines." This is the voice of just one Albertan in newly released e-mails in the media this morning that show the absolute disgust with the UCP, who decided that the rules to stay home and save lives didn't apply to them and jetted off for fun in the sun while the rest of us stayed home to stop the spread. This Premier tried to give a pass to his MLAs and staff who vacationed. What message does he have for the person he stopped from hugging his mother while he was approving Hawaiian vacations for his MLAs and staff?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, again the NDP is lying over and over inside this Chamber and spending their days trying to fearmonger and distract from what the real goal of this province is right now, which is to march forward, to get through COVID-19, and to make sure that we can move forward to recovery on the other side. This side of the House isn't going to play those games. Instead, we're going to focus on getting through the pandemic and then making sure that we set up Alberta to have the largest success of any province inside Confederation on the other side.

Member Ceci: Let's march forward to this question. Given that another Albertan wrote, "The sheer hubris shown by our elected officials travelling for fun or tradition during the holidays sickens me," and given that the Premier initially said that it was unreasonable to expect him to sanction his staff and MLAs who violated the public health advisory and given that we learned that the Premier personally approved his chief of staff's London vacation, can the Premier explain to this Albertan why he initially couldn't see the gross error committed by his minister and his MLAs and his chief of staff? Why did the chief of staff get a \$60,000 severance? Shouldn't he have been fired with cause?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, yet again the NDP continues to lie. The Premier has been clear about his conversations with his chief of staff when it came to travelling. He was informed by his chief of staff on the way to the airport. The Premier has taken action against his chief of staff and accepted his resignation. The Premier is now focused again on working to get the province through a pandemic. If you want to talk about transparency, I will point out that that side of the House is still hiding their sexual harassment investigation into their members that are even in this Chamber.

Member Ceci: Given that an Albertan wrote, "Your MLAs travelling outside of Alberta during a public health emergency proves there is no emergency," and given that another Albertan wrote asking, "Why wear masks . . . when MLAs put their toes over the cliff edge?" to the Premier: do you see now how your actions of your own members have undercut the public health orders at a critical period when we need the community to buy in to stop the spread? The vast majority of Albertans understand and follow public health orders. Why did your MLAs and staff choose not to?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, it's extremely rich coming from the Official Opposition, the NDP, trying to say that the government isn't being transparent about an issue when the Premier had a press conference about it. That member is part of a caucus that is still hiding, admitted to by their leader, the results of a sexual harassment investigation. Is that member part of that investigation? Is the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview part of that investigation? Which member is part of that investigation? [interjections] If you want transparency inside the House – I see they're very upset about it – stand up and tell us who was being investigated and what the results of it were. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Ellis: Point of order.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is using very unparliamentary language. He can apologize and withdraw.

Mr. Schmidt: I apologize and withdraw.

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

COVID-19 Vaccine and Economic Relaunch Strategy

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the last several weeks I've received many phone calls from eager Calgary-West constituents who are ready to open up the economy in Alberta, just as some places in the United States have done. As we know, in Alberta we have begun opening up through the four stages of relaunch, and currently we're in stage 2. To the Minister of Health: how has our government decided on how the hospitalization numbers are chosen for each stage in order to safely reopen our province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children's Services has risen.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand the frustration people are feeling as they watch countries like the United States reopen, but we need to be clear that we've made different choices. The U.S. death rate is nearly four times Alberta's, and I don't think Albertans would accept a number that high. Our reopening plan is based on protecting both lives and livelihoods, and the specific thresholds in the plan are aimed at enabling us to reopen safely while we reduce the stress on our health care professionals and make sure the system can provide all the care that Albertans need.

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

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that each province has different responses to the pandemic and given that many provinces throughout Canada have been unable to begin safely reopening their economies, as Alberta has been, and given that my constituents are eager to begin returning to some form of normalcy, Minister, why was the decision to have a staggered vaccine rollout and a staged reopening the best decision to make for a safer reopening of this province?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. All of our planning is based on the evidence and the advice of our chief medical officer of health, and it all balances the need to protect, again, both lives and livelihoods. Our vaccination plan starts with the oldest Albertans and others at highest risk and then expands to all adult

Albertans by an expected date of June 30. Vaccines are the way out of this pandemic, and we'll be there this summer. Our reopening plan balances lives and livelihoods by imposing targeted restrictions based on the evidence, keeping them in place only as long as they're absolutely necessary, and lifting them as soon as it's safe to do so.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the federal Liberal government was unable to meet their targets for vaccine procurement and distribution for all Canadians and given that this hampered Alberta's ability to continue with a robust vaccine rollout, Minister, could you please explain how the federal Liberal government's inability to obtain vaccinations for the country has impacted Alberta and how providing these vaccinations will lead to a quicker recovery for Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's be clear. The problem is that we've administered 10 doses of vaccine per 100 people in Canada while Denmark has given 16, Hungary 20, and Serbia 30. They've given two and three times the number of shots we have, and that's why we're still worrying about a surge in variant cases. The federal government simply didn't put a priority on contracting for the doses we needed at the start, in the first quarter, for those who need them the most, so now they're trying to catch up in the last week of March. The reality is that the supply in the first quarter is just too low.

The Speaker: Edmonton-North West has a question.

Red Deer College Degree-granting Status

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta postsecondary students are being ignored by this UCP government, and quite frankly they're getting fed up. The UCP reversed the promise made by our government to grant Red Deer College its formal university status, which would give them the ability to grant degrees. Now students say that five new degrees are waiting for the minister's approval, and they're getting nothing back from his office. To the minister. First, you reject their university, and now you're stalling out on their degrees. Why don't you ever seem to do anything that actually helps students?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's actually not true. To date I haven't received a recommendation either in favour of or against any degree proposal from the Campus Alberta Quality Council. Just as a quick update, all degrees must go through a rigorous quality examination through the Campus Alberta Quality Council. I'm looking forward to receiving their recommendations as it relates to the degrees from Red Deer College. I am favourably looking forward to being able to offer those degrees once we receive a complete quality assessment of the degree proposals.

2:20

Mr. Eggen: Well, given that this government has put in question the promise to Red Deer College to become a university after they've already invested a lot of time and money in the transition and given that the number one goal for Red Deer is to get this university status to be able to grant degrees and help to grow the economy in the city

of Red Deer and that now they can't even get these degrees past the minister in a timely manner, to the minister: can you explain to the people of Red Deer how putting their university status into question and ignoring the needs of future leaders helps us somehow to grow the economy in central Alberta?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, perhaps some clarification, Mr. Speaker. You don't need to become a university to offer degrees. You know, NAIT and SAIT offer degrees. Several of our other institutions also offer degrees. I do believe that there is capacity at Red Deer College to offer degrees. As I mentioned, those degree proposals have been submitted to the independent Campus Alberta Quality Council, that's reviewing the quality of those programs, and I'm waiting on a recommendation. I know they're working very diligently with Red Deer College on those proposals. Once we have a recommendation, we'll be able to move forward. As well – I might have the opportunity to speak to it later – the transition to university was not well thought out.

Mr. Eggen: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, given that this minister told the Red Deer College students that the ability to grant degrees ultimately lands on his desk and given that the stakeholders are coming to me suggesting that the minister doesn't seem to care or that he's stalling out on his vision for postsecondary in central Alberta, in Red Deer specifically, Minister, I'm wondering: like, do you need a pen to sign off on these degrees, and while you're signing things, could you also reinstate Red Deer's promised university status?

Mr. Nicolaides: Mr. Speaker, I have a pen right here. I'm ready to go. Again, we're just waiting for the Campus Alberta Quality Council to review the degree proposals. We, of course, want to make sure that all degrees are of the highest quality. They're working with Red Deer College to do that, and as soon as we have a favourable recommendation, we'll be able to move forward.

As it relates to university transition, what became apparent to me two years ago, Mr. Speaker, was that this was all just smoke and mirrors. The NDP had no plans in place for the successful transition. Indeed, programs such as trades and foundational learning could be at risk at Red Deer, which are important to the community. Those would have been lost.

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

Driver's Licence Road Tests

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The cost of everything seems to be going up under this no-jobs government: income taxes, property taxes, camping fees, auto insurance, and now driver examination fees. Albertans were surprised to see that as of April 1 they will have to pay more to book a road test. Meanwhile the UCP are happy to hand over billions of dollars to profitable corporations and their out-of-province shareholders. Why is this government nickel and diming Albertans while these corporations get billions in handouts?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board has risen.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government inherited a driver examination process that the members opposite nationalized. That left thousands – thousands – of Albertans waiting to take a test. It was impeding economic recovery. Fortunately, our Minister of Transportation is making changes, changes that will in fact expedite Albertans in getting their drivers' licences, changes that will support Alberta's economic recovery.

Mr. Dach: I figured that the minister would gloat about the changes they've made to road tests, but they're changes that are now costing Albertans more, which is what happens when you privatize things.

Given that when his government privatized driver examiners, they promised that fees for road tests would not go up and even claimed that it would save Albertans money and given that our caucus has been hearing from constituents, including mine, concerned about driver examination fees going up on April 1, why does this government seem to be breaking its promise to Albertans and increasing driver examination fees when drivers are struggling to pay skyrocketing insurance rates under this government? Where is the job creation there?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, this government inherited a driver examination process that the members opposite really left in complete disrepair when they finished their term. That's why our Minister of Transportation is making very substantive changes, changes that will in fact ensure that there's enough capacity for Albertans to get their driver's licence. That's critical for economic recovery. It's critical so that every Albertan can pursue their opportunities in this province.

Mr. Dach: Given that the road test fee structure found on the government's website does not match what registries are charging for a road test and given that in the government's budget there is not a single mention of road test fees going up – but it does talk about camping fees going up – why is this government trying to hide the fact of this fee increase for road tests? Is it because they broke their promise, or are they just ashamed to admit how much drivers now have to pay under this government for a road test, which will be preventing a lot of people from applying for jobs?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, the members opposite always believe that government needs to deliver every service. They continue to believe that government is the best to deliver driver exams even though, by doing that, they created a lack of capacity, long lineups. The members opposite broke the system. The Minister of Transportation has made changes that will allow every Albertan to take a test and get their Alberta driver's licence. This is about providing opportunity for Albertans. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. the Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Economic Recovery and the Pharmaceutical Industry

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has been the province of opportunity, the province where ideas come to life, the province where hard work, creativity, and passion are rewarded. Whether it's through the family they have built here, the small business they have created, or the home they have always wanted, lifelong goals are attained in Alberta, right here. Can the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation enlighten this House on why Albertans should be optimistic about the economic future?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are some good things happening in the Alberta economy. We're seeing record levels of venture capital investment land in this province. We're seeing increased plans for energy investment for 2021. Now the Conference Board of Canada, the Bank of Montreal, the National Bank are all predicting Alberta to lead the nation in GDP growth.

This government is betting on Alberta. Financial institutions are betting on Alberta. I call on the members opposite to bet on this province.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister. Given that you articulated the various kinds of investment that have been made in Alberta's economy during the recent estimates process and given that you further went on to explain the importance of continuing to diversify our economy, Minister, can you please let Albertans know what our province is doing to attract investment from the pharmaceutical industry as this is a rapidly growing industry in Canada that needs our support?

The Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. The Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation recently put out a call to the pharmaceutical industry for them to tell us how we as a province can ensure that we're not subject to the vaccine nationalism that has slowed our initial vaccination campaign. With our low corporate tax rate, our existing advantages in pharmaceuticals, including a Nobel prize winner in the Li Ka Shing Institute of Virology, we're well placed to grow the pharmaceutical industry in this province.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister. Given that Glenn Weagle, executive vice-president of technology and innovation at General Intermediates of Canada, was recently quoted as saying that Alberta has always had a very high potential for the production of pharmaceuticals and given that this is true as I recently met with an organization that is looking to start manufacturing pharmaceuticals right here in Alberta, Minister, what can you tell our government to do to support organizations that want to manufacture pharmaceuticals in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government has created the best conditions in this province for any investor, really, across sectors. We have the lowest business tax rate in Canada. We've implemented the innovation employment grant. We've recapitalized the Alberta Enterprise Corporation. According to a report by ATB that's just out today, we have one of the most well-educated workforces in the world. We have an incredible foundation for future growth in pharmaceuticals.

2:30

Coal Development Policies

Mr. Schmidt: Yesterday a petition was tabled in the House of Commons calling on the federal government to conduct a regional assessment of the coal developments in southwest Alberta; 14,000 Albertans have signed the petition, showing that they have no trust in this government's review of the coal policy and would rather have a federal review of the matter. It is clear that the government needs to rebuild trust and take action to protect our eastern slopes. Albertans do not want the status quo that the government is presenting them with, so why is the government not pausing all exploration activity until consultations have been completed?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I've said to the House before, we're starting consultations on the coal policy on April 29. At that time we're looking forward to hearing from the NDP their views on coal because what they have said lately completely contradicts their record while in office, where their

government approved four exploration programs on category 2 lands.

Mr. Schmidt: Given that the petition was co-led by indigenous activists who are very concerned about the lack of any indigenous consultation when the government removed the coal policy and given that the petition asks that the government consult with indigenous people on water rights and coal developments and given that so far the government's approach has been entirely inadequate, when can indigenous people expect the government to step up, fulfill their obligations to consult with them, and stop making further changes that impact First Nations when it comes to coal development?

The Speaker: The Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In our coal policy consultations we will be launching separate indigenous government-to-government consultations. I've spoken with all the chiefs down in southwestern Alberta about the coal policy, and we're looking forward to their participation, just like we're looking forward to the NDP's participation in those coal consultations. They can explain to Albertans why they're opposed to surface mining in category 2 lands when in 2016 it was the NDP who told coal companies: come surface mine in category 2 lands.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, given that Albertans have made it clear that they want a much more extensive process that considers the impacts of coal mines and given that no one trusts this government's process and many even hope that the federal government will step in and given that we intend to table a bill that will halt all coal exploration and ensure that regional planning considers all impacts of coal mining and ban category 2 mining completely, to the minister. Albertans want to know: will you support our caucus bill and stop mining our eastern slopes?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really can't wait to hear the NDP participation in our coal consultations. They can tell us in those consultations why they approved four exploration programs on category 2 lands, why they were the ones who told coal companies that you can come surface mine in category 2 lands. They even approved – they even approved – and saw constructed a coal mine in category 2 lands. I can't wait for the NDP to tell us why what they're saying now contradicts their record when in office. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Drug Overdose Prevention

Ms Sigurdson: In June of last year AHS was about to launch a telephone-based overdose prevention service, but the associate minister of health personally cancelled it. The associate minister interfered in a clinical program that would have saved lives. Overdose deaths have almost doubled on his watch. Today, nine months later, he announced that he's launching a very similar program. The question is simple: how many Albertans died unnecessarily while the associate minister deprived them of help for nine months?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We've always said that we support a full continuum of care that ranges from prevention and intervention to treatment and recovery. We know that roughly

70 per cent of overdose fatalities in Alberta happen at home. The digital overdose response system will help Albertans using opioids and other substances while alone summon emergency response to their location if they become unconscious. That was the app that was announced today.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that back in June the associate minister said, and I quote, "I am deeply concerned about patient safety with a service of this nature" and given that the minister's alleged concern for safety led to hundreds upon hundreds of preventable deaths but given that it seems the minister has changed his mind somewhere along the way, why won't the minister admit that his cancellation of this service last June was yet another of his serious errors in judgment that led to the preventable deaths of Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government is taking action. This app will be tested in Calgary this summer, where rates of overdoses in suburban areas are high, before we expand the program to the rest of the province. Our first priority is safety, but this program will also provide information about addiction recovery services in the area to help users on their journey to recovery. This is a great program developed by a company that's been doing this work for 15 years in Alberta, and we're confident it's the solution that Albertans need.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that the associate minister is at last coming around to harm reduction as a proven model for saving lives, which the rest of the world has known for decades, and given that he has launched a telephone-based supervised consumption service, will he finally do the right thing to save the lives of Albertans and expand access to in-person supervised consumption services in our province?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, while we know COVID-19 is impacting the lives of all Albertans, especially those struggling with addiction, we are seeing similar numbers in other provinces like B.C. Our government has remained focused on ensuring that Albertans dealing with addictions have access to life-saving prevention as well as intervention, treatment, and recovery supports and services. Every and any life lost to addiction is one too many. My heart goes out to the friends and families of any of those who have lost a loved one.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley.

Agricultural Concerns

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Agriculture has a long history in Alberta. Agriculture existed well before Alberta was a province. Generations of farmers have toiled to bring food to tables across Alberta and around the world. Like all parts of our economy, the agriculture sector has been hit hard by COVID, especially in the cattle industry. If the Alberta economy is to grow, agriculture must be a part of that growth. To the minister: what supports and initiatives is your department working on, and what changes in AgriStability are being considered to ensure that Albertan farmers are at the front of the economic recovery of this province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.

Mr. Dreesen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to the hon. member for that question. Agriculture obviously was a bright spot in 2020, but it did have disruptions in its supply chain. Something that – this government actually created a \$43 million fed cattle set-

aside program to help the beef industry out through their supply chain disruptions. We also modernized the meat inspection regulations, leading to tens of thousands of new opportunities for our butchers and ranchers as well as \$7.4 million annually of livestock producers' economic value out of the nearly 200 on-farm slaughter licences that we created, again, to help our cattle industry out at a time when they needed it the most.

Mr. Loewen: Given that interprovincial and international trade is essential to the livelihoods of many Albertan farmers and given that such trade is needed in the economic recovery and given that we are in the second year of bee farmers suffering from lack of supply of bee imports from New Zealand and other countries and given that we have a supply of bees just across the U.S. border that we can't access due to federal regulations, to the minister: what work are you and your counterparts in other provinces and the federal ag minister doing to facilitate fair, smooth, and mutually beneficial trade?

The Speaker: The Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes. Food security is so important. That's why at the start of COVID we actually declared the entire food supply chain an essential service, something that – we wanted to ensure that Alberta producers could import their inputs and things that they needed in order to have a successful season as well as export their high-quality products around the world.

The member is right in saying that there were a lot of difficulties with bee imports last year. That's something that we're working on with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and we also created a million-dollar program to help our beekeepers offset the cost of hive replacements.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that in many parts of Alberta farmers and ranchers suffer extensive crop damage from wildlife and given that the government compensates farmers for losses to wildlife and given that the management of wildlife falls under the purview of Alberta Environment and Parks and given that the government has dropped the 20 per cent top-up funding for the damage agriculture producers suffer, what will the government be doing to help alleviate the concerns and losses created by wildlife that our farmers in Alberta suffer?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. We are committed to supporting our farmers and ranchers. That's why every year we have about \$300 million in support through business risk management programs, provincial dollars here in Alberta, and AFSC will continue to administer the wildlife damage compensation program with minimal cost to producers. It's only about a \$25 application fee. This change actually aligns with the majority of the provinces, which do not provide a top-up to 80 per cent of the program, but the program in itself will remain available for producers with any loss to productivity due to wildlife.

2:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

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

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills I'm pleased to table the committee's final report on Bill 213, Traffic Safety (Maximum Speed Limit for Provincial Freeways) Amendment Act, 2021, sponsored by the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. This bill was referred to the committee on March 10, 2021. The report recommends that Bill 213 proceed. I request concurrence of the Assembly in the final report on Bill 213.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the motion for concurrence in the report on Bill 213, Traffic Safety (Maximum Speed Limit for Provincial Freeways) Amendment Act, 2021, is debatable pursuant to Standing Order 18(1)(b). Are there any members wishing to debate the motion for concurrence?

Seeing none, the chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills has requested concurrence in the report on Bill 213, Traffic Safety (Maximum Speed Limit for Provincial Freeways) Amendment Act, 2021.

[Motion for concurrence carried]

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills I request leave to present a petition that has been received for a private bill in accordance with Standing Order 98(2), the petition of Michael Blair, general secretary, on behalf of the United Church of Canada for Bill Pr. 2, The United Church of Canada Amendment Act, 2021.

Thank you, sir.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The Government House Leader has a notice of motion.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of Government Motion 70, to be put on the Order Paper in my name, which will be as follows:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly express profound dismay at the revocation of the permit issued by the President of the United States authorizing the Keystone XL pipeline border crossing as the Assembly is of the view that the decision will (a) lead to the loss of an estimated 60,000 direct, indirect, and induced jobs associated with the Keystone XL project in both Canada and the United States, (b) undermine North American energy security, making the United States more dependent on OPEC oil imports in the future, and (c) damage the critical and important Canada-U.S. bilateral relationship, and be it further resolved that the Assembly express its gratitude to the majority of the members of the United States Senate and the coalition of state governments who are seeking a reversal of this decision and that the Assembly call upon the government of the United States to compensate the government of Alberta and TC Energy for damages created by the arbitrary revocation of the presidential permit.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Bill 58 Freedom to Care Act

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 58, the Freedom to Care Act.

Government regulations for commercial purposes can prevent nonprofit organizations from addressing needs in the community. To support the nonprofit and charitable sector, I'm here to introduce legislation that will allow nonprofits performing social good to apply for common-sense, one-time exemptions from such regulations. The legislation, if passed, will allow cabinet, through an order in council, to grant one-time, short-term exemptions to nonprofits for some government regulations and require the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women to report annually to cabinet on exemption requests that cannot be addressed through existing processes or legislation. My ministry will also develop a central website to help nonprofits identify and access existing regulatory exemptions. The establishment of this central website is not part of Bill 58 but will be a part of the program to support the implementation of this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's 1.6 million volunteers are essential to nonprofits. This legislation will also provide individual volunteers with liability protections, encouraging more Albertans to help their neighbours and serve their community. Mr. Speaker, nonprofits are a key to Alberta's recovery and rebuilding our communities, and the need to focus on helping people instead of navigating existing exemptions to regulations is necessary. I look very forward to debating and discussing this important bill in the Legislature.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 58 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The hon. the Minister of Energy has one.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the following report on behalf of the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation. This report is to follow up on questions that were asked in Committee of Supply and main estimates on March 9, 2021.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we would be at points of order; however, we dealt with the point of order that was raised by the hon. Member for Calgary-West during Oral Question Period, and I'd like to thank the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for his prompt withdrawal. As such, we are at Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 60 Appropriation Act, 2021

The Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to move second reading of Bill 60, the Appropriation Act, 2021.

This act will provide funding authority to the offices of the Legislative Assembly and the government of Alberta for the 2021-22 fiscal year. The schedule to the act provides amounts that were presented in greater detail by the 2021-22 government estimates and offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates tabled on February 25, 2021. Budget 2021 provides essential funding for the programs and services Albertans rely on. It's focused on three main priorities: investing in health care, economic recovery, and continued efficient delivery of government services.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Alberta is now entering the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our province continues to tackle its many challenges head-on. Budget 2021 takes an approach that balances the need to take actions necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 and the need to keep our economy functioning. However, while the vaccination process has begun, the health care system will continue to remain under pressure for some time. Budget 2021 will ensure that our health care system has the resources it needs to continue the fight against COVID-19 and to protect the lives of Albertans. Increased investment in health care will ensure Alberta remains a leader in vaccine administration.

The estimates include a \$1.25 billion contingency, which will be available as needed to ensure our health care system is adequately resourced to deal with the pandemic and its effects. Contingency funding will be focused on priorities such as acute care, continuing care, testing and assessment centres, contact tracing, personal protective equipment, vaccine deployment, and supports to shelters and vulnerable Albertans. As the pandemic continues, keeping Albertans healthy is key to driving our economic recovery.

Madam Speaker, we were among the first jurisdictions to respond to the economic consequences of the pandemic with immediate measures to free up cash for employers. We deferred corporate income taxes to provide Alberta businesses with access to \$1.5 billion to pay their employees, their rent, and to continue operating. We deferred Workers' Compensation Board premiums for all private-sector employers and committed to covering half of the 2020 premiums for small and medium-sized employers. Utility payments were deferred. The education property tax was frozen and deferred. We abated tourism levy payments and Alberta Energy Regulator fees. Throughout the pandemic I've had nothing but admiration for Alberta businesses that quickly adapted to our new reality. Their efforts, along with government initiatives, helped protect us from the worst possible economic outcomes.

2:50

Madam Speaker, I've said it before, but it warrants repeating today: economic recovery and growth will be essential to get this province to fiscal balance. If we're going to ensure prosperity for future generations of Albertans, we must reverse the trend of investment decline. Not in our lifetimes have business, investment, and private-sector growth been more important. That's why our government is committed to positioning Alberta as the most competitive business environment in the country. Budget 2021 provides \$1.4 billion to support specific sectors, improve competition, and position Alberta for growth and job creation.

A key part of Alberta's economic recovery plan is strategic infrastructure investments. Budget 2021 added \$1.7 billion to the capital plan for '21-22. This is over and above what was committed to in Budget 2020. This increased funding will support the creation of good-paying jobs, employing Albertans to build new roads, schools, and hospitals right across the province. It's going toward strategic infrastructure projects that we have carefully identified for their potential to support economic long-term growth. In total the

three-year plan will support more than 50,000 direct and 40,000 indirect jobs through to 2024.

Municipal support accounts for the largest portion of the capital plan at 33 per cent. Capital maintenance and renewal makes the next largest portion, with \$3 billion over the course of the plan. That's an increase of nearly \$300 million from Budget 2020. This investment will support the creation of many jobs now while minimizing the need for more costly repairs or replacement infrastructure in the future.

In addition to health care and economic recovery, the efficient delivery of government services remains a top priority in this budget. For now, in order to provide the support Albertans need during what may very well be the most challenging time of their entire lives, the government must necessarily spend more in the near term.

During this time of economic and fiscal uncertainty the government will remain steadfast in its commitment to three important fiscal anchors. First, the three-year fiscal plan keeps Alberta's net debt-to-GDP below 30 per cent. By the end of the three-year plan the ratio will be 26.4 per cent, Madam Speaker. Second, the government is determined to deliver services in the most cost-effective way. In 2019 the MacKinnon panel report showed that Alberta spends more per capita than comparable provinces without better results. We've taken steps to bring spending down. Outside of our pandemic response we've made good progress, but there's more to do. This year's fiscal plan brings Alberta's spending levels in line with that of Canada's largest provinces, positioning us for success as the economy begins to recover. This is a critically important deliverable to put the province on a sustainable fiscal trajectory. Third, the government remains committed to balancing the budget. Once we can see our way clear of the pandemic, we will present a path and timeline for getting the budget balanced.

Madam Speaker, Alberta is facing one of the most difficult times in its history, but the province will persevere by focusing on what matters most: health and jobs. The government will ensure Health has the resources required to deal with the pandemic and its effects. Our fiscal plan also positions the province for economic diversification and growth. At the same time the government is working to deliver services most efficiently to safeguard our fiscal future.

Madam Speaker, I urge all members in this House to support this bill today. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to this budget bill. I'll just clarify that I do have 15 minutes and then 29(2) – or not 29(2)(a).

The Deputy Speaker: Twenty minutes.

Mr. Bilous: I have 20 minutes. Wonderful.

There are a number of things I'd like to lay out and concerns that I have in this bill, quite frankly, Madam Speaker. The bill claims to be focused on jobs and job creation and supporting the very foundations that will lead to accelerated job growth and help Alberta's recovery. However, this budget does not do that. We need to look back at the first couple of budgets that this government has tabled to identify the number of cuts that have been placed on entities like Alberta Innovates, which, of course, as you'll know, has a number of different programs and supports for businesses to help them get up and running. For start-ups they have microvouchers. They have a suite of programs. Well, last year alone Alberta Innovates was cut by this government to a tune of \$89 million, which is significant. We know that our postsecondaries have been cut massively. In fact, this year alone, in this budget, \$75 million was cut from the University of Alberta.

Now, what I fail to understand, Madam Speaker, is the fact that on the one hand this government claims that they are going to attract investment to Alberta, they're going to attract companies to Alberta – the government talks about Infosys, which is a significant win for Alberta. I mean, the government should really be thanking Calgary Economic Development and the former NDP government for their work on bringing Infosys to Alberta. But what's interesting is that the number one reason that companies like Infosys have chosen to relocate in Alberta is because of talent. Talent is the most critical piece for companies, and it's not just technology companies.

I mean, one can make the point that every company is a technology company because every company on the planet today uses technology. In fact, I don't know a company that doesn't use technology and also uses artificial intelligence. I love the example that our smart phones are a form of artificial intelligence. If you've ever typed in a search and it fills in what you're looking for before you finish your sentence, that's an algorithm. That's using AI.

My point, Madam Speaker, is that companies are looking to jurisdictions that have a strong talent pipeline. You see, it always comes back to pipelines. In this case we're talking about the talent pipeline. Under the former government there were a number of programs, including increases to our postsecondary institutions but also a targeted program of increasing technology spaces or grads of different programs that revolve around technology by 4,000. There was a pilot that was done by our postsecondaries that were interested in participating.

We had a task force struck with members of the private sector, the public sector, postsecondary sector because this is what companies like Amazon – when Calgary bid for Amazon's HQ2 and Amazon came back and the former government supported and upped the bid that Calgary Economic Development put in in order to attract Amazon's HQ2, which would have resulted in 50,000 jobs over a period of time in downtown Calgary, they came back and said, "You don't have enough talent coming through the pipeline," meaning that we need to allocate more resources to programs that are targeted in our postsecondaries to ensure that we are graduating folks with the right skills.

Companies that I talk to often will say that they get a good start, but some of the programs need tweaking. They need stronger partnerships with the private sector to know exactly what talents and qualifications and skills the companies need today. Now, we have a lot of incredible companies here in Alberta that will take our grads and say, "You know what? We're going to put them through our own internal six- to 12-month training to get them up and running with the software that we use to have the skills that we need," which is great, but there's more that we need to do at the postsecondary level.

What's not going to help Alberta be competitive is in direct contradiction to the government's stated mandate of attracting investment – well, companies that are looking for talent are not going to look to Alberta if we continue to pass budgets like this, that completely gut our postsecondary institutions. The irony, Madam Speaker, when I hear the minister stand up and talk about how we need to come in line with Saskatchewan and Manitoba – that's great. So we want to take the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta, that are ranked in the top 10 globally, and let's put them into the 40th or the 50th percentile so we can be neck and neck with Saskatchewan and Manitoba. That's a winning solution for Alberta. I apologize if I offended Manitoba and Saskatchewan, but their universities are not globally ranked the way the U of A and the U of C are. By gutting these very institutions, it means fewer dollars for our researchers, fewer dollars for our programs, which means we're going to get less quality. Students are

going to look to institutions that are funding their professors to attract more students.

3:00

I'll give you a great example, Madam Speaker. I'm sure you've heard this time and time again. The University of Alberta is ranked third in the world when it comes to artificial intelligence because of AMII, the Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute. Why are we ranked third? Because governments from a long time ago – in fact, we're almost coming up to the 20th anniversary of when the government of Alberta started investing in AMII, and every government subsequent, including our government, invested in AMII. Those investments over time attracted some of the top minds in artificial intelligence to Alberta.

Now, we know Alberta, we love Alberta, and we celebrate Alberta. There are many jurisdictions in the world who have no idea where Alberta is. But the fact that we attracted especially one researcher named Dr. Rich Sutton to Alberta: he has drawn a massive following of grad students who want to study under him. That builds more credibility for the U of A. That builds a bigger name recognition that in turn attracts more talent. That talent, Madam Speaker, attracts business.

A great example is Google, a small little Internet company. You may have heard of them. Google set up their DeepMind lab in Edmonton, Alberta, their first one outside of Europe, and they chose Edmonton, Alberta, out of anywhere in North America. Why? Because of all of those previous investments that governments made and because of the talent that we have here and are attracting here. That all stems back to investing in our postsecondary system.

When I see budgets like this one, making massive cuts to our postsecondaries with the argument that we need to come in line with other universities, again, ironically, in the same year that a virology researcher earned a Nobel prize – we've earned a Nobel prize; now let's scale back the money because that's going to help us continue to compete on the world stage. Like, Madam Speaker, the world is left scratching its head, wondering how when you have this celebrated accomplishment, you then say: now we're going to cut the funding because that will tell the world that we are serious about continuing to attract talent. I get, you know, that the minister and the government will jump up and say: but we've committed to \$20 million to the Li Ka Shing virology centre. That's fantastic. You cut \$75 million from them, so where's the other \$55 million? You're not going to get a pat on the back or a high-five until you actually restore the money and then invest forward looking.

You know, there are countless examples in this budget, Madam Speaker, where the government will claim that they've made investments, but in fact until they restore the cuts – Alberta Innovates is another great example, as I mentioned earlier; \$89 million cut from their budget last year. They got, I think, an additional \$20 million to \$40 million this year. Okay. Great. You're still halfway to restoring the cuts that you made previously. These aren't strategic investments that the government is making but examples of – companies like Infosys require that talent, and that talent will attract companies. We have some incredible work that's being done in this province already, but they need additional support.

We also see in this budget that there really is no jobs plan here. The government wants to talk about job creation, and my favourite is that the government talks about BMO's forecast for the year. Okay. Well, you know, forecasts are nice. That's great, but let's talk about actuals from last year, the year before, and the year before. In 2019 alone Alberta lost 50,000 jobs. That's pre-COVID, before the pandemic. The government cannot use the excuse of: the pandemic is why those jobs were lost. We recognize the pandemic has had an

unbelievable impact on entrepreneurs, businesses, workers, and the lives of Alberta.

But 2019, pre-COVID: 50,000 jobs lost. This was after the government announced its corporate tax rollback and claimed it as a silver bullet. In fact, that was the time period that the Finance minister – he probably forgot that he called diversification a luxury that Albertans can't afford. Now, he's since reversed that, but the point here is that this government didn't believe in anything outside our one major sector, which, of course, is critical to Alberta, that being oil and gas, energy. But Alberta has a number of other sectors that are also critical and then a number of supports like, again, technology and artificial intelligence, that really underpin our major sectors, including oil and gas.

But in 2019: massive job loss. We continue to have in Edmonton and Calgary the highest unemployment rate or among the highest in the country. What's interesting is that regardless of these forecasts, you look at the fiscal plan, the government's own fiscal plan, and it states in black and white that the unemployment rates will not return to pre-COVID levels until 2024 and beyond.

By the government's own admission the corporate tax reduction is not, in fact, going to be the tool or the silver bullet that this government claimed it would be to bring back jobs. Again, in 2019 the corporate tax rate was already announced, and in fact, the Premier even made comments about how banks and insurance companies from Bay Street would be irresponsible if they didn't move to Alberta and fill Calgary's office towers. We've yet to hear one example of a bank that has relocated its headquarters to Calgary or Alberta because the corporate tax rate is now the lowest in the country. If that was the beacon of hope and the big magnet, it's not working. In fact, companies said: hey, government of Alberta, Alberta taxpayers, thanks for that savings. In fact, Husky said: we'll take the \$300 million we don't have to pay in taxes, that goes to building schools and investing in critical infrastructure, and we're going to go invest in Saskatchewan, who has a higher tax rate, Newfoundland, who has a much higher tax rate, and states in the U.S.

So I mean, I guess you could say that your budget created jobs. It sure did in other jurisdictions. Albertans are subsidizing jobs in other parts of our country. I guess that's good for Canada, minus the ones that all went south and helped our neighbours in the U.S., which is also great. But I think Albertans would have preferred their tax dollars going to support companies investing in Alberta, hiring Albertans.

This budget has a number of flaws. The war room, which is probably the worst \$30 million this government spends every year. I mean, there's probably worse. It's just sometimes difficult to get answers out of the front bench. Thirty million dollars to be a laughingstock. Now, to talk about protecting Alberta's energy sector: you're right, we do need to protect Alberta's energy sector. But I would submit, and you can read in the news that the war room is not actually protecting Alberta's energy sector. It's doing the opposite. Instead of demonstrating that we have some of the highest environmental standards in the country and that we are continuing to work toward pulling carbon out of every barrel, which we know we are – the innovation that is going on in some of our largest oil sands companies is remarkable. I know this because I have visited them.

So we do need to tell our story and we do need to do a better job telling our story, but the war room is an international joke. We're spending \$30 million a year on this, that's being run by a failed UCP candidate who has proven over and over again his incompetency. In fact, if he was in the private sector, he would have lost his job about – oh, I don't know – the day after he was hired. You know, you plagiarize not one logo but two logos. Like, who's

running this shop? That does not provide credibility to our energy sector. That does not bolster investor confidence. That does the opposite.

3:10

You know what's the most frustrating is that in estimates I asked the Minister of Energy for metrics. How do you evaluate that every dollar that is being spent on the war room is actually gaining value or giving value? What are the performance metrics? What are the targets? There's no answer. There are no targets. There are no performance metrics. They have a \$30 million slush fund to do advertising. Well, if the war room is advertising, then what's the Public Affairs Bureau doing? They have a healthy budget.

You know, these are questions that the Official Opposition has asked the government as we've been elected to do. I'll take a second to say to the ministers that responded to the questions that the opposition posed: thank you; you're doing your job. Because we're doing our job. Our job is to ask, to find out where the money is going, to find out how it's being measured, what programs it's being spent on. That's our job.

In estimates, again, I applaud the ministers that were able to leave the hyperpartisan talk at the door, because Albertans want answers. We were elected to do a job, the same as the government, and our job is to find out how the money is being spent so that Albertans can judge for themselves if the budget is good or not. I can tell you that from all of our performance metrics, this budget is not.

I'm sure I'm running low on time already, but I want to talk a little bit about some of the programs specifically in the Jobs, Economy and Innovation ministry. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that, again, the programs that have been rolled out to support businesses during this extremely painful time that's been going on for more than a year now have completely fallen short of what businesses need. Businesses have said over and over again that the program supports are cumbersome, they're extremely difficult to navigate around, and the money is not enough. In fact, we just heard from a business owner today that talked about how the supports that she was eligible for don't even cover her commercial rent for a month, and that was her total that she received from the government in supports.

If we want to come out of this pandemic, we need to support our businesses and to a much greater extent than what is currently in this program. We just heard today that the Minister of Finance talked about: over \$500 million has been earmarked. Well, that's great. You can earmark all the pages you want. If you're not getting the money out the door into businesses' hands, they're unable to pay their bills, and they're going to go under. And we've already lost far too many businesses in Alberta due to COVID-19. I appreciate that's out of the government's hands.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to join debate on Bill 60 in second reading? The hon. Member for Calgary-South East.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As we all know, we are officially one year into Alberta's COVID-19 response, yet we still face a long road to normalcy. While vaccines do offer hope, there are still ongoing delays from the federal government, which means that widespread immunization will not be achievable for several months at the very least. This means that our health care system will continue to be extremely busy, and we will still have some public health measures for the foreseeable future. Despite these tough times Alberta's government has responded to help Albertans during these difficult times. Budget 2021 is planned to protect the lives and livelihoods of all as we continue to face the pandemic.

Madam Speaker, we are making a historic investment to make sure that our health care system has what it needs to continue to protect Albertans. Budget 2021 invests \$21.4 billion in Health's operating budget. This represents roughly a \$900 million, or 4 per cent, increase from 2020-2021. This record high investment is a continued demonstration of our commitment to world-class health care. On top of that, there is \$1.25 billion in contingency to ensure that Alberta remains a leader in both the pandemic response as well as vaccine administration. That is on top of the COVID-related health spending in 2020-2021, which was over \$2 billion.

Alberta has responded swiftly and effectively to address all of the problems that this pandemic has caused, but there is more to do, and this will continue to be the case going forward. Alberta's COVID-19 response will continue as a significant driver of government activity and spending, and we anticipate having to respond and support ongoing work in regard to the pandemic throughout this year and well into 2022.

Unfortunately, our health care system is not the only area being affected by the pandemic. Another that has faced pandemic-related challenges is our education system. With these impacts in mind we are making sure that we continue to respond and help our education system in the best way possible. Madam Speaker, Alberta students are continuing to benefit from one of the best funded education systems across Canada, indeed the world. This government is maintaining education spending to school authorities despite a decrease in enrolment. In Budget 2021 there will be more than \$130 million in mitigation funding received by school boards. By the end of the 2019-2020 school year school boards have reported \$384 million in operating reserves, which marked an increase of \$21 million during these difficult and unprecedented times.

Alberta is funding postsecondary education as well in a responsible way that is fair to taxpayer dollars but that also provides students with greater value for their investment. Budget 2021 is helping to prepare for Alberta's recovery by investing in people, infrastructure, and research capacity in the postsecondary sector to help drive job creation, foster innovation, and provide both the skills and knowledge that Albertans need to participate in the current but also the future economy. Budget 2021 is providing \$5.8 billion for Advanced Education while also supporting over 269,000 full- and part-time students, including apprentices, by providing them with the education and training opportunities they need to prepare for the workforce. With this spending Advanced Education's three-year capital plan investment of \$1.6 billion will help create jobs, stimulate the economy, and give Alberta's adult learners access to more spaces at state-of-the-art learning facilities.

Madam Speaker, these examples are just a few of the great things Budget 2021 is bringing to Alberta. This government is committed to helping Albertans during these difficult times and will continue to do so into the future. Albertans have shown great resiliency throughout this past year, and this government has been with them every step of the way.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, I will now recognize the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to be able to rise to speak in second reading to Budget 2021-22. This is, for all intents and purposes, I guess, really the first budget that we've had an opportunity to debate appropriately since the fall of 2019, so it is a particularly important opportunity for us.

Let me begin by addressing some comments that I've heard from some folks on the other side around the positions that have already been taken by members of our caucus to vote against this budget and not to support it and sort of the tendency of those across the way to suggest that somehow because we're not voting in favour of the budget, we're somehow not voting in favour of education or we're not voting in favour of health care or we're not voting in favour of other things that are funded through the budget. To be clear, this is a parliamentary democracy. You don't normally get to have the opposition vote with you just because you present a budget. Quite honestly, that would be akin to asking to graduate on the basis of your attendance certificate rather than your report card, and I would suggest that members opposite deserve to have this budget assessed as though there is a report card. Unfortunately, in the current situation that Alberta finds itself in, this is a budget that fails to meet the basic standards that Albertans were looking for.

3:20

Where are we right now in Alberta? We are, we hope, you know, 80 per cent of the way through a historic pandemic. We have had thousands of Albertans lose their lives, hundreds of thousands of Albertans become ill, and – I believe that is the number; I could stand to be corrected, certainly – hundreds of thousands of Albertans lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic, indeed before the pandemic and since the last budget introduced by this government in the fall of 2019 there.

Let me just say for a moment that there was, of course, a budget that they brought into the House in the beginning of 2020, but we short-circuited in an unprecedented way the debate process. As well, the budget itself was based off numbers that everybody understood were inaccurate. To use the words of the Finance minister, he felt like Rome was burning behind him as he introduced the budget, so I don't really perceive Budget 2020 as being a particularly helpful or guiding document to the people of Alberta.

Going back to Budget 2019, what has happened between Budget 2019 in the fall and now? Well, as I've said, we've seen hundreds of thousands of jobs lost as a result of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic we had seen the deficit double, we had seen about 50,000 jobs lost, and we had seen the economic growth stall. That budget and the outcome with respect to that budget that was reported – it should have been in June 2020 and ultimately was put out on August 30, 2020, in contrast to the standard budgeting protocol. Nonetheless, that report showed that that was essentially the first report card of this government, and that first report card said, essentially: doubled the deficit, lost 50,000 jobs, stalled the economy. That's the report card for year 1.

Then moving into year 2, as I've said, we've had this pandemic that no government, obviously, could prepare for. All governments would struggle mightily to manage the kinds of challenges that Alberta and all Canadians have faced since COVID arrived. But, to be clear, we weren't exactly in a strong place when it started. We're in this situation now where we lead the country in job loss. We led the country in economic recession. We had the biggest economic contraction in the country, over 7 per cent last year, the biggest amount of job loss last year. We are now heading into what we hope will be a recovery.

There are mixed projections out there in terms of what will happen with respect to the year going forward, the year that this budget is designed to guide us through. Most people agree and we do agree as well that we will lead the country in economic growth, but there is an asterisk beside that. Because we led the country in economic contraction, you have to put the two together. The economic contraction was over 7 per cent. We will lead the country in economic growth by over 4 per cent. We will not, however,

lead the country in terms of our ability to regain the jobs that were lost. The economic growth that we will see next year will not be matched by job recovery. We are on the verge, I'm afraid, of a bit of a jobless recovery or not a jobful recovery, not a recovery that will get people the jobs back that they lost.

Now, to be fair, a number of economists out there suggest that in the absence of doing anything, that pattern is something that we will see in jurisdictions all over the world, that in the absence of government stepping up and intervening, what we will find is what is often referred to as a K-shaped recovery, where a certain number of people, you know, with the recovery of GDP and more economic activity, a certain portion of people in any given jurisdiction will see their fortunes rise considerably and another portion will see their fortunes drop considerably. What will happen as a result is that as we come out of this recovery, just measured solely by GDP, we will have much greater levels of inequality in the recovered economy.

The fact that that's what people are projecting for Alberta is not in and of itself unusual for jurisdictions across the world. It is unusual for Canada, though. We stand out in terms of not recovering jobs at the same rate as we are recovering GDP, and of course I would argue that part of the reason that we do that is because this government is a bit of a one-trick pony when it comes to a jobs strategy; i.e., they figure that by accelerating the corporate handout and getting the corporate tax rate down to 8 per cent, somehow that is the magical formula, and there is nothing else that they need to do. That, unfortunately, was not working before the pandemic, as evidenced by the statistics that I just talked about, and it certainly is not going to work going forward.

Now, it's interesting. Last March or so, after the accelerated passing of last year's budget, the Premier did in fact announce an economic advisory council. However, it appears to us that pretty much the biggest thing that that council, made up almost entirely of very wealthy CEOs of very, very large companies, managed to secure was the acceleration of their corporate tax cut, at which point they were disbanded in about June, and all additional advice ceased. Now, we've since heard spokespeople from the Finance minister's office say: oh, no; we're still getting advice from them. But interestingly, the website that set them up has clearly stated that it was disbanded in June of 2020. They recommended their own beneficial policy change, and then they headed for the hills. Fine. That's who the government chose to listen to.

It doesn't mean that that's the only group of people the government needs to listen to. The government could listen to other people as well and come up with additional strategies to ensure that our economic recovery is one that is equitable and one that provides shared prosperity for all Albertans, not just those who are most well off. They could've done that. Indeed, that's what we kind of expected they must have been doing quietly behind the scenes, and we expected to see the outcome of that work, something that would have started 12 months ago, reflected in this budget.

But that is where we come to a big problem because, in fact, it is not reflected in this budget. There is virtually no jobs strategy reflected in this budget. There are words that say "job strategy," I think, in one or two places. It's really good that the words are in there, but there's no actual meaningful plan that is associated with specifics, with estimated costs, with return on investment, with expected job outcomes, with line item costs, with timelines. None of that stuff is in there. What we have instead is a plan that does not seem to be particularly well thought out.

In addition, the budget essentially includes the continuation of long-term cuts to our health care, a continuation of the starvation of our education system, and a number of targeted attacks on what I would argue is community resilience. Let me go through each of

those areas individually, and let me start, of course, with what I think Albertans were so most wanting to see in this budget, that they did not see, which are jobs.

The budget document, Madam Speaker, talks about a \$3 billion jobs plan. Let's break that down a bit because on the surface that sounds – that's not nothing. I mean, you know, it's a \$60 billion budget, so it's a little modest, but it's not nothing. Let's talk about this jobs plan that will be put in place after the single biggest economic recession that this province has seen in probably 50 years. Well, first of all, there's a little over I think it's about \$1.7 billion in incremental infrastructure funding. Obviously, there is more than \$1.7 billion in infrastructure funding, but to be clear, again going back to my first point that you don't actually get to graduate on the basis of your attendance certificate, you actually have to do something. We know that there is a general level of infrastructure funding that always is under way. We know that there are people who are already employed by that.

3:30

So the government doesn't get to take what is an ongoing, long-lasting program and point to that and say: look at us; we're creating jobs. You're not. You're maintaining jobs. That's great. Maintaining jobs is an excellent thing, Madam Speaker. I would argue a long time for maintaining jobs. Indeed, I will argue about that with respect to other elements of our public service that this government should not take jobs from. However, in the meantime, when you come to infrastructure, what you have to look at is: what is the incremental spend?

The incremental spend is about \$1.7 billion and for roughly eight point something, if I recall correctly. The Premier is fond of running around and saying: this is the biggest one-year spend on infrastructure ever, ever, ever. First of all, two notes to that. I would argue that you need to actually measure how much you get out the door as opposed to how much you actually plan to spend because those two numbers typically vary by about 15 to 20 per cent. But, secondly, even if you measure it against the biggest number actually out the door, which is harder to actually perform on, that largest number was when we were in government and we were engaging in the classic countercyclical spending designed to help soften slightly the blow experienced by so many Albertans when the price of oil dropped by roughly 75 per cent.

What the government is doing this year in this budget as far as infrastructure goes is not as much as that. It's certainly not out the door yet; it's just planned to be out the door. The amount is actually less, and of course that doesn't take into account that dollars are worth less now than they were in 2017. Nonetheless, they're putting some money into infrastructure. You know, it's a bit of what many economists would argue is low-hanging fruit in terms of what a government can do in terms of countercyclical spending to keep folks employed in the kind of incredibly difficult economic times that we are experiencing in this province and indeed across the country.

It's good. It's not massive, it's not visionary, but it's the kind of thing that you would expect to do. What else do we have? Well, we have just under half a billion dollars in – wait for it – federal dollars directed towards orphan well reclamation. Again, good plan. Glad that the federal government is stepping up to support that. It's a program that we initially started when we were in government, understanding that it helped folks in that sector get back to work and it also helped achieve the positive outcome of ameliorating somewhat the long-term environmental liabilities that all Albertans have taken on as a result of decades and decades and decades of failed environmental oversight. So, you know, there's value to it.

This government accepted the offer, I'm assuming, of the federal government, so we have that federal money in the jobs plan.

Then we also have the federal government contribution to what this provincial government is referring to as the jobs now program. Now, I will say that the idea behind it is a good one, you know, supporting employers to help to re-educate some of their employees to get them trained up for what is needed in the workplace. That makes good sense. It, too, is primarily funded by the federal government. As we've talked about in this House during question period, it unfortunately doesn't really amount to what we would call a jobs now program. It's more of a jobs some time later program.

As we have discussed, we are looking at potentially losing \$60 million of that program because we are, I think, now seven days away from losing the ability to spend it according to the rules that were laid out by the federal government. Now, hopefully, cap in hand, this government will succeed in getting the federal government to give them an extension on their homework. But, nonetheless, let us be clear that the budget suggests \$60 million was spent as of seven days from now. It's not in any event, so it's late, and it's also, again, the federal government.

Then we have the government's sector-by-sector job-creation strategy. There are little bits and pieces of boutique investments here, each of which have some merit to them and each of which, in their small, little way, have a bit of impact in small places, and that amounts to roughly \$200 million. Let us remember – and that's \$200 million of provincial money, so that's great. But let's put that in the context of a \$60 billion annual budget by this government; \$200 million of provincial money towards a little bit of economic diversification is not exactly what the situation is calling for right now, I would argue, particularly when it is contrasted with so many other things, which I'm about to talk about.

That's essentially – oh, sorry. And then we have the half-billion dollars in walking-around money. I did forget about that. The half-billion dollars in walking-around money is potentially good, potentially not. Hard to say; it's walking-around money. It is in fact called a contingency, which by definition means it won't necessarily be spent. Now, the Premier laughed and said: oh, of course it'll be spent; everybody wants it. I'm sure they do. The problem is that the way budgeting works is that we should actually run that one through the Legislature. Saying that we've got \$500 million of walking-around money that everybody that we're talking to behind closed doors really, really wants is not actually sound budgeting. Typically with an amount that big, unless you're talking about a contingency based on, say, a wildfire, where you know full well what it is you would actually be spending money on, \$500 million for a bunch of projects that a bunch of people might someday ask us for does not a plan make, Madam Speaker. As a result, I would argue that after 12 months of opportunity for this government to come up with a plan, to simply come in here and ask for permission to take \$500 million out for a stroll is less than impressive governance.

Now, that being said, that's what the jobs plan is, and it's far less than Albertans would have expected or would have wanted to see. What is in here – or what should be here that we don't see? Well, for one thing, you know, we are accelerating our corporate tax cut, but what we don't see is a single solitary estimate of a job created by that corporate tax cut. We've accelerated from 12 to 8 per cent on the basis of the recommendations of our panel of CEOs, but we're not able to present a budget that points to one single job being created. That's not great.

What else is not in here or is in here that we don't like? In here as far as jobs, well, we don't see much in the way of agriculture funding and agrifoods, one of the key areas of diversification that we should be focusing on. What's this government doing? It is cutting hundreds

of positions in the department of agriculture. What else is it doing? It is refusing, for whatever strange political reasons, to sign on to an AgriStability fund that every single agricultural producer in the province is begging for them to get with the program on. Yet they're not doing it, so we don't have any kind of major throw in here for agriculture or agrifoods.

What we also don't have is any significant plan to actually incrementally increase our efforts to promote our ability to produce energy on a more sustainable basis. In fact, instead, what we have is that we are spending money, wasting money, and this in and of itself, quite frankly, is a reason to vote down this budget on things that not only don't create jobs; they actually help to eliminate jobs. That is, of course, as the MLA for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview was talking about before, the energy war room and the ridiculous inquiry into un-Albertan activities. Both of those investments, shall we say, serve to do nothing but push investor dollars away. The government has rightly learned enough to understand that our oil and gas industry needs to be able to attract international investment and they do need to make a better case for our industry amongst those investors, but the problem is, I'm quite sure, there's not a single solitary one of those investors who had their mind changed one way or the other by that ridiculous movie, nor did they have their mind changed one way or the other by our ridiculous response to that ridiculous movie, except, perhaps, that just the cartoon element of the whole affair probably did not bring a single solitary new international investor to Alberta's oil and gas industry.

3:40

And I would argue, in fact, that it helped create an even more deeply felt perception of the caricatural nature of what should otherwise be seen as a sustainable and responsible oil and gas production capacity here in this province. So it didn't help; it hurt.

Of course, the inquiry into un-Albertan activities: I mean, there again we're seeing taxpayer dollars going to literally paying people for junk science. Again, we look silly on the international front using studies that are clearly not peer reviewed and don't meet the standard of intellectual and academic rigour that would be expected of an investment destination that meets appropriate ESG standards. Now, we do have a new ESG secretariat, which is lovely, but it seems to me that it's going to spend most of its time trying to counteract all of the bad work done by the two other things that I just talked about, so overall it's a net loss. That is where we are.

Then the final thing – I won't get into it specifically here, but what we don't have with respect to jobs is an appropriate investment in postsecondary education, and I will talk about that in a moment. In fact, what we have is a gobsmacking attack on postsecondary education, which contradicts the most common of sense across this province when you're looking to diversify the economy.

We also, of course, don't have a meaningful child care plan, which, again, contradicts the advice of a growing chorus of economists across the world, including pretty conservative voices, quite frankly, understanding that to avoid that K-shaped recovery that I was describing before, we must ensure that women are able to participate fully in the economic recovery. We will not do that without an appropriate child care plan, and we don't have that in this province, and we have a budget that specifically budgets for not one single solitary increase in one child care space in the year going forward. That is an incredible fail and suggests to me that this is a government that is simply not prepared to do the kind of real research and heavy lifting that is necessary to generate a prosperous and equitable economic recovery.

Let's talk just a little bit about health. Now, the members opposite love to go on about how much money they're putting into health,

but let us put this in context. First of all, if one were to simply follow population and inflation, separate and apart from the one-time COVID contingency – again, I've reviewed the meaning of the word "contingency" – which may or may not entirely apply to health, taking into account population and inflation, we are roughly \$600 million behind where we were in 2018-2019.

Now, it is true that there is a one-time contingency investment into health, but you do not plan on the basis of contingency funding. You do not provide good value-for-money public services on the basis of emergent, unpredictable, undefined, undescribed, untracked contingency funds. Even if it's all spent on health, which we don't know if it will be because, to review, it's a contingency, it's a one-time deal, and we know that for all the out-years the plan is for flat funding, which means the long-term plan is to continue to cut our health care system.

We also know that that is true because notwithstanding things that the Premier likes to say in question period, the very budget documents that are included in this budget, that we are voting against, suggest that the government is going full speed ahead with the recommendations put forward by the Ernst & Young review, which specifically recommended firing up to 10,000 front-line health care workers. We know that's a thing. It's real. It's in the documents. The Premier may want to say that we're not firing anybody, but I would urge him to look at the budget that he wants us to actually vote for.

The other thing is that we see in the Health budget a plan to this year alone reduce public-sector compensation by \$700 million, and we don't know where that's going to come from; again, significant plans to cut and then no guarantee to increase, just a maybe about the increase. We're expected to simply accept the maybe and trust without there being any line items, any type of commitment made by this government. Of course, it would be irresponsible, frankly, for any member of this House to vote for a contingency that large in this setting. That's what we see with respect to Health.

And all of this in the current situation, where every single solitary health expert has outlined the fact that – you know, obviously, we have additional costs associated with being on alert for COVID. We have additional costs associated with tracing, with vaccination, with treatment, with testing of COVID. There are all those costs. But what we also have is a huge built-up pressure of undelivered health care services that has been in effect for the last year, that will put tremendous pressure on the health care system once the vaccine, essentially, is adequately shared with Albertans. So we know that there are pressures coming, yet the plan here is for cuts: to cut compensation, to provide less than what we were doing on a per capita inflation basis in 2018, and to maybe spend some money but maybe not; we don't really know. Not a plan.

Then we have education. What does this budget say about education? Now, education is critically important to Albertans. It is important to parents. Really, the most important thing in their life is the future of their kids. It is important to the kids themselves, who, quite frankly, need to be able to access a quality education system in order to grab on to the best future possible for the rest of their lives. It's important to those Albertans who are neither parents nor students, who just want to be part of a province where people are well educated and have all the tools necessary at their disposal to contribute to a resilient, innovative, creative, forward-looking province and community. It is of tremendous value. It is both a social value, a community resilience value, an economic value.

What's this government doing? Well, we've got roughly 20,000 new students predicted to come into the education system beginning in September. Not one new dollar. Now, I would say – and not one new teacher. But, in fact, the situation is more dire than that, Madam

Speaker. The situation actually involves 2,000 fewer staff to greet them at the door when those 20,000 new students arrive at school.

Now, I don't know. I mean, I will say that there are times when I think that the Premier has never actually spoken to a student or a parent about their kids' experience in public school, but I'm sure that some of those MLAs over there have. I would love to hear how many of them say: "You know what? I think my classroom has too few kids in it. I sure wish there were more. I sure wish there were fewer teachers. I sure wish that those special-needs kids didn't get so many educational assistant supports." I'd be curious to see if a single solitary one of those members opposite could table a letter suggesting that that's what their constituents are asking for, because I will say that over here we could table thousands and thousands and thousands of letters that say the opposite. Yet that's what is planned in this budget for education.

We also see that there is no money set aside for what will be necessary to implement this ridiculous new curriculum that this government is insisting on imposing on Albertans. They will not be given the time to learn it and figure out how to introduce it in a way that ensures that children learn as successfully as possible. Everyone knows that when you do a major new rewrite of a curriculum, you need to budget for its introduction, and there's no money in there for that.

3:50

There's also no money to take into account what we know will be true once, you know, different forms of teaching come into effect, and that is that many, many, many, many students fell behind this year. Many students, smart students, hard-working students who care deeply about their school work and about their future, simply were not equipped to learn online. Many students who were at school and went into their schools notwithstanding some of the nervousness that might have been in place, that did everything they could to be at school to learn what they wanted to learn, didn't get to learn because their school was inevitably closed, their teacher ended up having to take a leave, they ended up having to be quarantined, the class itself got sent home for a period of time. All the things that were going on this year have significantly undercut the learning success of our, you know, 700,000 students.

I mean, some will do well. It's that K thing again, right? I've talked to kids who will say: "Yeah. Nope. This online thing is working great for me; I'm having a great old time." But there are just as many kids that are saying: "No. This is not working for me. I'm really struggling, and there's no way that I can get support." In the face of that, there should be thought given to how we help those kids catch up, but there's not. The budget actually plans to jam more kids into classrooms with fewer educational staff there to help them.

Finally, in terms of infrastructure – and I talked about infrastructure before – we also see that significantly large school divisions did not get any funding at all for new schools. Edmonton public school board, second-largest school division in the province: no schools. Calgary public board of education: in Calgary itself, no schools. You know, anyone who's ever – I don't know how many folks over there get the opportunity to sit through briefings from Education officials, but if you ever did, you will be told that there is a massive swelling, a baby boom, that's now roughly between ages nine and 14, that's making its way through our school system, and we are in desperate need of more high school space. Desperate need. Were there any? Did Edmonton get one? No. Did Calgary get one? No. Way to plan ahead, folks.

Quite honestly, we cannot let ourselves get backed into the short-sighted situation where we end up forcing these kids to take half their courses online or to come into school at 6 o'clock in the morning because we literally can't afford to have them all come

into the school at the same time because there are too many of them. Then we're undercutting their education, and in so doing, we're undercutting their future, and – it shouldn't require me to say this, but I will anyway – in so doing, we're undercutting our own future. That's what's happening with education.

Then, you know, just generally speaking, when you think about how hard the last year has been – how hard it's been in terms of the people that we have lost, how hard it's been for their families, how hard it's been for people who have become ill, how hard it has been for the front-line health care providers who have been caring for all those people, how hard it has been for people who have lost their jobs, their businesses, their economic security – when you think about all that, it's so important for us to think about what we can do to ensure community resilience, yet there are so many ways in which this budget takes a direct run at community resilience.

What kinds of ways, you say? Well, let me walk through them. One, which strikes me as just – it's such a small amount of money, but at the same time it is kind of, again, jaw-dropping. I'm not exactly sure what it is about all the horrible things that we have seen happen in our streets over the last year with respect to racism, what it was about this incredible growth in acts of overt racism that translated to this government's statement that we should cut the Human Rights Commission by \$1 million. Not entirely sure what it was that made them think that that was their go-to place to cut funding, but they did.

Justice. We have cut the justice system in multiple areas. Police, prosecutors, court services, victims' services: we've cut all those things. For a law-and-order party or an alleged law-and-order party, it is surprising to me that they decided that we needed to gum up the administration of justice and criminal justice in such a significant way, because these were big cuts.

What else did we do? Well, they – the government, the budget – are cutting supports for homeless outreach support. Seriously? In the middle of a pandemic? Why? Why are we doing that, or why are they asking us to agree to this? We can't agree to this.

What else are we doing? Well, massive cuts to municipal infrastructure. Again, that goes to quality of life, to community resilience. That goes to job creation, to be clear. If there's no money for municipal infrastructure maintenance and renewal and new building, a whole bunch of folks are going to lose their jobs. What we've seen is roughly a 30 per cent cut from the last 10-year average, which is remarkable and counterintuitive and countercyclical and, again, very short sighted.

We've also seen costs go up. We've seen income tax go up, as it does every year. I think we're at about \$600 million now since the Premier introduced what he once called his hideous or odious tax of bracket creep. That's \$600 million. Of course, education property tax. We're seeing property taxes generally go up as a result of all the cuts to municipalities. We're seeing car insurance go up, and, yes, that is actually a decision of this government, because they took the cap off. We have seen tuition skyrocket, and I'll talk about that in a minute. We've seen school fees, of course, go up because they took the cap off that. And we've seen, of course, one of the biggest ones, which is just, again, so surprising to me. We are on the verge of being told that simply going for a walk in the afternoon for a picnic in a provincial park is going to cost us. Wow. Way to get at the heart of what makes Alberta Alberta. So a lot of extra costs being downloaded onto Albertans, undermining and generally undercutting a sense of community resilience.

Now I just want to talk a little bit about postsecondary, though, because I have to say that I just sit around sometimes, and I speculate to myself: "Why – why – is this UCP government so hostile to postsecondary education? What is it that's going on there that they are so skeptical or suspicious or fearful – I don't know what it is – of

postsecondary education?” Now, they claim: oh, we’re spending more than anyone else is. Well, let me, first, start by saying that their whole spending per capita narrative is fundamentally flawed. I won’t go into that analysis – I’ve done it a number of times in this House – but suffice to say that it is.

But let’s just say for a moment that we do spend a little bit more on postsecondary than other jurisdictions. What I will say is that there was a time when governments in this province said: our goal is to create a world-class postsecondary education system; our goal is to attract the best and the brightest; our goal is to attract people from all over the world; our goal is to be one of the best. Never once did they say: no, no; our goal is to spend about the same as what the University of Fredericton is spending. Like, seriously, that was just not a thing. You know, way to shoot for average, because apparently that is what’s behind the gargantuan cuts to postsecondary.

What we have seen is that since the last budget that our government brought in, we have seen postsecondary education cut by almost \$700 million, which is a lot of money. This year, this budget represents the third year in a row of deep cuts to postsecondary schools and postsecondary education. It is at the same time paired with massive increases in the costs that students have to incur in order to access postsecondary. Cumulatively we’re at \$387 million more that students have to pay. So they get significantly less; they pay significantly more.

4:00

So what is this going to mean for Alberta? Well, it’s going to mean that kids aren’t going to go to school here. They’re going to leave the province. It’s going to mean that some of the kids that do go to school here are going to leave the province afterwards. It’s going to mean that the quality of education that kids receive and young adults receive will be lower. It’s going to mean that the opportunities for partnership with the private sector in terms of research and innovation and commercialization of areas that would provide us frameworks and platforms for diversifying our economy are going to disappear.

This is not just me, the leader of the NDP opposition. What does the Premier like to call me? An Edmonton socialist? I have to say that I’m curious. He says that over and over. I’m wondering: what does he think is more insulting, “socialist” or “Edmonton”? I’m just curious: if he wants to maybe run that one by the mayor at some point and the people of Edmonton. But, either way, what I will say is that it’s not just me, however you want to describe me, saying that. It is business leader after business leader after business leader who are pulling their hair out at this attack on our postsecondary system, who understand the critical role it plays with respect to economic diversification and who understand the critical need for this government to introduce a robust, thoughtful investment into diversifying our economy.

But what do we have? We have nothing. We have a corporate tax handout, which has, prior to the pandemic, lost us 50,000 jobs and helped contribute to doubling the deficit. We have our failed \$1.3 billion to 7 and a half billion dollar gamble on Keystone. Then we have a few empty strategies with no details and very small amounts of money attached to them, if any – in many cases there’s none – paired with this massive attack on our postsecondary system, paired with a number of significant cost increases to Albertans, and, again, attacks on our health care and our education systems.

None of this amounts to a meaningful plan to bring Alberta out of the economic recession within which we find ourselves. None of this pairs with the need to ensure our recovery from this economic recession or depression or whatever the stats ultimately tell us that it is in a way that is equitable, that is shared amongst all Albertans regardless of income, shared amongst all Albertans regardless of

gender, and shared amongst all Albertans regardless of whether they are racialized or not. None of this focuses on that. I mean, it’s been referred to as a caretaker budget, but I actually think that that is a bit too complimentary. A caretaker budget would at the very least do no damage. I’ve just outlined multiple areas in which this budget does that, multiple areas within which this budget does damage. It doesn’t even actually rise to the terminology of caretaker budget.

Albertans deserve more, Madam Speaker. Albertans are desperately concerned about the economy. They’re desperately concerned about an economic recovery. They want to know that jobs will be created. They want to know that their government is laser focused on it. Instead, we’ve got a Finance minister who says that diversification is a long-term luxury, a Finance minister who says that it’s not our job to deal with the downtown Calgary problem, a Finance minister who thinks that you can cut your way through postsecondary education to a pretend economic recovery somewhere, a government whose only advice, apparently, thus far on economic recovery was from a bunch of CEOs who recommended their own tax cut. That’s it. That’s all we’ve gotten so far. Albertans want, need, and deserve so much more. That’s what we’ve been hearing. That’s what we’ve been hearing from Albertans since this budget was introduced.

Again, don’t just count on me. I mean, we don’t all live or die, of course, by the polls, but a smart government will check them out every now and then. We know that the polls show that something like 69 per cent of Albertans do not support this budget. That should be a sign for the folks over there, who actually represent a good portion of Albertans right now. But what they are saying – trust me; 69 per cent is not somehow just consolidated into the seats of the opposition. They’re in your seats, and they don’t support this budget. So the question is: why would you be voting for it? Albertans certainly don’t want you to. They expect more from this government, and they expect it to be laid out in the budget. They don’t expect crossing your fingers and a promise of: trust me.

I suspect that there will come a time when we will hear from external accounting humans, perhaps the Auditor General, perhaps others, that this whole practice of putting in 2 and a half billion dollars of contingency funds is not on, that it’s not how you budget. Certainly, I will say again, just relying on poll numbers, that Albertans don’t have the level of trust in this government that is necessary for them to make the argument that somehow they deserve to get away with sound accounting and parliamentary principles so that they can come in here and use their majority to ask for a great big slush fund that may or may not get spent on this thing or that thing – we don’t know – because they just simply after 12 months have been unable to write it down.

They don’t have that trust. Albertans deserve, at the very least, more detail. They’re not getting it. What Albertans do see is a big hole where a robust economic strategy and job-creation plan should be. As a result of that, on behalf of those Albertans we simply cannot vote for this budget, and as a result I’m pretty confident in saying that other members of my caucus will also not be voting for this budget.

Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to address this bill in second reading.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, are there any other members who wish to join debate? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is my privilege to rise today and support Alberta’s 2021 budget. Protecting lives and livelihoods is not just a slogan for this government; it is actually a primary motivation. Working to keep Albertans safe both

economically and physically is a task that this government does not take lightly amid this pandemic. That is why we are spending a record amount on our health care industry and investing billions into our province's infrastructure as a part of Alberta's recovery plan.

As we pass the one-year anniversary of the start of the COVID pandemic, it is more important than ever to continue to support our health care system and health care professionals. However, it is time to start looking to the future and our path forward from COVID. Things like Alberta's recovery plan, which we announced last June, provide a clear framework of goals we plan to achieve to get our province back on track.

One such goal states that Alberta's recovery plan will create tens of thousands of jobs to make our economy more productive in the long run, with the largest infrastructure build in Alberta history. I'm happy to see another promise kept, Madam Speaker, as Budget 2021 announced \$1.7 billion more in capital funding for 2021-22 than was planned in Budget 2020. Our three-year capital plan is now over \$20 billion and will support 90,000 new jobs and maintain jobs through 2024.

If we are going to plan for the future, we need to build for the future. Infrastructure upgrades and investments in agriculture, tourism, and technology will establish a solid foundation for Alberta's future prosperity and help modernize these sectors to compete in our ever-changing world. Things like road development and resurfacing, bridges, and overpasses may not always seem like the most exciting projects. However, they are critical to our province both in maintenance and renewal of our infrastructure. They provide safe and efficient routes for shipping and hauling supplies to and from Alberta's energy industry, our forestry industry, and good roads are vital for our tourism industry, not to forget, of course, our agricultural industry.

4:10

On top of that, establishing and building new schools in our communities will create thousands of construction jobs and set our generation up for future success with state-of-the-art institutions. Just a few weeks ago we announced that Lethbridge and the surrounding area will see the development of three new and modernized or replaced schools. Again, developments like these are critical to establishing a competitive future for the province by investing into the critical infrastructure of our communities.

I'm proud to say that Lethbridge had a number of strategic infrastructure investments, from our Exhibition Park building, which supports our agricultural industry, to our airport, expanding our runway, modernizing our terminal to allow for that connective transportation aspect that will really see benefit in our city's growth. The twinning of highway 3, a major industrial, food-supporting corridor, for safety and other initiatives is strategically planned to help that growth east of Lethbridge, not to mention the \$815 million for irrigation infrastructure. This will add thousands upon thousands of acres of irrigated land, which will increase our crop production, support our ag and food processing industry, and again it's strategically planned and placed. And that's not to mention that the U of L and Lethbridge College received some funding for deferred maintenance that had been deferred for almost 20 years. We would have loved to do more, but it just wasn't possible.

Additionally, by investing \$1.5 billion in core and emerging sectors like agriculture or tourism and technology, we bring outdated elements in these sectors into the 21st century and set ourselves up for developing breakthrough technologies.

Planning for our future also involves taking care of our health system, and with the current pandemic this is more true than ever. On top of the \$21.4 billion in non-COVID health care spending,

nearly a billion dollars more than last year, we've set aside another \$1.25 billion in contingency specifically to fight the pandemic, being prepared to address whatever pressing needs become apparent, whether it's PPE, vaccine deployment, rapid testing, adjusting to variants, unpredictable, unknown but likely to happen.

This represents the most ever spent on health care by any government in Alberta's history, and that doesn't even include the \$143 million we will spend over the next three years to build new health care facilities. Right now the only way out of this pandemic is through it, and we have committed the necessary and appropriate funds to address this issue, to support demands on our health care system, and to establish a path forward with hospital projects, revitalization projects, and construction of new facilities.

We're also seeing a renewed sense of hope in Alberta as we continue to roll out Canada's most efficient vaccination program. As of Sunday, March 21, we have administered 487,293 vaccines, and we have fully vaccinated 93,285 Albertans. This is no small feat, and it results from the hard work of our medical professionals and the co-operation of Albertans. As economist Milton Friedman once said, "One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results."

Well, Madam Speaker, we are getting results. As the Premier noted yesterday in this House, over the last few weeks the Bank of Montreal, the National Bank, the Conference Board of Canada, and others have projected that Alberta will lead Canada in economic growth and job growth in 2021. The National Bank projects that Alberta will see a 6 per cent growth in employment in 2021 versus 4 per cent across the country. Additionally, we are seeing the best year for the film and television industry in this province, information technology development, and historic investment in capital projects for our communities, and it's only March.

Lastly, we are taking a careful approach to spending that will help get Alberta's finances back on track, beginning with asking Alberta's hard-working public servants to help us find labour efficiencies so we can invest more in health care and in economic recovery. Albertans must remain in this together. With thousands of Albertans realizing huge impacts on their livelihoods and some losing their jobs entirely, we need to make sure we can respond to this once-in-a-lifetime crisis and spend efficiently. Moving forward, we are anchoring our spending to strong fiscal principles that will put us back on the path to a balanced budget. We have committed to keeping our debt-to-GDP ratio below 30 per cent, allowing us to gradually bring our spending in line with other comparable provinces like B.C., Saskatchewan, and Ontario.

I sure wish that money grew on trees, but it doesn't. The more that we spend, the more that we will see in a deficit and end up in debt. I appreciate what the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview spoke on, a number of comments that were very poignant, but again more spending at this time adds to our deficit and adds to our debt. It's just not always that simple. Although we have had to delay our timeline to eliminate the deficit to fight COVID-19, these sound principles will help us back on the path as soon as possible.

In closing, Madam Speaker, we continue to navigate through this pandemic and towards a brighter future. I do not doubt that Budget 2021 is leading us into more prosperous years ahead. Through historic investment into our infrastructure and capital projects and record health spending, we are addressing the problems of today while investing in our future. We are looking to the future while acknowledging today's issues, and we are ready to face each new situation as it comes our way.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise today and speak to Bill 60 and discuss the budget that is being brought forward by this government. Now, the Leader of the Official Opposition I think made a number of good points in a number of areas. I'd like to follow on some of the comments she brought up, specifically on the budget for Health. Now, I heard the member who just spoke talk about the record investment which this government is making in health care. Let's be clear. Pretty much every government for over a decade has pretty much always spent a record amount on health care each and every year. That is no special thing that this government is doing.

We know that every single year we generally have in Alberta a record population. We have growth. Pretty much every year we see an increase in costs. We see a new record inflation from the previous year. So the fact that the government is spending more on health care this year than it did last year is in and of itself not necessarily worthy of applause or indeed, as noted by the Leader of the Official Opposition, worthy of our vote as the opposition. As our leader also noted, if this government had simply continued to fund Education – pardon me, Health; well, Education, too, frankly, but I'm talking about Health right now – at the rate of population and inflation growth, given an increase commensurate simply with that, we would see \$624 million more in the budget this year than is here. Indeed, the government is spending a record amount compared to what they spent the year before and a record amount compared to what it's been spending in previous years, but it still falls short of the actual growth of population and growth in the cost of inflation. So this is not something for which the government deserves applause, particularly when we consider the landscape in which this budget is taking place.

We are coming into this budget, as has been noted in the Department of Health, at a time when we have faced a health crisis unlike any this province has ever seen before, an incredible challenge that has strained our health care resources at best, and would have been so even if the government had taken responsible action at all points during this pandemic, but of course we know that it did not. In fact, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic this government chose to red line, see how far it could push that health care system before it let off the throttle. There's no doubt that caused far more expenses in the system, no doubt that caused far more stress and anxiety and burnout for our health care professionals, and there's no doubt that had a significant impact on many of the services that Albertans needed to access, creating an incredible backlog that we now have to deal with in surgeries and diagnostic imaging, indeed in even just simple things like primary care and care for chronic conditions.

That is the landscape in which we have this budget being presented, a time when the health care system is going to have an incredible amount of work to do simply to get back up to its normal operations let alone continue to contend with the growth of population, the growth of inflation, and the pressures that creates, and we have \$624 million less than if the government had simply maintained funding based on population and inflation for normal operations. So we have a real challenge in front of us.

You couple that with the fact that this minister is undertaking probably the most ambitious attempt at overhauling that health care system that we have seen a government attempt, one that they continued to press even in the early days of this pandemic. Indeed, they have pushed forward with a legislative agenda and many other things, which in some respects have, I think, undermined our health

care workers and a lot of our capacity, and we don't have a single additional dollar in this budget to contend with that.

4:20

Let's take, for example, the Alberta surgical initiative. Now, this minister has contended that he will in fact ensure that every single Albertan gets their surgery within the medically recommended time frame by 2023. He insists that he is going to be able to achieve that goal. Indeed, he says that in this next year, he is going to do 55,000 additional surgeries over the 290,000 that would normally take place, for 345,000 surgeries. There is not a single additional dollar in the budget to do that. Indeed, it says right in his business plan that he is allocating \$4.1 billion to acute care, exactly the same amount that was allocated last year.

Now, the minister at estimates pointed to this and said, "Well, right over here we've got this line in our fiscal plan, in our budget that talks about our COVID-19 pandemic response. There's an additional \$2.138 billion there. Those additional surgeries to catch up on that backlog are going to come from there," except, Madam Speaker, he does not have those dollars. Those dollars are not allocated to Health; they're in the contingency fund. When we asked the Minister of Finance if those dollars had in fact been allocated, he said that, no, they had not. The minister may have access to these dollars, or he may not.

Now, let's be clear, Madam Speaker. This minister is operating what is essentially a \$23 billion enterprise that is responsible for delivering health care services to all Albertans. Every Albertan is a stakeholder in this operation, and what he is telling those Albertans is: "Well, I may have the money; I may not. Here's a budget in which I hope I will have the dollars to do what I say that I'm going to do on your behalf, and here, by the way, is my business plan on how I'm going to measure those outcomes, that is one-fourth the size of what I presented last year even though we've just gone through a global pandemic and I intend to do even more." He is offering less explanation, less performance metrics in a year after he has undermined things like the Health Quality Council of Alberta and their independence to be able to track the quality of the work, of what he is doing in the health care system.

I am concerned, Madam Speaker, that what this government is attempting to claim it can do, with what is frankly already too small a budget, even just based on population growth and inflation, is going to fall far short of what's going to be needed to help see our health care system just recover from COVID-19, let alone weather the other plans that this minister has for it, plans like, as the Leader of the Opposition noted, laying off up to or perhaps more than 10,000 front-line health care workers. That's an announcement that was made just on the cusp of the second wave. Our health care workers got to go through that second wave with that hanging over their heads, knowing that they may not have a job once this pandemic is done, that that's how little this government values them and their work.

[Mr. Smith in the chair]

Indeed, that is a challenge we know physicians were facing as they had this Health Minister launch an unprecedented war with them at the beginning of the first wave, pushing through with radical changes, and we saw what effects those had in demoralizing doctors, in damaging access to care. We have this minister presenting a budget in which he intends to lay off up to 10,000 front-line health care workers, where he intends to somehow reduce the wait-list for diagnostic imaging. At the same time I can't tell you – you know, I hear from so many front-line health care workers who are concerned right now because they don't know when they will be vaccinated. One of the largest and loudest groups are the

folks that are doing the diagnostic imaging. They do not know where they sit in terms of when they will be up for vaccination despite the fact that they deal with members of the public every day.

Now, I recognize that's a complex decision. There are a lot of things to make there, and I am in no way saying that I know where that should be, but I can say that if a government is intending to overhaul a system, if they are intending to make the kinds of incredible changes this minister is and that, frankly, he is going to need to pull off if he is going to make it with a flat health care budget every single year for years to follow, he is going to need the help and support of those health care workers. He is going to need them at their best. The treatment they have received from this government, Mr. Speaker: I can tell you that those workers right now are not at their best.

We see an incredible challenge ahead of this government, and frankly, I don't see how they intend to make it. I am deeply concerned for what their slavish devotion to this ideology is going to mean for the impacts to Albertans' health. We have flat funding through the next two years, so that \$624 million gap that is there is going to grow year over year. That pressure is going to increase, so coming out of COVID-19, we're going to have a budget that falls short, a contingency fund that maybe is available for health, maybe isn't.

Incredibly shoddy budgeting, Mr. Speaker. No corporation would allow that; no corporate board of stakeholders would accept it. But that is what this government is banking on to follow through on their promises, not only their promises but indeed to ensure that Albertans are going to have a robust health care system there to protect them once this pandemic is over.

One other thing I did want to touch on today while I have the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, is that if this government does indeed want to save money on health care – and indeed that, I think, is something every member of this House supports if it is done prudently and intelligently – a very simple way to do that is to invest in supportive housing. I am wearing a bow tie today that was given to me by my partner for Christmas. It's proudly emblazoned with YEG. Now, I recognize that I am a provincial politician, but I'm very proud of the city in which I live, and I'm very proud to get to represent the heart of that city.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Let me tell you, the number one thing I am hearing from folks in my constituency is that they want to see their provincial government step up to the table alongside the government of Canada, alongside the city of Edmonton to invest in permanent supportive housing, because that is the solution to the crisis of homelessness we are facing. That is key to reigniting the economy of Edmonton downtown, and that is key to reducing costs in the health care system. An investment of \$5.9 million: multiple requests from Mayor Iveson to this government. This government has not invested a single new dollar into permanent supportive housing.

They've doubled down on a broken shelter system, which continues to drive the same expenses that we're going to see throughout the health care system from people accessing the emergency room at the Royal Alex hospital here in my constituency because there are no other supports available, because they lack housing, because they lack the kinds of supports they need day-to-day to allow them to stay stable, when we have solutions like Ambrose Place, which is demonstrating millions of dollars of savings in the criminal justice system, in the health system, in the social support system from the investment of providing those

individuals who are chronically houseless with permanent supportive housing.

4:30

That could make a significant dent in our costs in health care without compromising the quality of care for Albertans and indeed supporting those front-line workers, police officers, folks in the emergency wards, EMS, paramedics who have to deal with situations for which they do not have the training or capacity: a small investment this government could make, nowhere to be seen in this budget, no communication with the mayor about where that stands. That is the kind of solution we need to see for Albertans.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Are you rising under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Edmonton-City Centre, who was just in the midst of I think a very important issue that doesn't just affect the constituency that's around us here immediately but right across the city, right across the province. I think that it's fair that – if he would choose to continue, I would be grateful.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to my colleague for the question and the opportunity, I guess, to wrap up my thoughts. Indeed, this is something I think that we could see across the province of Alberta having real impact. I know that the city of Calgary has spoken up about their concerns as well, about some of the cuts and some of the challenges that have been created under this government in terms of supports and services for individuals who are living houseless, who are struggling with mental health and addictions.

Indeed, I appreciate what the Member for Calgary-Klein was sharing earlier today. He is proud of his government's investments in some aspects of mental health and some aspects of treatment or opportunities for folks who are struggling with substance use, and I respect that. That does make an impact, but, Madam Speaker, that is one piece of the puzzle. His government can pat themselves on the back for those steps, but they have undermined at so many other points on the spectrum. They have failed to deliver on so many other essential areas.

This isn't just me talking; this is the front-line workers themselves, Madam Speaker, who I speak with here in my constituency and who are out there doing this work and helping individuals. Indeed, I appreciate the investments this government made as part of COVID-19 last year, and I recognize where they stepped up to help support the services that were available at the Expo Centre and others, but I also recognize how, when those were pulled out, that led to the creation of Pekiwin camp here in my constituency because services and supports were not properly transitioned or made available, again a failure of collaboration between this government and the city of Edmonton, which has worked long and hard to come up with a robust plan to address this issue on the ground here in our constituency and across the city.

I truly hope that this is something that this government will come around on because right now we have funding of over \$50 million

between the city of Edmonton and the government of Canada to get 210 units built, but because this government will not step up and has not stepped up in this budget that we're debating today, the city was turned down on its next round of funding with the federal government that could fund up to 480 more units. That's 690 units of supportive housing, Madam Speaker. Do you know what kind of impact that would have on folks accessing emergency services at the Royal Alex hospital? Do you know how much that could save in the health care budget, in policing costs?

That is a drop in the bucket compared to the budget of the embarrassment of an energy war room. It is a drop in the bucket compared to the \$23 billion budget for health in this province but would yield incredible savings in that area. Frankly, Madam Speaker, it is simply the right thing to do for these individuals. Let's not lose that in the talk of numbers and economy and all these other things, which are important and a big part of what we're debating here today, but a budget exists for the purpose of supporting the people of Alberta. That tiny sliver of a fraction of investment in the whole of this budget would have a powerful impact on the lives of potentially up to 690 individuals currently living houseless in the city of Edmonton.

I'm going to have much more to say, I think, as we continue this debate. There is much more to dig into in this health care budget, which is incredibly ambitious while, I think, incredibly short sighted and inexcusably opaque to the people of Alberta, predicated, as I noted, on a contingency fund which the minister cannot actually say that he has.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to join debate on second reading of Bill 60? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to show my appreciation and my support for Budget 2021, named Bill 60, Appropriation Act, 2021. When our government undertook the project of drafting and creating a budget for this year, they had a very difficult job in front of them. This difficulty stemmed from, as we all having lived through this past year can attest to, that there was a significant drop in the price of oil, that we had an economic recession, and, of course, the global COVID-19 pandemic. I'm not sure that any government has faced that kind of triple whammy, if you want to call it that, to try and overcome.

Now, all of these events created many significant challenges for Albertans specifically. Many in my constituency have had difficulty and had the difficult task of trying to provide for their families, trying to provide and balance their finances in the face of great uncertainty. Now, Alberta's government has faced a similar challenge. It was our job, it was this government's job to ensure that we were doing everything within our power to try and protect the lives and the livelihoods of Albertans that had been affected by the events of this past year.

Madam Speaker, I believe that this goal has been achieved within this year's budget. Budget 2021 breaks records with the amount of support made available to Albertans across various sectors, including health care, business, seniors and housing, and all of the other sectors of the government. The allocation of these funds will help Albertans. It will help them to recover from the many losses of 2020, and they were significant. When Budget 2021 was announced, I was pleased with the results of the hard work of the various ministries of our government. It was evident that these ministries had worked hard to bring Albertans the most amount of support that we possibly could in the times that we face.

Madam Speaker, this is what Albertans need the most right now. They need to know that Alberta's government stands with them and

will do its best to support them. They need to know that we care about their lives and their livelihoods. I believe that our government cares because of the strong policies that I see put forward in this budget. This past year I have met with many of my constituents, and they have welcomed me into their businesses. They've made time in their lives to let me know about their concerns. I am always appreciative of that time because I know that over the past year time has often been a valuable commodity in their lives and in their businesses.

4:40

I've made it a priority to share with my constituents the various grants and funding opportunities that have been made available to them. This includes things like the small and medium enterprise relaunch grant. I can remember meeting with one of my small businesses in Drayton Valley as they were struggling to try to figure out how they were going to relaunch their small business and being able to point them towards the help that that small and medium enterprise relaunch grant was going to provide for them. The critical worker benefit and the working parents benefit: all of these programs have been critical in helping Albertans to move forward through this 2020 and into 2021. The grants have proven to be a vital component of economic recovery and the wellness of Albertans who have been struggling for this past year. We've seen the impact of these grants and the differences that these grants have and can make in the lives of Albertans.

Madam Speaker, that's why it is so much more important that we build our provincial budget in a way that prioritizes the sectors that have been the most affected in this past year and to strengthen the sectors that need the most attention. We need strong policies that will encourage our province towards recovery.

Madam Speaker, I want to discuss some of these policies in greater detail and to provide any Albertans that happen to be listening with the context that they may need in order to understand what is being made available to them in this budget. It is very important that Albertans have this context and that they are provided with all of the information that they need in order to know how this budget is framed and is going to be helping Albertans. This will allow us to continue to move forward with the utmost of transparency, which is something that all Albertans are entitled to when they consider the finances of this province. Upon reading the contents of this year's budget, I was happy to see what funding our ministries have allocated and what a significant impact they will be making in our province.

For example, allow me to expand on the funding allocated to health care. This year our government is increasing funding to our health care system by a historic amount. We had originally promised, in drafting this legislation, that we would be ensuring that our fight against COVID-19 would have no limitations. We promised that our health care system would have whatever it takes to continue this battle. Madam Speaker, we kept that promise by introducing a \$23 billion allocation towards health care, and in doing this, we are increasing our typical investment into health by nearly a billion dollars. On top of this, the Treasury Board and Finance ministry has provided a further \$1.25 billion one-time funding allocation that will go towards keeping Albertans protected against the COVID-19 virus and will enable our health care workers to continue their vital work.

Madam Speaker, this year's budget will include funds for many facets of our health care system. This includes physician compensation, community care, continuing care, and home care. As someone that sat through the budget estimates with the Minister of Health, it was a good opportunity for Albertans to hear exactly how the finances with regard to health care are going to be rolling out in the coming year.

This budget will provide funding for drugs and supplemental health benefit programs and for Alberta Health Services operations. It will also provide funds to increase Albertans' access to mental health and addiction services.

Madam Speaker, I was particularly pleased to note the attention given to mental health and addiction treatment. Now, over the past year many Albertans have been struggling to maintain a spiritually and emotionally healthy lifestyle, and the allocation of funding to this sector, I believe, is more important than ever.

This is only one example of why this budget is so important and how it will serve Albertans and their needs. Everyone's needs have changed as a result of this pandemic and the recession that has accompanied it, and this budget reflects that reality. It is a responsive piece of legislation, and as I have indicated, it highlights some of the portions regarding health care.

Another way Budget 2021 achieves this is through a total increase in spending across sectors. Madam Speaker, there will be a time to balance our budget. Every Albertan should be concerned about governments balancing their budgets, but right now we are committed to focusing on the areas that require more funding. Because of this commitment there will be an increase of \$3.1 billion in capital funding in this year's budget. This brings our three-year capital plan to \$20.7 billion, which will serve to create over 90,000 direct and indirect jobs between now and 2024.

At a time when Albertans have been struggling, this budget recognizes the need for capital spending. Right now Albertans want to work. This is one area that many have struggled with during this pandemic. Unfortunately, many Albertans have lost their jobs, and their livelihoods have suffered under COVID-19. That is why it was vital in this budget to provide a strategy to boost capital funding. Madam Speaker, through this funding our government will build more infrastructure and will diversify the economy. These are projects that will last for a long time, and I believe that in significantly increasing our capital funding, we are investing in assets that will support future generations for years to come. In essence, we are taking advantage of a difficult situation to create a recovery plan that will have both an immediate and a long-term impact. It is a good time to invest and to invest in Alberta and Albertans. Albertans need jobs, and this capital plan will serve their needs today and the needs of their children tomorrow.

We are already experiencing signs of economic recovery, and Alberta's rate of employment is steadily rising. Budget 2021 will further increase our employment rate, attract investment, and ensure that our health care system is properly equipped to carry our province out of this crisis. I believe this budget is just what our province needs after such a long and challenging year. We are not in the clear yet, but this piece of legislation gives me hope for the future. Through its various allocations it is evident that our ministries' hard work to prioritize the sectors that need the most support will in turn provide the most support to Albertans.

I also believe it is necessary to acknowledge some of these sectors and their members. Those working in health care, agriculture, energy, and many others have worked tirelessly to keep us safe and to keep us fed and warm through the winter months. To the farmers who produce food for our tables, to the utility workers and the nurses and the first responders who keep us safe, we would like to say thank you. I would also like to thank the front-line workers and the volunteers who have made significant and lasting impacts on Albertans' lives. I hope that with this piece of legislation we will be able to give back to those of you who have worked so hard to keep our province safe.

I would also like to show my appreciation for and acknowledge the hard work of everyone involved with the creation of this budget. Drafting such a piece of legislation is always a challenging task.

Notwithstanding the challenges brought forward by our circumstances, I am certain that this budget will have a long-lasting and positive impact on our province.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

4:50

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Budget 2021: I'm not even sure where to begin, to be honest. We've heard a lot from the government over the last few weeks, many buzzwords, platitudes, empty promises, promises for jobs, promises for future investment, promises of a better future for Albertans. Yet when I look at this budget, I see no plan, no jobs, and no investment in our future.

Let me start with what I do see. What I see specifically in agriculture and forestry: the sectors that actually have driven us through most of COVID-19, the ones that have been our stable employer, who have been able to continue to put food on our tables, to continue to drive the economy by export, are actually losing out in this budget. What we're seeing right now is a budget that looks at decreasing investment in diversification through agrifoods. We are now lagging behind based on this budget alone and previous budgets that we've seen by this government, a real lack of signalling to investors that they take agriculture seriously.

How we see that is that in many of the other prairie provinces we're seeing mass investment happening. We're seeing the government sending a signal to investors to say: we take our agricultural industries seriously, we want to start doing value-added in our province, and we want to diversify. What we see in this budget by this government is a reduction in any type of investment by the government. In fact, on top of that, what has been said to investors is: we'll give you more debt if you want to take more loans out from us, but we're not going to match you as a partner.

I can give you some examples of how we're seeing that. This year in Manitoba the world's largest pea-processing plant, a newly completed \$600 million facility built by French company Roquette, is currently in start-up mode. When fully operational, it will process 125,000 tonnes of peas annually. Fun fact: we grow peas in Alberta. Fun fact: we export them all. An hour's drive east, Merit Functional Foods completed construction of a \$150 million Winnipeg processing plant in December. It will use 250,000 tonnes of peas and canola annually. Officials say that the facility is designed to expand and could be up to 100,000 tonnes of those two crops yearly. That's Manitoba.

We could look at Saskatchewan: same thing. We're seeing investment coming from other areas to invest specifically in Manitoba and in Saskatchewan to diversify their crop markets. How has that happened? Well, Manitoba put their money where their mouth is, and they invested. They became a partner in diversifying the agricultural industry. There was a \$2.5 million investment from Ottawa and a \$1 million investment for training; \$4.5 million was rebated through the Manitoba works capital incentive program, and \$4.5 million was given to support the industry in diversification.

What has this government done? Actually reduced the budget for agrifoods and diversification. Then the response to that from the hon. minister so far has been: "Oh, well, if you go to AFSC, you can take on more debt. You can borrow. We've given you more borrowing power." Well, that doesn't send a very confident message to investors that they think they should be investing in diversification and agriculture. We see it happen in oil and gas all the time – we'll give you grants, we'll give you some options around carbon incentives, all these different things – yet agriculture

is ignored when it comes to diversification. These are huge numbers that could be bringing investment into this province, that could be jobs for many Albertans in this province.

There's a quote here where – and I can table this article later today.

In its 2020 budget, the UCP government set a goal of attracting \$1.4 billion in value-added ... [agriculture].

"I've talked to them four times. [No one calls me back] saying they've found an investor for me ... Not to take away from our resource industry here, but that is the focus in Alberta.

"I'm not [going to say] that Manitoba and Saskatchewan threw a whole bunch of money at these companies to build there, but I've had more calls from the Ministry of Agriculture in Saskatchewan than I have from Alberta.

"I've had Economic Development Saskatchewan visit my office twice to see if I [could] change my mind and build in Saskatchewan. I've had three visits from folks in Montana, two calls from Nebraska, and they all say, 'We have land, power and labour here. What would it take for you to move here?'"

These are Alberta companies wanting to build and expand in Alberta, in fact, in the minister's own riding, in Bowden and in Sylvan Lake.

You would think that the minister would be listening to these voices and, in fact, looking at this budget and saying: "Wait a minute. We should be looking at ways to invest. We should be looking at ways to encourage these companies to be buying and building in Alberta." Yet we're not. So what's happening? They're being encouraged to move outside the province. This is something that we clearly have been talking about since we've been seeing these Conservative budgets, which is basically that if you don't incentivize the economy and you don't incentivize investors, they will not invest. This budget clearly, for agriculture specifically, is not giving any support to encourage investment in this province. In fact, it's discouraging investment in this province because we're not even trying at all to be competitive with other provinces.

You know, we could look at the numbers again about what could be in this budget and isn't. For example, Alberta grows 1.9 million tonnes of high-protein, high-quality peas, almost half of western Canadian production. At a commodity price of about \$340 a tonne, Alberta's pea crop is worth about \$640 million annually raw, not value-added, not using the fibre. None of that is being done. That is just the whole pea. But you take the same peas, you take out the protein, the fibre, and the starch, you sell those components separately, and each tonne of peas becomes worth \$1,727, five times what it's worth right now, so five times the economic driver for the province. Again, we are growing 1.9 million tonnes of peas in this province, so five times the commodity price – but, hey, who needs five times the commodity price in this province? I mean, agriculture did well this year, so the government doesn't need to look at investing and supporting, you know, value-add. We'll just grow it and ship it, which seems to be the trend.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I'll leave that around the cuts that we specifically see around investment and the fact that this minister and this government have clearly done a disservice, I would say, to the agricultural industry. In fact, I would probably go as far as to say that, you know, this budget is actually being balanced on the backs of our farmers. Why do I say that? Well, we're seeing that agridiversification isn't happening. If we're not going to diversify, if we're not going to support farmers in selling their product and being able to do value-add, I mean, why would we want to see our farmers be able to sell peas for \$340 versus \$1,727? I mean, farmers deserve that money, you would think, but according to this government they don't.

The other thing that this government is doing on the backs of farmers is the AgriStability program, which we've been very, very clear about. If this government chooses to balance their budget on the backs of farmers by not encouraging them and not supporting them in accessing AgriStability, I get it. If they take one part of that program, they save \$95 million that they're not going to get from the feds, but they also don't have to pay the 40 per cent. This government is actually going to – if they only take on the reference margin limit, if they only agree to that part and they don't look at doing anything else about the compensation rate, they're giving \$95 million to the feds to hold on to, because we're not going to match it, but they're also saving 40 per cent of that money in their own budget.

5:00

In fact, what this government is doing when it comes to AgriStability, when it comes to the price market adjustments, the other insurance program that this government has cut, that we're slowly starting to see happen, is that they're actually cutting insurance programs. The government is cutting insurance programs to farmers to save on administrative fees and to cut out their cost shares, literally saving the budget, balancing the budget on the backs of our very farmers, the very people that kept us fed over COVID-19, continue to deal with the COVID-19 issues with our meat-packing plants and trying to get livestock to market.

In fact, on top of that, what we're now hearing is that many of those workers don't even qualify for the critical worker benefit even though they worked through the whole pandemic. So now the very people that made sure livestock was getting to processing plants, who made sure we had eggs on our tables, who were out in the fields doing harvesting for pulses, canola, all of our grain: their drivers are now not going to qualify for the critical worker benefit. Thank you very much, farmers, on behalf of the UCP.

There are many things that I would say are very counter to the message that this government is trying to deliver to Albertans and the true reality of what is actually happening.

We could also look at the fact that, as we all know – I mean, we are starting to hear it – it's super dry outside. We haven't had a lot of moisture this year, so we're going to have issues when it comes to how much moisture we have in our soil.

Mr. Schow: That's why we invested in irrigation.

Ms Sweet: Yeah, you could talk about irrigation. Absolutely, you could. But, I mean, if the water is contaminated by coal, you're going to have a problem there. The investment is great, but water monitoring is slightly a problem. But thank you, hon. member, for bringing that up.

Now, in regard to how dry it is, the wildfire season is about to start. We know that we've got about – I think we're at eight now, maybe nine uncontrolled wildfires in the province. Sorry. They're contained. They're small. They're not out of control, so, I mean, that's good. But it's mid-March. We're early into spring already, and we already have wildfires, and what have we seen? The wildfire budget has been significantly lowered. From 2021 to 2020, despite last year bringing a less severe weather season, the government has deducted money out of the wildfire budget. The contingency fund is questionable. Nobody really seems to know what the answer is. We weren't able to get a very clear answer from the minister in regard to how much money is actually being allocated for wildfire season. Unfortunately, that's going to be a problem because, as we know – and we're already hearing it in the news. We're hearing farmers. You know, farmers are out putting seed on their fields

already because it's so dry, which is very, very unusual for this time of year. We don't even have buds on trees yet.

To not have some form of number attached to the wildfire budget: all that really is is camouflaging the fact that they're trying to make their deficit less and not acknowledging that they are going to spend more. So we can guarantee that at the end of wildfire season the Agriculture and Forestry budget is going to be completely off what was projected today, and then, of course, the rationale will be: well, wildfires; we had to spend money. Of course, but you could have budgeted for some of it first. Like, the government could have been up front and honest and said: "You know what? We think we might spend whatever, a hundred million dollars, on wildfire." Instead, it's a zero line item so that when they have to go over budget, when the government goes over budget, they can say: well, it was an emergency, and it was wildfire, and we didn't think that we were going to need this much. Well, of course not, because there's no money in it right now. You're going to need more than zero at some point to fight wildfires. That is the reality of this.

What we're seeing is a fun play with the budget numbers to hide things, to not budget for things that could be considered emergent, flood mitigation, wildfire. COVID-19 has now become – they used to be able to put a whole bunch of different numbers in different places and then say: well, that's COVID-19 money. Well, I think that if you look clearly at the budget, the numbers keep shifting, and they keep moving to different locations, and they don't all add up. You look at one line item on one page, and then you look at the same line item on another page, and sometimes the numbers aren't even the same numbers. Again, when we asked the minister about this, I wasn't getting a very clear answer as to what that looks like and why it is.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or a comment for the Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Seeing none, are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise this afternoon and speak to what we see before us, which is essentially the priorities or lack thereof from this UCP government. It's quite clear that as Albertans continue to struggle through the pandemic, this budget falls extremely short of what they may have expected, surely what I and my colleagues in the NDP opposition have expected. We can see clearly that there is simply no plan before us to create jobs or to build an economic recovery, and it's unfortunate. If you listen to the messaging that the government put forward around, you know, as previous members, specifically the Member for Edmonton-City Centre, spoke on, what the government calls historic levels of investment in health care and opportunities for job growth, unfortunately we see quite the opposite in the documents before us.

I can say that it's been quite frustrating. What we normally go through in the budgetary process – of course, last year, when that budget was put forward, a lot of our opportunities to bring scrutiny to the government's priorities or lack thereof were essentially eliminated entirely. I can appreciate that we were entering the pandemic or had just begun to see the effects of the pandemic. But here we are, a year later and a year more for this government to lay out what their priorities are for health care, for education, for recovery in terms of bringing jobs back to our province, and it's unfortunate that we see no real plan moving forward.

You know, I appreciate members on this side taking the time to go line by line and, I think, even to the estimates process with the Minister of Service Alberta, taking part in that. I would just, first of

all, point out that what is usually the case of going back and forth, through line by line of ministry budgets, has been quite different, I would say, in many instances this year, where the government has been so unwilling to speak to the priorities or the importance of the budget that they've put forward and instead took the opportunity to reduce that back and forth in a lot of instances. That was no different in the instance of the Service Alberta ministry. It's quite frustrating because we have a lot of questions on this budget and how it relates to past budgets and how it relates to budgets moving forward, and unfortunately in a lot of those cases, because of the government's direction, we were unable to get those answers. I doubt we will get those answers here today, Mr. Speaker, but we can at least put those concerns on the record.

One of them that I was very clear about having concerns about was the lack of investment and, really, the lack of any targeted measures or willingness from this government to be accountable to what we normally see as targets and metrics in the budget year to year. Unfortunately, a lot of that work, which is normally in place, was completely removed from the budget this year and from the ministry reports this year. For example, in Service Alberta over the last two years or last two budget cycles we saw, you know, key indicators and targets and measurements in the ministry business plan around eight pages long, and coming into this budget cycle, it was only three pages, Mr. Speaker. It really goes to show the lack of commitment that this government is willing to make when it comes to setting out targets, setting out ways that they can be held accountable when it comes to transparency.

That's very clear when we look at the Service Alberta ministry, specifically around changes that they've made to FOIP processing. The fact is that this government has been very proud of the changes – I guess you might call them modernizations – that we've seen to the FOIP program, but unfortunately you wouldn't believe it if you looked at their ministry business plans. Not only did we see a million-dollar cut this year to the FOIP process, but essentially all if not all targets and measurements of that have been removed from the ministry business plans. We've heard from the minister, "Don't worry; these will be in the annual reports, which you'll see later," but the fact is that they've been completely removed in the first place, which is very unfortunate. Now we're left to the whim of the minister to decide what they report on in that annual report. Just an overall lack of clarity and transparency when it comes to the budget.

5:10

Now, beyond that, Albertans, especially Albertans living in rural communities and potentially even 20 minutes outside of our major municipalities, have been very clear that they were looking to this government for a broadband strategy. Once again, you would not get that this government has any concern or has set out any priority for a broadband strategy when you look at their ministry business plans and when you look at this budget. We could not get any answers from the minister about additional investments in this budget. In fact, we only heard about programs offered by the federal government in those estimates deliberations, which is very unfortunate.

When we talk about setting up an economy for the future and bringing jobs to the province, especially, once again, when we look at opportunities in rural Alberta in the tech sector, in the AI sector, in the arts and culture sector, in the education sector, in the health care sector, Mr. Speaker, all of these sectors are increasingly reliant on seeing movement on a broadband strategy and on the implementation of high-speed Internet across this province. Once again, we have seen no commitment from this government to implement that.

We have heard that we will likely see a broadband strategy at some point in 2021. Well, Mr. Speaker, I imagine that that is good

news for a lot of organizations and municipalities across this province. Unfortunately, as far as we can tell, no new dollars in this budget or budgets moving forward, based on their projections, for the implementation of that. While this government can talk a big game on broadband, on education, on health care, on jobs and the economy, we can clearly look to their budget to see that they really don't seem to be that serious about these important initiatives.

Once again I would thank the members of the opposition who spoke before me on their portfolios and how they're being affected. It's clear to see that while this government talks about historic investments in health care, when you look at the budgets and the line items, it's quite the opposite. It especially goes when we look at the lack of a jobs plan, which Albertans are so clearly waiting for and hoping to see and hoped to see in the last election. This government promised tens of thousands of jobs for Albertans, but what we saw was that even before the pandemic, even before COVID-19 hit our province, this government had lost 50,000 jobs.

Unfortunately, the direction that this government has taken, you know, when we look at things like increased personal income taxes – this Premier promised that we would not see any increases to taxes across the province, but when we look once again to what's actually in this budget and the previous budget, we see that bracket creep continues in the '21-22 year, and the same goes for education property taxes for the '22-23 year.

This government can say that they aren't increasing costs on Albertans, but when we look at bracket creep, the increases to personal income taxes, when we look at the unwillingness for this government to take responsibility and hold the line on education property taxes, when we look at the other failings of this government, whether it be removing the cap on auto insurance or not supporting Albertans when it comes to energy costs, removing the cap on energy prices – just recently, in the last month, we've seen many Albertans, hundreds of Albertans coming forward to share their concerns with the recent spike in energy costs. All I can say is that the government made a decision to get rid of that cap, and now many of the people, unfortunately, have to live with the consequences of a government that has absolutely no direction.

Albertans were looking for something in this budget, many of them, of course, looking for different things, but they were looking for a government to recognize Albertans' values, to recognize the importance of supporting Albertans when it comes to increasing costs on them, and this government's willingness to increase the burden on them is very unfortunate. The changes to personal income taxes and education property taxes are just a couple of examples of how this government has totally given up on staying committed to their platform in the first place.

It truly didn't have to be this way, Mr. Speaker. There is money in the budget that could have supported many of these initiatives instead of the government going in this direction. For instance, it's been talked about a lot, the \$30 million war room that we see, spending money year to year with zero accountability, with the Minister of Energy sitting on the board of this corporation making comments like, "I don't always agree with the decisions or the actions of the war room," yet the minister continues to be on the board of that corporation and does not look for any accountability or any transparency. For that minister herself, I'm not sure, but for the general public, most definitely zero transparency when it comes to that.

We've given plenty of opportunities for that minister to bring forward what money is being spent on. Of course, more recently a whole lot of money was spent on attacking a Netflix cartoon about, you know, a Bigfoot character that has magical healing powers. I mean, it's just ridiculous, Mr. Speaker. If the war room is spending their time going through Netflix, I really have to question whether

that money is being spent how it should be and how the minister could stand in this House and defend the position of that moving forward. It's absolutely unbelievable.

Now, when we look at some of the actions from other ministers and other ministries, when it comes to Advanced Education, boy, oh boy, Mr. Speaker, have we had some conversations in the opposition about a complete disregard for the future of our province. The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview I think laid it out very clearly that the government talks a big game about bringing in new companies, but when it comes to organizations like Infosys, they were very clear – and we're very thankful, no doubt, to see companies being willing to support our economy and being willing to invest in Alberta despite the many shortcomings of this UCP government. No doubt we are thankful, but the fact is that they laid out very clearly that they made that commitment to our communities and to our province because of how well educated our province is and because of the priorities of our province as a whole. Unfortunately, what we see in the Advanced Education budget, you know, is a \$690 million cut to postsecondary institutions since we were in government, in the '18-19 budget, a 22.6 per cent reduction to postsecondary institutions. It's hard to understand how this government thinks that that is a good decision by any means.

Of course, we see in the budget that there are further cuts coming in the '22-23 year, and while I'm thankful for just one moment that this government, as far as I can tell, has gone back on the direction of performance-based funding for these institutions because of the major backlash that they've heard from Alberta institutions and Alberta students and Alberta companies, it's very clear that this government is going in the wrong direction.

We see no logical formula for the cuts that have been put forward by that ministry or by that minister. We see disproportional cuts on certain institutions. Like, the U of A, I believe, is facing an 11 per cent cut this time around. It's hard to understand how this government came to the conclusions that they did, how they made the decisions that they did. You know, when we look at the likely more than 2,000 people who are going to lose their jobs because of just this one instance of cuts to the Advanced Education ministry, it's hard to believe that this could even be considered a plan at all, Mr. Speaker.

Unfortunately, I am going to run out of time very shortly, it seems, but I have a lot more to say on this, Mr. Speaker, as do all of my colleagues, I imagine, and all Albertans. Advanced education is just the tip of the iceberg when we talk about social supports that this government has gone back on. We look at the indexing of AISH, that this government had supported when the NDP was in government, supported again through the election, and they went door to door with that proposal to support indexing of AISH. I cannot tell you, Mr. Speaker, how many people came to me to say: well, we might get the UCP, but at least they are going to commit to indexing AISH. That promise, unfortunately, was not kept.

I'll have much more to say at another time, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

5:20

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

Seeing none, are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this afternoon to talk about the budget. Before I start, I just want to acknowledge all of those amazing individuals who are working tirelessly every day in support of all of us regarding the pandemic.

My sincerest appreciation and gratitude to everybody that is taking the time out of their lives to support us in this.

I have to say that we look at this budget, and there are so many concerns. There are so many cuts that we just, unfortunately, haven't gotten answers to. I know my experience in estimates with the minister. We started off by asking if we could go back and forth and have a conversation about the budget, and unfortunately that was stopped. She indicated that, no, that was not going to happen, that it was going to be block time. That immediately signified to me that it wasn't going to be a conversation or a discussion with questions and answers. That kind of set the tone for the meeting. Unfortunately, when it was time to respond, there were no answers provided. There was no clarity provided, and I still have industry and stakeholders reaching out to seek clarification.

There was a question from the community leagues, specifically from organizations, from the EFCL, which is the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, and the Calgary community leagues. They were asking questions because they have not been able to get in touch with this minister. There are significant cuts to the CFEP funding, which these community organizations rely on. They had written a letter and not received a response, and the minister indicated that she just hadn't had time to respond to them. The unfortunate thing is that this isn't a new concern from these organizations. They actually stood up with us in December 2019 expressing concerns over that budget and the cuts and how much of an impact it would have on their ability to provide services to communities.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about communities, we talk about the heart of where we live. These are the organizations – over 300 represented in Calgary and Edmonton and countless more represented by agricultural societies in the province, that support rural Alberta – and these are the individuals and volunteers that allow for community to gather. They create a space where everyone can come together. They provide parks and playgrounds and Little League and hockey and art classes. They provide so much to our communities, and every area of this beautiful province is impacted when the CFEP program is cut. When the minister said that she just hadn't had time to respond, I find that really upsetting because they've been asking on the record since 2019 to talk about the concerns about the cuts. Those cuts happened. They were concerned then. That was prepandemic. We're in the middle of a pandemic, and these cuts are still coming, and they don't have answers. They want the ability to sit down with the minister and hear why this government doesn't see value in supporting our communities.

Individuals that volunteer their time to these community organizations want to be part of the conversation. They want to be heard. They are the ones who, realistically, are going to be the first ones to respond to communities when gatherings are able to occur again. They are the ones who are setting up activities. They need to know that they have the infrastructure support in place, that they have capacity to actually hold events. When funding cuts are this significant, we are at risk of losing them. When volunteers walk away from the table, when there are crumbling buildings, it's hard to recover from that. I think that when we're attacking the heart of our communities, there are big concerns. We know that when gatherings occur again, it's going to be the community leagues and those agriculture societies that provide those first points of entry for many in the community. People are desperate to find out what's happening, and they've turned to their community leaders.

Those are the ones who are running the activities. Right now some of them are running food banks. Some of them are running, like, some sort of soup kitchens. They're running different ways to get people involved in a safe way. But they're not actually getting revenue. They

have no ability to have any sort of capacity to raise funds, and this government is cutting those grants. They are talking about dollars that need to be invested in our communities, into our individuals that access these supports and these resources. They often are the only connection for some people when it comes to some sort of social activity, some sort of support, especially in the time of a pandemic, when people are struggling with mental health. There's so much going on. There's such a disconnect. Our community leaders are begging to have a voice with this government to talk about what they can do to support their community, our neighbours, our grandparents.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

It's very concerning when we have a minister that is ignoring this group of individuals, that represent every Albertan in some capacity when they're talking about community access.

The other concerns that we're continuing to hear are around our arts and culture in the province. Now, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that this has been something that we've been hearing on our side of the House since this government released their very first budget. It's very clear that this UCP government simply does not understand the contributions that arts and culture make to this province. They're an essential part of our economic recovery and our long-term diversification. We've been pleading to have someone from the arts and culture community sit on the recovery panel. It's an ask that we put in over a year ago. When you have so many individuals, organizations, and community leaders in arts and culture that have insight into how they can help, it's just mind blowing to me that they're not being listened to. What we do see are more cuts. The cultural institutions, our industries, events: they're all struggling. This is the only area where we have not seen any job growth. There has been job loss and absolutely zero recovery.

When we asked the minister about the budget, where they could show that they were supporting this industry, there wasn't a line item that they could identify that actually shows that this is where the supports are coming from. We know that the federal government has provided money, but there have been stipulations that leave out giant organizations, who also have been asking this government to please listen to them, to please be aware of the impact that they're having. When they talk about the money that they're putting out, there are organizations that are completely left out. An example of this is the for-profit live-music industry.

Now, on I think it was May 19, 2020, we did a press conference asking for the ministry to sit down with live-music venues to talk about the impacts of COVID and some supports that are required to help support this industry. Unfortunately – fast-forward to today; we're now almost a year later – this industry still isn't being listened to. When the minister refers to the stabilize program supporting live-music venues, she's not listening. Those that are for-profit do not receive the benefit of this program. They're asking to be included. They're asking for support. They're asking for a voice with this government, and in almost a year of asking to meet with this government, it hasn't happened.

5:30

We're seeing supports that this government is rolling out in terms of distributing federal dollars, and they're still excluding so many portions of the culture industry. We have a government that just doesn't seem to understand how important culture is to our province. When they talk about investing, when they talk about the tax credits that they're offering, when they talk about their ideas of having investors come to our province, I can tell you that one thing that employers want to know about a province is: "What's the culture environment there? What can my family do when we come there? How can I sell my family on coming to Alberta?" They want

to look at the education system, which this government has decimated: the cuts, the concerns around the curriculum. They want to know what the health care system is like, and we know from talking to our physicians, our nurses, our health care providers that there are major concerns with the budget cuts and how this government has so aggressively dealt with our health system.

Then we talk about culture, and this government doesn't even have a representative from the culture community at the table for the economic recovery. We hear words from the minister such as "hope": we hope that this will get better; those involved in the arts are a resilient group, and they can be strategic. Well, there's only so much that hope will do. We need to see action. We need to see that this minister is actually listening to those that she's cutting funds from. When I'm hearing over and over that they can't have a voice within this government, I'm concerned. These decisions are being made that are impacting livelihoods, Madam Speaker. When we're talking about job loss, we're talking about families. We're talking about individuals. These aren't just numbers. These are people that are being impacted with loss of income, loss of revenue.

Small businesses are closing and may never be able to open their doors again. There are so many restrictions in place for how people can qualify for funding. There are so many unclear explanations about why the money that they have, over \$130 million sitting in a government account, isn't making its way into business owners' pockets. This is just absolutely unacceptable. But we hear this government talk about, you know, how their number one plan is job creation. We haven't seen it. There's been zero job growth in the culture industry. Zero. Not one job through their lack of a plan.

When I was in budget estimates with two ministries, both referred to the other about how they were going to support travel and tourism. The travel and tourism minister talked about reaching out to culture and understanding the importance of culture when it comes to supporting our travel and tourism here in the province. Then when I asked the culture minister about that, she referred back to that minister. I asked for a simple plan: "What's the plan? Travel and tourism is asking." They don't know.

We have so many incredible people in the province that are asking to be heard, asking to have their voice, and they're being ignored. When we look at these cuts, it's very concerning about how much of an impact this is going to have postpandemic. Are these organizations going to be able to recover? Are these artists going to be able to recover? We heard in the budget in 2019 that so many film producers and crew members were leaving the province because they weren't supported by this government, and no more support has been added in the time of a pandemic when, I would say, most of these industries were probably the first to be closed and are likely to be the last to open. That has huge impacts on their ability to provide art, culture, entertainment to our province. They might never open, and that to me is absolutely devastating when we look at how important culture is in our province.

I would almost guarantee that every member in this Chamber at some point during this pandemic has turned to some form of art for some mental health, whether it's sitting down and watching a series on TV, a movie, whether it's taking a Zoom dance class or exercise class or looking at ways that they can perhaps express themselves differently, whether it's through learning how to play an instrument or practising some of their art skills. Art is essential to our well-being in this province, and when we see a government that doesn't understand, isn't listening, and is cutting, it's very concerning.

We have a minister that hasn't responded to the questions that we've asked, and I can tell you that in estimates my questions were from community, they were from stakeholders asking: we can't get in touch with this minister; can you please ask on our behalf? Still no response. That, to me, is very concerning. We have a budget that

we're trying to get answers and clarity . . . [Ms Goehring's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to join debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my honour to rise in the House to speak on behalf of my constituents to the 2021 budget. I think that it will be wise to, you know, state in the beginning of my speech that I will be voting against this budget. The reason – I don't know where to start: the government and specifically the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, that I had the opportunity as an elected member to see and watch closely doing their work, specifically, you know, when we're seeing very disturbing events and gaining information.

The province, Alberta, is facing some unprecedented challenges in the wake of, you know, the racist attacks, racist events, done so openly, and the groups, the organizations who are instigating all those racist sentiments are unprecedentedly growing in their numbers. There have been reports since 2019. Racist activities have been growing online, and the groups in the province have grown about 300 per cent. There was a call specifically about the groups having their activities in this province, the call across the country to put a ban on the activities of those very groups, one of which was Proud Boys. We are seeing the events – I don't know which word I should use about those targeting individuals on the LRT stations, bus stops, malls, and the organizations organizing open events with symbols of hate.

What else this government needed, you know, to learn about where we are going, what kind of challenges we are facing: they did not realize that this is their duty and did not realize that this is where we are going. What made them – I just want to come to the point – first eliminate the work of, you know, Anti-Racism Advisory Council, like, I'm not going to say eliminating the council but attack their ability to contribute or do the work to help government to combat racism in this province? The attack was started in 2019. Specifically then, the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women acknowledged the growing number of the crimes of hate-motivated activities but still failed to acknowledge the efforts in their budgets.

5:40

You know, I raised this question during the fiscal updates last year, when the ministry stated that the Anti-Racism Advisory Council is one of the major parts that comprise the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, but there was not even a single line – not even a single line – in that where we could understand what support that council had and what are the functions they are conducting and how the government is working with that council. The same thing we have seen: nothing has been allocated towards that work in Budget 2021-2022.

Even the budget for multiculturalism has been cut down further. When this question was raised to the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, she, too, shared her experience. As a coloured person she was subject to the incidence of racism. But I do not know what it will take to learn that racism is real in today's life. People are suffering, and the government needs to take initiatives. When we asked that question, the ministry states, you know: "Don't try to criticize it. Don't involve in blame games." How is it blame games when racism is on the rise in the province and government cuts the grant of the antiracism community group program and we see the consequences?

The next year, instead of learning from their past experience, they further cut the human rights education and multiculturalism grant, period. The program is totally cut. When this is happening, I'm just trying to forward a word and, as the ministry says, blame game. There is something wrong with this government that has been reflected in this budget and that cannot be supported. When these were the concerns raised by Albertans, my constituents, people from all over from the province of Alberta . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but in accordance with Standing Order 64(3) the chair is required to put

the question on the appropriation bill on the Order Paper for second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 60 read a second time]

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

Mrs. Savage: Yes. Thank you. I move that the Legislature stand adjourned.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:45 p.m.]

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