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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, November 29, 2021

Day 133

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Milliken, Nicholas, Calgary-Currie (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Barnes, Drew, Cypress-Medicine Hat (Ind)
Bilous, Deron, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP)
Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)
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Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (NDP),
Official Opposition Deputy House Leader
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Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP),
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Toor, Devinder, Calgary-Falconridge (UC)
Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)
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Party standings:

United Conservative: 20

New Democrat: 24

Independent: 2

Vacant: 1

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Select Special Child and Youth Advocate Search Committee

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Goehring
Lovely
Nixon, Jeremy
Pancholi
Sabir
Smith
Turton

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Chair: Ms Lovely
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Amery
Carson
Frey (formerly Glasgo)
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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Ms Phillips
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Hanson
Milliken
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Guthrie
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Yao

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, November 29, 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.

Members, please remain standing for the playing of our national anthem.

Recording:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all of us command.
Car ton bras sait porter l'épée,
Il sait porter la croix!
Ton histoire est une épopée
Des plus brillants exploits.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Chestermere-Strathmore has a statement to make.

Economic Recovery and Growth

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It has been a very difficult time for many Albertans, especially given the recent commodity price collapse and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are so many glimmers of hope on the horizon for the province's economy. In many ways an economic rebound is already under way. Albertans created more than 60,000 jobs over the last four months. Albertans recovered all the jobs lost earlier in the pandemic, more than 340,000 recovered jobs lost early in the pandemic. BMO, National Bank, Desjardins, ATB, and the Conference Board of Canada are all projecting that Alberta will lead Canada in economic growth this year and the next. The Conference Board also predicts that we will lead the country in growth in 2023.

We've already broken our venture capital records, with a quarter to go in 2021. In the first three quarters of 2021 Alberta saw \$480 million invested in deals across Alberta and increased dollars in deals compared to 2021, 61 deals. Calgary is now ranked fourth in Canada in venture capital deals. In 2019 we had \$227 million in venture capital, a record; 2020 saw more than \$455 million, which is double the previous record; and 2021 shows the trend continuing, with \$480 million in just three quarters. Amazon Web Services just announced the largest tech-sector investment in Alberta history. Plug and Play, one of the world's most successful tech accelerators, now has operations in Edmonton and Calgary. Northern Petrochemical just announced \$2 billion on a project that will create 4,100 jobs. Dow Chemical is building the world's first net zero petrochemical facility in the Edmonton region.

Mr. Speaker, all of these investments mean good jobs for Albertans, building on our existing strengths and diversifying into new and exciting areas, that will only attract young families to our province, especially as costs of living in other areas of the country skyrocket. This is truly a game-changing moment for Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo is on his feet.

Affordable Housing

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2019 the federal government recognized housing as a human right in the National Housing Strategy Act. Yet as winter closes in, more and more Albertans are without housing, and our emergency shelters in Calgary are near to full capacity every night. The fact is that this government's policies are forcing more Albertans onto the streets and into tents. Homelessness has doubled in Edmonton in the last two years. According to a recent report 2,800 people in Edmonton do not have housing, about 3,000 people in Calgary are homeless, and 24,000 Albertan households are on a wait-list for affordable housing.

Mr. Speaker, all levels of government should be laser focused on fixing this crisis and providing more secure, affordable homes for Albertans, but instead of stepping up for the struggling people in this province, the UCP is trying to sell off our affordable housing with their disastrous Bill 78. This awful legislation does not even require that the profits from this fire sale go back into affordable housing, and decades of research show that privatization will lead to higher costs and worse results for communities.

Mr. Speaker, this Premier is determined to yet again give a gift to wealthy corporations at the expense of ordinary Albertans. When my NDP colleagues and I were in government, we invested \$1.2 billion into affordable housing. We indexed AISH and income supports to inflation. We cut child poverty in half. I'm just devastated to watch Albertans fall into poverty and homelessness as the UCP government undoes all that good work. Housing is a human right, so why won't this government stop forcing Albertans onto the streets?

Civic Engagement and Voluntary Organizations

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Mr. Speaker, today I want to share the stories of unbelievable efforts of faith, community associations, volunteers, and so many others who have stepped up in a major way over the last 20 months. Centre Street church's compassionate ministry handed out almost 90,000 food hampers and boxed lunches to people in need in their community. First Alliance church: over 100,000 meals and supporting initiatives like the giving wall, where people can choose a tile off the wall for a specific and practical way to provide for someone in need in their communities. The Calgary Seniors' Resource Society relied on thousands of volunteers to deliver hampers, medication, to drive seniors, and to provide company for seniors in isolation. One of my constituents cooked and dropped off meals for her neighbours that were living in isolation. Many community associations found innovative ways to meet local need during the pandemic.

The Hindu Society of Alberta donated \$2,100 and over 7,000 pounds' worth of food to the Mustard Seed. Earlier this month the Muslim Association of Calgary's youth volunteer group prepared lunch bags for kids in need that were then distributed through Brown Bagging for Calgary's Kids. Al Rashid operated an emergency shelter in their mosque last winter to accommodate displacement due to the pandemic. They also delivered COVID care packages in nine neighbourhoods across Edmonton in various languages. The Dashmesh Culture Centre operates a food bank out of their temple from Monday through Saturday, serving individuals from all

backgrounds in their community. Sikh Youth Edmonton has done countless good deeds during the pandemic. They gave away things like masks and sanitizer, food, and emergency kits.

Imagine if we could continue to build on this fantastic civic engagement to strengthen communities and address challenges going into the future. As politicians we cannot simply make these changes alone, and I truly believe that everyone has an important role to play in strengthening our communities.

To the fantastic individuals across this province that are already doing so much: on behalf of all of us, thank you.

Hanukkah

Mr. Dach: As I attended Rabbi Ari Drelich's menorah-lighting ceremony last evening to mark the beginning of Hanukkah, I was once again reminded of the importance of community coming together to make a difference. This is the story of the uncertain military victory of the Maccabees and the great moral movements around the world and across time, how a little goes a long way, just like a small amount of oil miraculously outlasted everyone's expectations. This Hanukkah I hope we remember that in hard times, even when our resources seem limited, faith can help us make the most of what we have.

About 75 per cent of Edmonton's Jewish community calls Edmonton-McClung their home, Mr. Speaker. My riding is home to many of the Jewish institutions in the city of Edmonton, including Chabad Lubavitch, Beth Israel synagogue, and the Talmud Torah school, whose students proudly sing Hebrew songs on campus and reaffirm our belief that light still drives out darkness and that freedom still needs fighters.

Mr. Speaker, the victory of hope over fear is more important than ever. The growing prevalence of the painful and disturbing acts of anti-Semitic violence we are experiencing throughout North America calls for all Albertans to take a united antiracist front. We must centre the experiences of the many Jews who experience intersectional marginalization, including because of race, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities, who do not have the choice but to fight on multiple fronts. We must work with Mayor Sohi, among others, and all other levels of government to determine how we can reach out to communities and bring together the necessary supports to establish accountability and healing. All of us, together with municipal governments throughout Alberta, must work on how we will address anti-Semitism and establish a strong antiracist foundation.

The festival of lights is also a reminder of how Isaiah saw the Jews as a light to the nations. In that spirit, let us work with Jewish communities to implement or improve existing programs as well as develop new proactive and responsive initiatives that address anti-Semitism and hate.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

1:40

Climate Change Science

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to determining evidence of a trend in human-caused climate change, here is what can be said. There is low confidence regarding the sign of trend in the magnitude and/or frequency of floods, droughts, dryness, hail, thunderstorms, and extreme extratropical cyclones since the 1900s. Now, before the members opposite start sharpening their knives and getting ready to sound the climate change denier alarm,

it's important to note where these statements come from. These are not my assertions. I simply agree with them. These statements come from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fifth Assessment Report.

Steven E. Koonin makes the case for this argument in his book *Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters*. Koonin was the former Undersecretary for Science with the U.S. Department of Energy under the Obama administration. He argues that there are a multitude of reasons for science's low confidence that an increase in extreme weather events can be attributed to human influence. Some of these reasons include low-quality historical records, high natural variability, natural influences, and disagreement among models used. He also notes that, increasingly, reports are made using event attribution studies, which are notoriously rife with issues that cause these reports to be self-fulfilling prophecies.

Chapter 3 of the IPCC 2012 special report on extreme climate change states that many weather and climate extremes are the result of natural climate variability. Even if there were no anthropogenic changes in climate, a wide variety of natural weather and climate extremes would still occur. To conflate weather events and climate demonstrates a lack of understanding of the science. I'd encourage all members opposite to read this book before they line up to support extremists like David Suzuki in their efforts to destroy our energy industry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Nielsen: I'm proud to represent the constituency of Edmonton-Decore. It is a diverse and vibrant part of Edmonton, and I'm glad that the Minister of Seniors and Housing got to visit it on Friday to highlight the opening of the Londonderry affordable housing complex. This project will make a meaningful difference for hundreds of people in my constituency, and I'm proud to have been a part of the NDP government that funded this project. I'd like to thank my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Riverview and former Minister of Seniors and Housing for funding this project and for implementing a housing strategy that built housing, unlike the UCP's plan to sell it away.

I find it ironic but not surprising that the UCP is taking credit for this project while also continuing to attack the NDP's record. When we've asked the UCP important questions about measures of accountability in Bill 78 and the possible sale of affordable housing and contracts that will be awarded to UCP donors, the current minister has purposely ignored them and has made childish insults towards us instead. But while in Edmonton-Decore the minister highlighted that projects like Londonderry are exactly what the province needs more of, which is exactly why the NDP funded it to begin with. The UCP strategy comes with about one-fifth of the funding that the NDP's plan did, and therefore it will be impossible to build projects like the Londonderry complex.

While the minister was in Edmonton-Decore, I hope she took some time to talk to my constituents to see the real harm that her government has done to the most vulnerable. Poverty and homelessness have skyrocketed under the UCP. Cutting AISH and income support has made it harder for the most vulnerable to make it by. We need more affordable housing, but the UCP would rather sell it. They refuse to implement any measure of accountability on themselves or corporations. Sadly, it's evident that the UCP are more interested in finding ways to subsidize profitable corporate landlords instead of helping Albertans have a safe and affordable place to call home.

Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville Constituency Update

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to represent the riding of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, and I would like to highlight some accomplishments. The town of Vegreville received from us \$8.2 million to build its agrifood industrial park, an investment that will create many local jobs. The Veg Al-Drug Society has received funding to ensure that they can continue their good work serving local citizens. The Heartland community commons project in Fort Saskatchewan received funding to bring together a number of civil society organizations.

The Two Hills Mennonite school received funding for the much-needed repairs to the school and the installation of a playground.

My constituency continues to benefit from programs like our site rehabilitation program, which has so far allocated \$575 million to over 500 Alberta companies, creating over 2,700 jobs. We also created the jobs now program, the women's economic recovery challenge grant, palliative and end-of-life care grant fund, Alberta's child care agreement, and the multiple grants we have given to small communities for road and bridge work, sidewalk repair, water and sewage work.

In addition, we were able to attract Dow Chemical to invest \$13.5 billion; the Shell Polaris carbon capture and storage project, creating 2,000 jobs upon completion; Grizzly Bear Creek wind farm near Mannville; and ATCO, along with their many industry partners, creating multiple projects throughout my constituency.

I'm particularly proud of all the new business start-ups and existing businesses that have been able to expand and grow their businesses during the worst health and financial crisis the world has ever seen.

I'm especially proud of the passage of my Bill 201, the Protection of Students with Life-threatening Allergies Act. It is because of this passage that schools are now required to maintain an anaphylaxis policy, develop individual plans for each student that has an anaphylactic allergy, and are required to keep at least on EpiPen at each school.

Mr. Speaker, we have accomplished a lot, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Premier and my colleagues to bring about positive outcomes for residents of Fort Saskatchewan and all of Alberta.

COVID-19 Vaccines for Children

Ms Pancholi: This past weekend my husband and I were thrilled to take our kids for their first COVID vaccine shot. Now, all parents know that taking your kids to get shots is never really a fun experience, but just like their infant and preschool vaccinations, we do it because we know it's important for their health and also for those around them. Getting kids vaccinated is one of the first steps we take as parents to acknowledge our children's world is much bigger than just their home. Vaccination is about more than individual protection; it's also about recognizing that we're part of a collective community. We do it to take care of each other.

There were some tears this weekend. Yes, some from my kids. It was a pretty stressful environment, and a therapy dog at the clinic really would've been great. But there were tears from my husband and I, too, and a happy dance in the car afterwards. Our kids now have an extra level of protection against a virus that has cost more than 3,200 Albertans their lives. It also means Alberta is one step closer to the end of this pandemic.

It's why if the UCP truly wanted this pandemic to end, they'd do everything possible to make it easy for kids to get the vaccine. Most obviously, provide in-school vaccinations. Parents have been

signing permission forms for in-school vaccinations for years. Any excuse not to do this, frankly, is nonsensical, and the UCP knows that. Making parents travel to vaccine clinics instead of providing them in local community pharmacies also doesn't make sense. In Edmonton and Calgary some parents are looking at bus rides of over an hour to get to the handful of clinic sites. It's even worse in rural areas, and the UCP won't even agree to provide three hours of paid leave for parents to do this.

We know what's going to happen. There'll be a big uptake at first of parents who are eager and able to get their kids vaccinated. Then the rate will plateau and drop. How do we know this? Because it's happened every single time vaccine eligibility has expanded. Why doesn't the UCP show any capacity to learn? Because leadership simply isn't in their DNA. It's not who they are.

Thank you to all the parents and the front-line staff. To the little ones who did their part for all of us, well, not all heroes wear capes. Sometimes they carry stuffies, want *Paw Patrol* Band-Aids, and, yes, get scared and cry. But they're little heroes.

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

Adoption

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. These are the final few days of Adoption Awareness Month, and, like always, the month has held a special significance for me. It is a month for us to celebrate the many families that have opened their hearts to a child or children to give them a loving home and a forever family. I have spoken many times in this House about the journey my wife and I have had while navigating the adoption process. It was an emotionally stressful process that lasted nearly three years, but I would not have traded it for anything in this world because in it it brought our son Xavier home to us. Xavier was not just a perfect fit for our family; he completed our family and made it whole.

I was privileged to draw the first private member's motion for the new Legislature back in 2019. On May 27, 2019, my Motion 501 read, "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to take all necessary measures to make the process for all forms of adoption more efficient and timely for families." Mr. Speaker, it's been two and a half years since I made my motion, and I'm so proud of the work that the Minister of Children's Services and others have done to improve the adoption process here in Alberta. Legislative and regulatory amendments have modernized terminology, clarified nuances, and ensured more accountability from adoption agencies, which has resulted in a more timely adoption process.

A province-wide adoption program review led to various policy, program, and practice enhancements, including improvements to home study report processes, equalized and mandatory training requirements, and the creation of tools and infographics to show different adoption program requirements more clearly for prospective parents, and that does not even mention the new regulations based upon proclamation of Bill 206 or new postadoption changes.

Mr. Speaker, there is still a lot of work to be done on the road ahead to make the adoption process better for Albertan families, but I am proud of the work that this government has done and truly happy that the process is better for families right across Alberta.

Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

COVID-19 Omicron Variant

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the recent warnings about another new COVID-19 variant are deeply concerning. We don't know much for certain, but early analysis of omicron suggests it may be more contagious and may even break through vaccine protection. Israel and Japan have closed their borders, and while Canada has moved to restrict travel, cases have already been detected in Quebec, Ontario, and B.C. Experts here say that it's only a matter of time. So to the Premier: how is your government preparing for the threat of this new variant, and do your models predict a winter wave?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Well, thank you. First of all, Mr. Speaker, we are, of course, and we should all be very concerned about this omicron variant emanating from southern Africa. We are glad that the government of Canada responded to Alberta's call to bring in travel restrictions for individuals coming from the countries of concern. I can inform the House that AHS will, with respect to all cases identified in returning international travellers from any country, require a full case investigation, contact notification, PCR testing for all close contacts, and rapid testing for households and specific settings like schools and child care settings.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, but, you know, the last time the Premier was warned of a variant, their failure to act is what actually accelerated it. Today our ICUs are still over capacity, surgeries are still being cancelled, and the decrease in daily new cases appears to have plateaued. As we navigate the new uncertainties presented by this variant, we're going to need to restore public trust, trust the Premier does not have. Once again to the Premier: will he appoint an independent science advisory table to help with these critical decisions and take UCP politics out of public health?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, regrettably, it's been NDP politics that have sought to divide Albertans from day one in the COVID era. Our chief medical officer takes advice not only from her own officials but from her scientific advisory panel, the advisory committee on immunization, and from many other expert bodies. With respect to the omicron variant if a person has not travelled, AHS will do retrospective follow-up for a confirmed case, all close contacts will be investigated and asked about symptoms 14 days following exposure, and anyone with symptoms will be treated as a probable case.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, yesterday the CMOH said that Alberta was working with AHS on a proactive plan to manage omicron cases. Meanwhile the Premier is more engaged in a proactive plan to manage his leadership review. Albertans are tired of watching the Premier make the same mistakes. Now, when Doug Ford moved to this independent model I just mentioned in Ontario, their provincial response improved and trust went up. Not only is this good public policy; it's also good political advice. Why won't the Premier take it?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, why does the NDP see in every inflection point throughout COVID-19 an opportunity not to come together but to divide? Why do they always seek to politicize the pandemic? The chief medical officer is tasked in law with providing advice to the government on how to deal with a public health crisis of this nature and draws upon expert advice. I've already delineated a number of the actions that have been taken. There will be a further

public briefing offered by the chief medical officer, together with myself and the Minister of Health, to the public at 3:30 this afternoon.

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

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the Premier does not have the trust of Albertans.

Now, meanwhile this weekend I had the pleasure of attending the Winter Whyte Light Up in Old Strathcona, a wonderful event put on by local business leaders to build their community and showcase their shops ahead of the busy holiday shopping season, but even as I watched these entrepreneurs work so hard, news was already spreading about the potential impact of omicron on our economy. To the Premier again: will he implement a business risk index to help those small businesses be better prepared, and will he renew commitments on the grant programs that were so heavily depended upon?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, the risk to those businesses if the NDP were in office today would be incalculable because we know the NDP policy. They have only one response. I mean, I guess, to a hammer everything looks like a nail, and to them the economy looks like a nail. They would shut it down, and it would have been shut down through most of the past 20 months. Thank goodness those businesses are able to operate safely in this province, and we will continue to do everything we can to ensure a balance between the protection of lives but also livelihoods.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, I am merely repeating the call of the Calgary Chamber of commerce and other businesses, for heaven's sake.

Now, the threat posed by omicron is a big question mark, but what isn't is where it has the biggest potential to spread: schools. We are in the middle of a critical push to vaccinate the last population needed to finally start putting this pandemic behind us. Given the news about omicron, will the Premier please reconsider his decisions on pediatric vaccines, offer the vaccines in schools, and give parents the paid time they need to get their kids the shot?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to report that as of the end of last week well over 60,000 children between the ages of five and 11 had been registered for vaccination by their parents. There are 120 AHS clinics where those vaccines are available, including on weekends and after business hours. Of course, we instituted a three-hour mandatory leave opportunity for paid leave for people to get vaccinated. We will continue to provide the scientific information and encourage parents who feel it's the right thing for their children to ...

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, we don't know where this will go, but we do know that we must have strong policies in place to protect public health and our economy. One of those policies is paid sick days. Now, as of January 1 workers in B.C. will have five paid sick days while here at home the Premier is dragging his heels, claiming it kills jobs. You know what? It's actually workplace outbreaks that kill jobs. Why doesn't the Premier lead for once and bring in legislation for paid sick days and support Alberta's businesses in the process?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, of course, people are protected in Alberta if they have to take sick leave from work, and we encourage

employers to do the right thing and support their employees. With respect to vaccination I'm pleased to report that Alberta is now approaching 89 per cent of first-dose coverage amongst people over the age of 12, so for adults and teenagers, and that is a significant increase. It looks like we will – I think it'll take some time yet – likely exceed 90 per cent in that range of the population, and we are very effectively rolling out booster shots. We encourage anybody over the age of 70 and Indigenous people over the age of 18 to receive them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has a question.

Rural Ambulance Service

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like most rural leaders, I was shocked last week to hear the Premier defending his changes to EMS despite evidence showing that under his government it's harder to get an ambulance. This after two resolutions from rural leaders calling for action on his utter failure. Strathcona county's director of emergency services says that due to gaps in ambulance services more and more firefighters are having to act as EMTs, meaning they are not as available for fires or rescues. Why is this Premier forcing communities to choose between providing emergency medical help or disaster prevention? Will he admit his plan has failed, get back to the table with municipalities, and fix this crisis he's created?

Mr. Kenney: Neither I nor the government are doing any such thing, Mr. Speaker. The member who just posed the question is from Edmonton, which for many years has been part of the AHS centralized dispatch very effectively, with very good response times. We do know that this summer there was a 30 per cent increase in the number of EMS calls for a number of reasons. Additional resources have been added. We need to ensure, of course, that EMS is there when people need it, and that is why we'll continue to add resources as necessary. Fortunately, we are beginning to see an abatement in that demand.

Mr. Shepherd: Always excuses; no accountability.

The president of the Alberta Fire Fighters Association reported that in his 20 years of experience he's never seen wait times for EMS this bad, with firefighters so busy and stressed that they don't even have time for bathroom breaks because wait times have doubled. EMS and firefighters are at the brink of exhaustion after fighting this pandemic while the UCP simply add more burdens and pressures with no regard for them. Will this Premier commit to meeting this week with myself and associations for firefighters and EMS to hear their concerns, those of thousands, countless other Albertans, and then act to address this?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health has the call.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon. member for raising an important issue. I had the opportunity to speak with municipalities, both at RMA and AUMA, over the last couple of weeks. This issue was raised with them. I also had the opportunity to speak with individuals on this particular issue. We are acting. We have added resources – an extra \$8.3 million to EMS budgets in August; we've increased paramedic staff by 9 per cent – but we know we must do more. We've recently launched the EMS hours of work project to be able to try to ensure better service and make sure that we have the people to be able to support Albertans in health...

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

Mr. Shepherd: Not a single extra ambulance is on the road because of this government. Instead, they duck critical questions on their failures on EMS, and Albertans are paying the price. The mayor of Boyle told the media that the RCMP and fire crews in his area were forced to perform CPR on a patient for 45 minutes before an ambulance arrived. That patient, tragically, died. That's not isolated. There were 31 cases where there was no ambulance available between last Wednesday and Friday alone. These are called red alerts, and they're happening daily. A man died, and others could, too, if this government doesn't act. Would the Premier explain to Albertans why he won't do his job and step up to help those in emergencies?

Mr. Copping: Mr. Speaker, while I appreciate the passion by the hon. member, the fact is that our government is acting. Not only have we added resources; we are doing a review of the status management to reduce the need for ambulances to leave the communities to respond to calls in the cities. We're increasing options to treat patients without transportation to emergency so that we actually reduce the number of calls in the long term. We've started work on a comprehensive EMS plan for the next five to 10 years. We understand that there is an issue. We are addressing it. I'd like to just, one, point out that on code reds, that is just a symbol to be able to identify where the issues may be, and we are addressing that right now.

COVID-19 Contact Tracing

Ms Hoffman: This summer, as the fourth wave was on a crash course with our province, the Premier fired 1,400 contact tracers. This put parents, students, and our education system at risk as schools were forced to take on contact tracing without the support that they needed. In the two months after firing 1,400 contact tracers, by this Premier's own admission, only 54 were hired back. Unacceptable. With the chief medical officer of health warning about a potential fifth wave and many questions about the new omicron variant, can the Premier inform this House exactly how many of the 1,400 contact tracers have been rehired?

Mr. Copping: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to chat about contact tracing. It's important to note that since January of 2021 we have been able to respond to all other requests in terms of contact tracing within a 24-hour period. It's not about the number of resources that are put to this issue; it's about: are we actually getting the results? We are getting the results. In regard to omicron we will take a look at our contact tracing resources that are required to be able to address that. We already indicated that we will address all international travel, and if we need to do more, we'll do it.

Ms Hoffman: The Premier chose politics over the safety of Albertans, and it cost us dearly. There's no telling how many of the cases, infections, or even deaths the 1,400 contact tracers that this Premier fired might have prevented. Surely now even the Premier can see that doing more to protect Albertans is worth the investment. We should have more contact tracers now than ever. That's how we stop the spread of COVID-19 and keep the economy open. Will the Premier commit to fully staffing the 1,400 contact tracing positions that his government eliminated by the end of the week? Yes or no?

Mr. Copping: Mr. Speaker, our government will make the commitment to have enough contact tracers to do the work. That's been happening since January, and it's happening even today.

We've also added more contact tracing requirements for international travel, and we will staff up contact tracers to be able to do that. We will put the resources in place to protect Albertans.

Ms Hoffman: In September, after this government blew up contact tracing, the fastest growing age group with COVID-19 was five- to 11-year-olds. While the Premier tries to downplay the impacts of COVID on children, I hope we all agree that it should not be allowed to run rampant in our schools or our communities. So in order to protect children, will the Premier commit to extending contact tracing to child care and other youth programs to ensure that no stone is left unturned when it comes to actually keeping kids safe during the potential fifth wave and with the imminent arrival of the omicron variant?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education has risen.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. Again the member opposite is low on facts, because the fact of the matter is that as of November 22 AHS was in a position to work with all school authorities to take over contact notification from those school authorities, but many school authorities told us that what they were doing in the interim was really working for them. In fact, 78 of the 176 school authorities chose to continue on with the way they were going. That's 90 per cent of all Alberta students now being monitored by the schools, because they chose to do it that way.

JOGMEC-Alberta Memorandum of Understanding

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, our government has signed a memorandum of understanding with Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation, which will expand our efforts to attract investment into Alberta and further expand market access for our energy sector. Given that expanding markets with our close allies will mean more trade and more exports, can the Premier tell the House about Alberta's relationship with Japan and what this MOU will mean for our economy?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Japan is our third-largest trading partner. In 2019 we exported nearly \$2 billion worth of goods to Japan. Now, most of those goods were agriculture products. By growing our relationship with Japan, we ensure that we can grow our largest industry but also send more other products to that nation. When Alberta first began to establish trade offices across the world, under Peter Lougheed in the '80s, the Tokyo office was the first office that we put in place.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. The MOU specifically lists JOGMEC as the specific body with which Alberta has signed an agreement. Our province has struggled for decades to expand our energy sector's market access to Asia, and given that no progress was made by the previous government, who sat next to Justin Trudeau and did nothing when he vetoed Northern Gateway, can the minister tell us how much of our energy products Japan currently receives?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Currently Japan receives little of Alberta's energy products. Again, of the \$2 billion we export

to Japan annually, over \$1.5 billion is from our agriculture and forestry industries. We've heard from the Japanese government, however, that they have a tremendous need for energy products and that they want to get those products from Canada. Our government has undertaken two trade missions to Japan, and we've heard that message loud and clear.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the minister. While the energy sector will be the largest industry for decades to come and given that our government has been diligently working to diversify our economy in other sectors as well, the conversation around economic growth is not one of our energy sector or other industries but, rather, one of the energy sector and other industries. Can the minister tell us how this MOU supports diversification in Alberta?

Mr. Toews: JOGMEC is a state-owned enterprise under the Japan ministry of economy and trade, and they are a key player in the Asian economy. With the Minister of Energy's recent release of her mines and minerals strategy, we can also ensure that we're also able to export mined products such as lithium, cobalt, and vanadium but also our petrochemical products, hydrogen and others, as we grow those industries.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two weeks ago it was announced that the CEO of the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation was stepping down after only 14 months. This follows 4 of 7 of the board of directors of the corporation leaving or being removed with no explanation. This turmoil and apparent instability are very concerning, especially as this corporation has been touted as a, quote, game changer for Indigenous communities, so can the Minister of Indigenous Relations tell this House exactly what is happening with the board of the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation and why it is experiencing so much turmoil?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Indigenous Relations.

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for bringing it up. Like I say, this is a real highlight of our government, and it's done such great work. I just really want to thank Alicia. She was the CEO of the organization, and she's moved on. She's working on her own now, doing some great stuff. But under her leadership many milestones were reached, including the rolling out of the northern corridor pipeline, just announced a few weeks ago, which saw eight Indigenous communities become true partners in prosperity. I wish her nothing but the best going forward in her career path.

2:10

Mr. Feehan: Given that the large turnover at the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation creates serious concerns about its ability to fulfill its mandate and given that it needs to be seen to be credible and stable, something that the secret removal of 60 per cent of the board does not help with, and given that concerns are swirling about the slow speed at which the AIOC moves to support nations and whether the funding it provides will actually be effective, Minister, what impact has the mass departure of AIOC board members had on its work, and will you finally be up front about what exactly is going on here?

Mr. Wilson: Well, Mr. Speaker, it wasn't really a mass. We had the CEO, who moved on to another position. Our chairman of the board, who's a very busy businessman, offered me a year of his time, and I took two of it, and he's now moved on to look after his own businesses. We have one of our very comparable board members who's offered to step into the position, and I've appointed him to that position: Stephen Buffalo, a great leader in the community, across the Indigenous communities. He has stepped into that position, and I'm so happy to have him there.

Mr. Feehan: Given that one of the directors who was removed or left the corporation was someone who was named in a \$25 million court filing by a former employee who alleged racism and sexual harassment at Indian Oil and Gas Canada and given that if that was the reason that he left or was removed from the corporation, Albertans, especially Indigenous Albertans, have a right to know, will the minister confirm if these allegations filed in court were the reason why that director was removed from or left the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, and if so, what kind of internal investigation is being conducted on this deeply concerning matter?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That issue is before the courts, and he has not even actually left the board.

Let me just say that we are proud that we have another Indigenous woman who has accepted a position on the board, and they started their first meeting on Saturday. That's how strongly they feel about this. They work on weekends. They work at night to make sure that we keep moving projects forward. I'm happy to say that you'll be seeing a lot of new projects coming forward. I know it's going to break their hearts, but there's a lot of good stuff happening. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Deaths of Children in Care and Youth Transitioning out of Care

Ms Pancholi: Last week Albertans were shocked to see the heartbreaking spike in deaths of children and young people in care. Government records show that 34 have died in the first seven months of this year, as many as the entire 12 months of the year before. According to the Child and Youth Advocate the number is actually higher, almost 50 per cent higher, in fact. The advocate, in a Don Braid article, was frank in his opposition to the UCP decision to remove supports for emerging adults at age 22 and has been since this decision was first made. The Minister of Children's Services said that she reached out to the advocate to address the increase in deaths, so will the minister follow his recommendations and reinstate supports for youth until age 24?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I did, of course, as I said last week in this House, speak with the Child and Youth Advocate about these concerning numbers that we are seeing. That is something that I have always taken very seriously in this role, and that's why I asked the ministry just over a month ago, in fact, to do an additional review, so that we can transparently look at what happened here and so that we can make sure that the right supports and services are in place to support young people. I do want to say that not one of the young adults in this number was transitioning off the supports and financial assistance program, despite what the member opposite has said. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Pancholi: Given that the Minister of Children's Services has rejected recommendations from the Child and Youth Advocate related to family treatment programs and file transfer issues and given that last week the government claimed that the pandemic was to blame but now admits that they are doing an internal review, to the same minister. The UCP knew the pandemic would cause further stress and strain on these already vulnerable families yet stubbornly refused to listen to input or take action. Will this review include the Child and Youth Advocate, and will the minister assure the members of this Assembly that if that review shows the need for the UCP to reverse course on its cuts, they will do it?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I said before and as I've shared with the member opposite, we will absolutely not wait to act when we know what has happened in each and every one of these cases, and that is why I reached out to the Child and Youth Advocate to have that meeting last week and to discuss this. I also want to point out that we are adding 4,000 additional treatment spaces, which will help Albertans right across the province access life-saving detox treatment and recovery resources every year. We invested \$53 million last year to support mental health, and that includes young people right across the province, knowing the difficult situations, but we will not wait to act.

Ms Pancholi: This government should have been acting a year ago.

Given that the minister has said that the change in age of eligibility from 24 to 22 for youth aging out of care has impacted roughly 450 young adults and 139 of them have successfully transitioned into other support programs and given that the Child and Youth Advocate has stated that 19 young people who were on this program have died between April and October this year and another two have died this month alone, my question is very straightforward, and I hope that the minister will answer it clearly. Can the minister confirm and assure the members of this Assembly that none of the young people who have died this year were cut off or due to be cut off this program?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would hope that the member opposite is actually listening to the responses as I did address that in my last response. Ninety per cent of the young adults aged 21 to 24 that have transitioned off since these program changes have been made were transitioned, in many cases, to more appropriate adult supports and services that meet their unique and complex needs; 10 per cent are slightly more complex; and 100 per cent of those young adults who still need our services will continue to receive them.

Government Policies and Cost of Living

Member Ceci: Christmas is coming and rising costs are hitting families hard. Everything from gas to groceries is up, and this government's deindexation of the tax code and the benefits Albertans rely on is piling on the pain. The average family of four will soon be losing \$600 a year as a direct result of this government's tax policies. To the Minister of Finance. Q2 is coming up, and the double whammy of inflation is crushing the household budget. Will the government take responsibility for their actions and present Albertans with a real plan to address what the Premier has called in the recent past a sneaky tax grab?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We certainly are in an inflationary environment brought on by federal monetary policy and federal fiscal policy and issues with supply chains that are creating an inflationary environment. What I can say today is that in 2021 an Albertan who earns \$100,000 will pay the same amount of provincial tax that they would have in 2019. We have kept tax rates flat. What we're really doing is we're really incentivizing growth in this economy. That growth will create expanded fiscal capacity and jobs for Albertans.

Member Ceci: Given that our Official Opposition has received thousands of messages from families who can't make ends meet and given that it's expected utility costs will continue to rise, which will hurt Calgarians like mother of five Emma Corrine, who wrote to us,

our gas and electricity bills have increased 60 per cent to the point where it's unmanageable. It's food or electricity every month.

We can't afford to leave Alberta or we would be gone as fast as we could. The Premier and the UCP are suffocating us,

is the government really okay with suffocating families like Emma's and making conditions so unbearable that they yearn to leave this province?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, I find it pretty rich coming from that member and the members across when they're concerned about increasing utility costs and sneaky tax grabs. This is from the party who brought in the carbon tax . . . [interjection]

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Mr. Toews: . . . the largest tax. They didn't even have the courage to include it in their platform. On top of that, they did everything they could to drive tens of billions of dollars of investment out of this province, creating great hardship for thousands of Albertans.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:19.

Member Ceci: We didn't deindex a tax quote; you did.

Given that the UCP policy's agenda goes well beyond car insurance and utility bills to hike tuition, student loan interest, school fees – you name it – and given that they've also gone after the most vulnerable in our society by deindexing the Alberta seniors' benefit and AISH and given that seniors stand to lose \$542 per year and now people on AISH stand to lose \$1,300, can the government explain why their so-called economic recovery strategy involves stealing money from vulnerable Albertans? It's not a true recovery unless everyone benefits. [interjections]

2:20

The Speaker: Order. Order. There are a number of challenges with that question, including failing to speak through the chair, a preamble, and also making an allegation that the government is stealing. [interjections]

Order. If I needed help from the government, I would have asked for it.

The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I reject every premise in that question. Again, what this government is focused on is creating the most competitive business environment possible, a business environment that attracts investment, and we're seeing billions of dollars of announcements of investment coming to this province. Two weeks ago we had a \$7 billion week. That means

jobs and opportunities, expanded fiscal capacity for the benefit of all Albertans.

Utility Costs

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, a small-business owner in my riding of Edmonton-Ellerslie reached out to me regarding his utility bill for a location that hasn't even opened yet. He was charged more than \$192 for water and drainage services. On the other hand, his other location, which is open seven days a week, was charged only \$90. Small businesses are struggling once again with COVID-19 due to the government's lack of leadership. They should not have to suffer for the government putting corporations before citizens. Can the minister explain why he's doing nothing while Albertans are being punished with absurdly high . . .

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly want to acknowledge again the hardship that so many small businesses have encountered over these last 18 months during the pandemic. That's why this government, Alberta's government, has supported small businesses at a level that no other province has matched. Our Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation continues to meet regularly with small-business owners, and, again, what we're really doing, what we're really focused on is expanding opportunities for every small business in this province by implementing our Alberta economic recovery plan.

Member Loyola: Given that surge pricing is evident in a predominantly industrial and commercial area and given that industrial consumers make up about two-thirds of the total utilities consumed in the province and given that in some of the larger industrial complexes in the province utilities can account for up to 80 per cent of the input costs, can the minister explain to Albertans what specific steps he has taken to regulate costs of utilities? Will he act, or should Albertans expect to pay more this winter because he just doesn't care?

The Speaker: The hon. the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're empathetic for any Albertans that are struggling with the higher cost of electricity, and we would encourage them to contact the Utilities Consumer Advocate and their programs and options available to them. The member was asking what we're going to do to regulate prices. The answer is nothing. The fact is that we have the only open market in electricity, and not only is it working well, but right now we have seen \$5 billion worth of generation announcement since we made that commitment to an energy-only market.

Member Loyola: Thanks for confirming that you'll do absolutely nothing.

Given that the government has removed rules that ensure price stability on utility bills and given that they've ignored repeated calls to reinstate the rate cap and give businesses a break on their utilities and given that this government's mismanagement forced small businesses in my constituency to stop operating as they could not afford the skyrocketing utility prices, can the minister commit to capping the rate of utilities? How many small businesses will he put out of business before he steps up to end these outrageous price spikes?

Mr. Nally: Mr. Speaker, it would appear the hon. member is allowing me to live rent free in his head. That is the only explanation I have for his, quite frankly, embarrassing questions. Regarding a rate cap, there's no such thing as a rate cap. It is a socialist construct designed to hide the true cost of electricity. We prefer to be transparent about the true cost of electricity so Albertans know exactly what they're paying. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Coal Policy Committee Report

Mr. Schmidt: My office has been inundated with thousands of letters from frustrated Albertans in the wake of the provincial coal committee being given another extension. Many writing to me expect that the submissions didn't fit the UCP plans to allow for the proliferation of these devastating mines in some of our most beautiful natural areas. One Albertan wrote, "A preliminary report should be issued to show transparency. Albertans don't trust this government and this move supports that lack of trust and loss of transparency." Will the minister listen to this Albertan and thousands more and release a preliminary report from the coal committee this week?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is well aware we extended the deadline for the Coal Policy Committee to deliver their report until December 31. I do not have a preliminary report or a report. We won't have anything until December 31.

Mr. Schmidt: Given that that's unfortunate and given that another constituent taking issue with the coal committee delaying wrote:

Why is it a hard decision to say "Alberta's Rockies are world class mountains and should remain that way"? Why is it difficult to say in light of a recent study that points to a net negative to Albertans caused by mining in the mountains to say "well then I guess we won't mine there".

Minister, this constituent is right. Albertans have been telling this government for nearly two years to leave our Rockies alone. Will the minister commit today, once and for all, that there will be no new coal mines approved in the Rocky Mountains?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes. It's unfortunate that I don't have a report, as he noted, but that's because of thousands and thousands and thousands of Albertans giving input to the coal committee. The coal committee needed additional time to analyze it and listen to Albertans. I don't know why the NDP consistently say they don't want to listen to Albertans. We do, and that's why we're waiting for the coal report. In the meantime absolutely any coal development is halted on the eastern slopes. Nothing is happening there.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah, given that nothing is happening except a transfer of a bunch of coal leases and given that another constituent was even more suspicious of the government's motives, stating, "I am inclined to believe that the 6 week extension was so that the results would be released as Albertans are distracted by seeing family and celebrating Christmas or ringing in the new year," is the minister trying to bury the coal committee public consultation results behind the Christmas holidays? Will she commit to a full technical briefing and to take questions from the public the day the report is released even if it's New Year's Eve?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's incredible that he would suggest that the delay in the Coal Policy Committee report is based on some sort of conspiracy to develop coal. We've heard over and over again from the coal community that they believe there is a conspiracy to shut it down. The fact is that we're taking the time to listen to Albertans. The Coal Policy Committee is going to have a comprehensive report to us at the end of December. We'll take our time, as every other government in the past has had to do, to look at the recommendations and release the report in due time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Restrictions Exemption Program

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Section 1 of the Charter says that limits to fundamental freedoms must be justified. While public health objectives can justify reasonable limits to Charter freedoms, public health restrictions must satisfy the Oakes test, imposing Charter principles of minimal impairment, rational connection, and proportionality. To the minister: before issuance, are public health restrictions subject to Charter due diligence under the Oakes test to ensure they are Charter compliant?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for that thoughtful questions. The Oakes test is an important part of our constitutional jurisprudence, developed by the Supreme Court of Canada in a 1986 ruling of the same name. I need to be clear that the Oakes test is applied by the judiciary, not politicians. That said, our approach to restrictions has been to balance the safety of Albertans with a minimal possible intervention into Albertans' lives. Policies like the restrictions exemption program are reducing the spread of COVID-19 while allowing Albertans to safely access nonessential services.

Mr. Stephan: Given that the vast majority of children suffer more from COVID restrictions than from COVID itself and given that children, vaccinated or unvaccinated, have never overwhelmed our health care system and given that all children, vaccinated or unvaccinated, already socialize with each other in schools and given that some municipalities are not allowing unvaccinated children to play sports in their facilities, to the minister: will the government act to protect unvaccinated children from discrimination?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

2:30

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. The health and safety of Albertans are paramount for our government. That said, we've already introduced policy that recognizes and treats children differently from adults when it comes to COVID-19 because of the available evidence that COVID has less of an impact on children. As we announced last week, the REP will not apply to children under the age of 12, who are now eligible for vaccine, and youth activities for children aged 12 to 17 are out of scope in the REP. Operators, including municipalities, can introduce additional restrictions according to their local needs, but as with any interventions, they should balance minimizing the spread of COVID-19 and the impact on Albertan youth.

Mr. Stephan: Given that a health worker with a negative rapid test result cannot spread COVID while a vaccinated employee with COVID can and given that high natural antibody protection can be

higher than vaccine protection and given that the Charter protects the right to bodily autonomy, to the minister: can AHS better seek fairness for all using rapid tests and antibodies to respect bodily autonomy of employees while reducing risks of COVID transmission?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Health Services brought in their vaccination policy to make sure we can continue to safely deliver services to Albertan patients. This is ultimately about protecting both patients and health care workers in the system. As I've said many times, vaccines are the single most effective tool in our tool box when it comes to managing COVID-19, but I want to assure the member, this House, and all Albertans that we'll continue to work with AHS to ensure that their approach doesn't impact front-line services and impact Albertan patients.

Provincial Police Force Proposal

Mr. Sabir: Last week during the Premier's speech at the Rural Municipalities of Alberta convention newly elected councillors made it clear that they do not support the minister's proposal for an Alberta provincial police force. Will the minister now finally admit that this proposal for an Alberta police force is misguided and that Albertans do not want it? If he won't, can he tell the House three municipalities that actually support this silly proposal? Please be specific. So far I haven't found even one.

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

Mr. Madu: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. You know what? Rural residents who live in our rural communities deserve the same level of policing that that Member for Calgary-McCall receives in Calgary. I am very happy to continue to consult with municipal leaders to make sure that we have the right policing model for our province.

Mr. Sabir: Given that the RMA president said, and I quote, that the badge, the car colour, all of those things, are a distraction from what we are hearing from the people that I represent, end quote, and given that there are real problems that rural councillors are asking the minister to actually address – and I know that councillors have shared those concerns with the minister – will the minister stop this expensive rebranding exercise and actually get to work to address the priorities of Albertans when it comes to policing? [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice is the only one with the call.

Mr. Madu: You know, Mr. Speaker, again, that Member for Calgary-McCall enjoys the benefit of community policing, but many in our rural communities do not. This report is about looking into ways of making sure that our rural residents have the benefit of community policing. Just this month my department officials will embark on a consultation with municipal leaders, with Indigenous communities, and with law enforcement communities to make sure that they have the right model. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Comments made off the record, by both sides of the House, are making it increasingly difficult for the Speaker to hear the minister. I hope to be able to hear his answer to the next question.

Mr. Sabir: Given that the minister has already admitted that his current proposal risks losing \$200 million in federal support and

given that this causes concern that municipalities will have to shoulder the additional cost of this misguided and silly proposal and given that this government has already downloaded \$286 million in policing costs onto municipalities, forcing them to raise taxes and cut services, and given that the Premier promised on Friday that municipalities won't pay for his ridiculous provincial police force, Minister, if municipalities won't pick up the massive tab for this, who will? All Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Municipal leaders and municipalities across our province have every reason to be concerned about the cost of policing. You know, we, the province and municipalities, pay 70 to 90 per cent of the cost of policing. Recently the RCMP and the federal government entered into an agreement that will see multimillions of dollars in additional costs to municipal leaders. Ontario, Quebec are not dealing with those problems, and Alberta should not.

British Army Training Unit Suffield

Ms Goehring: News surfaced last week that the British Army will be leaving CFB Suffield. They said last week that they won't be mounting a full withdrawal from the base but are restructuring to be lighter and more agile. When that base is fully operational, there is a cycle of thousands of soldiers arriving for training, and a reduction of troop levels will hit the Medicine Hat economy hard. The area has already been negatively impacted by COVID. Will the province support Medicine Hat and its local economy in light of a massive reduction of visitors to the area?

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader has risen.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't know the details of the federal base. I do know that shortly the Minister of Finance will likely get up and supplement some stuff that's happening on the economy, but I do want to assure people from the Brooks-Medicine Hat area that their MLA works hard each and every day for them and that we are going to continue to fix the economy, that was a disaster underneath the NDP. As we've already said, \$7.4 billion just recently going into the economy: that's where our government is focused, and that's where we're going to continue to be focused. While the NDP bet against Albertans, we're betting on them.

Ms Goehring: Given that CFB Suffield is the largest military base in the Commonwealth, employing 400 permanent staff and a thousand temporary staff, and that many of those employees live in Medicine Hat and areas off the base and given that surrounding communities will also feel the impact of that loss, with a crushing hit on their economy that is sure to devastate many businesses already struggling through a global pandemic, has the minister spoken to the mayors of the impacted communities to understand the full impacts of what this means? Will he do so today?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We certainly as a government made some inquiries when we were first made aware of this through the media, and I would suggest that the member opposite do some additional homework, because I believe this issue is being overstated at this point. One thing that Albertans can count

on is that we will position Alberta's economy for increased investment attraction, increased job opportunities, and opportunities for every community, including Medicine Hat.

Ms Goehring: Given that small businesses like the Dayz Off Pub have counted on British soldiers as their customers for years and told the media that whenever you lose something, it hurts and given that other businesses are concerned about what the impact of a potential scale down could mean to them and their local economy, which has been battered by this government's incompetent handling of the pandemic, will the minister explain what the plans are for helping these communities survive this impact to local businesses? Will he present a plan by the end of the week, or should small businesses expect more radio silence on this impending crisis?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, our province and country and the British people have a close bond, and we value our military, and we value their presence in our province, especially in the communities in which they operate. But I can confirm once again what the Minister of Finance said, that there is no iota of truth to this particular story. We will as a government continue to advocate with the federal government because military decisions are those of the federal government. We will continue to advocate on their behalf to make sure that this military training in our province doesn't go anywhere.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Water Management and Allocation

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week I was appointed as the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Environment and Parks for water stewardship. Alberta is very fortunate to have an abundance of clean water sources. These sources are used for everything from irrigation to drinking water to recreational activities. However, while we have the responsibility to meet the demands on our water sources, we must prioritize water safety and sustainability in our province. To the Minister of Environment and Parks: what has our government done to support water allocations and management across the province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Parks.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta has water management plans in place for a number of river basins, including the South Saskatchewan, the Battle, the Wapiti, the Cold Lake-Beaver River, and the Lesser Slave River basins, that direct how we manage our water across the province. Water modelling is used to support our planning and our regulatory process, and in closed basins such as the South Saskatchewan basin water users must improve the efficiency of their water use or get access to additional allocation via the transfer market from other licence holders, because the basin remains closed despite the fearmongering of the Official Opposition.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that Alberta has a robust regulatory system that manages our province's resources and development and given that proposals to change water allocations require a transparent process that weighs any environmental impacts and further given that many Albertans have questions about proposed industrial projects like

coal mines and the processes that they have to go through, once again to the Minister of Environment and Parks: what processes are in place to protect our water from potential contamination or overuse?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have water quality management frameworks in the southern river basins that have been in place for years, and I just recently announced that we'll be doing the same for the North Saskatchewan and the Battle River basins going forward. Very impressed with the amount of work that's taking place by both our nonprofit partners and the department to be able to protect those river basins. Also, just recently I announced that there'll be a selenium working group, between us and the Alberta Energy Regulator, to make sure that we find a path forward for all of our river systems inside the province. Once again I want to assure the House that despite the fearmongering of the NDP the Oldman River basin is not being opened for more water.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again, through you, to the minister. Given that Alberta is a world-class destination for a wide variety of recreational activities in our waterways and given that our province is home to many species of fish and other aquatic wildlife, with some like the bull trout classified as endangered, to the Minister of Environment and Parks: what other actions are being taken by Alberta's government to conserve our waterways and protect the species who call our streams, rivers, and lakes their home?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a lot of work taking place with both bull trout and westslope cutthroat, which are endangered species inside our province. We have a joint working group with the federal government when it comes to westslope cutthroat. Just recently we also announced a significant investment in the hatcheries inside our province, including moving forward with Arctic grayling right here inside Alberta to help restore that species. We continue to work with our partners, our nonprofit partners like Trout Unlimited, and just recently I gave a million dollars a year to Cows and Fish to work closely with our agriculture industry to make sure that we can protect both the agriculture industry and our waterways inside this province, because we like partnerships, unlike the NDP.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds or less we will continue to the remainder of the daily Routine.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of Bill 87, the Electoral Division (Calgary-Bhullar-McCall) Amendment Act, 2021, sponsored by myself.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the point of order at 2:19 has been withdrawn.

As such, Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Written Questions

[The Clerk read the following written question, which had been accepted]

Investment and Growth Fund

- Q5. Mr. Bilous:
How much money has been distributed by the investment and growth fund, as referenced on page 114 of the 2021-22 fiscal plan, since its inception to October 26, 2021, and to whom has that money been distributed?

Alberta Jobs Now Program

- Q4. Mr. Dang asked on behalf of Mr. Bilous that the following question be accepted.
How many businesses have qualified for the Alberta jobs now grant since its inception to October 26, 2021, and what are the names of the businesses that qualified for the grant?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview or someone on his behalf. I'm not sure . . . [interjections] Okay. No, no, no.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-South on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's eagerness to move this on my colleague's behalf, but I suspect I might be able to do a little bit of a more thorough job here.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the history of what has ultimately become the Alberta jobs now grant. Back in the last fiscal year as other provinces rolled out supports to small businesses, provinces that were taking serious action on the pandemic, the Alberta government, particularly this UCP government, took no action. They left dollars on the table, and frankly, Albertans and Alberta businesses suffered. Thankfully, despite the agreements in place Ottawa agreed to shift those dollars to this fiscal year, and now, more than half a year later, we have the Alberta jobs now grant.

I think Albertans deserve to know how many businesses qualified for this grant. Let's be very clear. This Premier and this government are the least trusted in the entire country, so Albertans want to know: who did receive these funds? Was it friends and insiders? Was it donors? Was it businesses that supported PACs, that brought people to support the Premier at the party's AGM just a few weeks ago? Or was everything above board? Mr. Speaker, we don't have the answer to that question, but this government does, and Albertans deserve that answer. It's their money. They want transparency, and they don't want the most secretive government in the country. They want accountability. It's not a big ask, frankly. This is something that the government should have on hand. It's something that the government should be able to produce. It's something that, frankly, I think is exported in a spreadsheet.

I'm hopeful that the minister will stand and report that he'll produce the records as requested, but if he doesn't and if the minister and the government decide to decline to release these records, it begs many questions such as: what are they hiding, and why are they hiding it? Why doesn't the public have the right to know how their funds are being spent? What businesses are raking in cash flow, are getting subsidies from this government that they don't want taxpayers to know about? Mr. Speaker, I think that it's very clear we need to know these questions. We need to have the answers. Frankly, these are questions that we shouldn't even be asking in this place. These are questions that should have been released by this government ahead of time. These are questions that the government should have already put out publicly, and it should be information that is publicly available for all taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, if the government has nothing to hide, then they should produce that now, but I do have to question why they did not produce it before this, before we were forced to debate this in this

Chamber. I hope that every member of this Assembly agrees with me that transparency is paramount. I know that members of this place believe in accountability for taxpayer dollars. I know that the Member for Red Deer-South has even introduced bills to this place that talk about transparency in accounting for how we spend taxpayer dollars. If we don't see this type of accountability, if we don't see this type of transparency, if we're not able to see the businesses that have received these funds, then I think that goes counter to the exact spirit that the United Conservative government purports to bring, this sort of transparency, accountability, and rule of law to this place.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

If we don't see the question answered, if we see this government either come and to try to amend this question or reject this question outright, then I think it will be very clear that this government is trying to hide from Albertans, that this government and this minister are trying to hide the truth of how they're spending the money from Albertans and that they are avoiding the transparency that every other government should expect to be normal.

Accountability is a big deal for us, right? Accountability is a big deal. Again, this isn't a huge request. I hope the minister can understand that. I hope the minister realizes that this is something that they should be keeping track of anyways. It should be consolidated already for review, and if it's not, perhaps the minister needs to review his practices, but certainly it's something that they do need to release for Albertans to know about. Mr. Speaker, I encourage every single member of this Assembly. I encourage all members of this place, especially those who purport to be fiscal conservatives, who purport to be about accountability, who purport to be about trusting and to be trusted with our tax dollars and to want to see government be more responsible with tax dollars and more accountable with tax dollars.

2:50

We need to know which businesses qualified. We need to know whether they were businesses that are friends and donors to this government. We need to know whether they're businesses that supported PACs to bring supporters to the Premier's AGM. We need to know whether everything was above board. We need to know whether there's anything illicit going on and, Mr. Speaker, very well there may not be. It may very well be that there is nothing going on that is underhanded, that there is nothing going on that would be untoward, but we won't know those answers until this government releases that information. We won't be able to have those answers until this government releases that information. Again, frankly, it's very disappointing and it's very upsetting that this government did not just do that upfront, did not just release that information upfront.

It's something that has led to this government receiving awards. It is an example of why this government has received awards from national organizations saying that they are the least transparent government in the entire country, and it's why this government has the lowest trustworthiness rating and, frankly, plummeting popularity for this Premier and all of his cabinet members in this province. Albertans don't trust this government. They don't trust that these ministers are telling the truth. They don't trust that this government is being accountable with their money. They don't trust that this government is doing the right thing for Albertans.

That's why we have to come and ask these questions. That's why we have to use these written questions and motions for returns process to try to get these answers on behalf of Albertans. That's why we have to as the opposition come in and do this debate. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, I think it's disappointing because we could be debating

other business in this place if the government had just been upfront and released that information as part of a regular update.

Instead of accountability the government has made a decision. They've made a decision to hide that information and force us to come and debate it in this place. They've made those choices, and, Mr. Speaker, we know governance is all about choices, right? Governance is all about what types of decisions you make, and the decisions that this government, this minister, and this Premier are making are the type that lead to Albertans thinking they are the least trustworthy government in the entire country or the type that lead to Albertans thinking that this is a government that lacks transparency or the type of decisions that lead to independent journalist organizations saying that the UCP government is the least transparent government in the entire country.

Mr. Speaker, I'm encouraging every single member of this place, particularly MLAs – and I think all of my colleagues in the opposition here will support this motion. We'll see. I particularly encourage the members of the government caucus who believe in fiscal transparency, who believe in fiscal accountability, who believe in making sure that we have the checks and measures in place in terms of our spending to support this motion. I think it's a simple question the minister should be able to answer. It's a simple question the minister should already have the answer to and something that I'm optimistic that the minister will be able to rise and speak to in just a few moments here. I think I'm running a little bit low on time, perhaps to the minister's pleasure.

I think that certainly when we're looking at the mismanagement of the pandemic by this government, when we're looking at the mismanagement of COVID-19 and the opportunities this government has failed Albertans on, where they have left millions of dollars on the table and left supports off the table for small businesses and for Albertans every single day – Mr. Speaker, we're coming in here and we're talking nearly every day at this point about how this government is making life less affordable for Albertans, how this government is making life harder for small businesses in Alberta, making life harder for everyday Albertans. They deserve to know the answers. When they finally do release programs like the Alberta jobs now grant, when they finally do come in with these services, what is happening with their money? What can Albertans expect, which businesses did Albertans support, and, really, what did happen with their money?

I think that's a simple ask. I think it's something that I hope this government will be able to pass without amendments. I think it's something that I hope this government will be able to pass without significant changes and that all members of this Assembly, whether they're in the government caucus or in the opposition caucus, will be able to vote for. I think it is important information that will allow us to report back to our constituents, that will allow us to talk to the businesses across the province who received the funds and work with them to ensure that they're able to survive the rest of the pandemic.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

We are on Written Question 4. I see the hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration has risen, as this is debatable.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to be able to respond to Written Question 4. Pleased. This is a written question that was submitted by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. I'm pleased to hear the submission from our friend the Member for Edmonton-South. He may be surprised. From listening to that submission, he's probably going to be agreeing with me, because I understand, from his submission,

that he's seeking transparency on the funds that were distributed through the program.

The written question that was received on October 26 was requesting the total number and names of each business that has qualified for the Alberta jobs now program since its inception to October 26, when the written question was received. What we hear instead is that the Member for Edmonton-South is asking for transparency on the funds that were distributed under the program, not what Written Question 4 is actually about, which is who qualified.

Now, by way of background the Alberta jobs now program launched, Mr. Speaker, in May of '21 to invest up to \$370 million to help both private corporations as well as nonprofits with job supports to get thousands of Albertans back to work. Now, during the first intake period alone the program received close to \$182 million in applications. Now, that totals about 2,700 applications from employers to get about 14,000 Albertans back to work. Now, after we had received feedback from employers and those who had been involved in that first tranche of the program, after getting their feedback about the criteria that was involved in that first intake period, we then launched the second intake in November, this month, and we continue to see high demand for the program. This is a clear signal that Alberta's economy is ready to reopen, ready to recover, and ready to grow.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the decision to reject the question from the member opposite is twofold. Now, the first reason is that, due to the nature of the program, providing the names of all of the approved businesses under the program will not accurately reflect the number of employers who actually benefitted from the program. We hear, very thoughtfully, from the Member for Edmonton-South. He's asking for transparency in the funds distributed, but the written question is asking for the businesses who were approved. As I said, that's not going to accurately reflect what the Member for Edmonton-South is asking, which is transparency on the funds that were distributed during the program. This is because as employers move through the program some employers may have to withdraw their applications after they've been approved but not received any money for a number of reasons such as changing business and economic conditions or an inability to fill the positions. Now, therefore, employers may disapprove of their information being disclosed when they have yet to receive any funding.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the second reason for the refusal: this information will be made available through the Alberta grants disclosure portal, which is updated quarterly. The portal provides transparent information on grant payments made by the government of Alberta, including those provided under the Alberta jobs now program. This is the information that the Member for Edmonton-South is seeking and is going to be provided on a quarterly basis through that portal. Under the program the employer name, the program name, the payment amount, the payment date are posted on the portal once the employer has received the grant funding. Therefore, the member opposite's request would only duplicate a practice that is already in place.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope the decision to reject the question posed by the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview will receive support from all members in this Chamber.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the chance to add some other thoughts around why we need to accept Question 4. You know, I'm very, very lucky in the sense of my riding,

Edmonton-Decore. One of its nicknames, of course, is the Shopping District. I have three major malls. I have many businesses located along 97th Street, a lot of strip malls located in there as well, with a lot of business owners.

3:00

You know, I have a business owner that stops me in the middle of the grocery store and says to me: “On this jobs now program, where is this money going? Who’s getting it?” Before I even had the option to even think about trying to answer, he said: “Who’s getting it? Walmart?” I was stunned. I was thinking: well, do they even qualify for something like that? Isn’t this about helping our small-business owners and our medium-sized-business owners? There’s already a narrative, and it certainly wasn’t any of my doing to try to put this out there. This has happened all on its own. People don’t trust, potentially, where the money is going.

You know, I was listening to the minister talking about: well, we’re going to be transparent on a quarterly basis. I think you need to be transparent right now because there’s already a distrust out there about where the money is going and who has qualified. I mean, we’ve seen business owners not qualify for provincial supports because they used the wrong web browser when they were applying. We’ve seen business owners that have applied for funding to help and because they didn’t file the paperwork before 5 p.m., they were refused. There’s already a natural distrust about their ability to apply for the jobs now program and to be able to actually get it. Waiting quarterly just fuels that distrust.

You know, I should point out that there was one group of business owners that were excluded from being able to provide. I know my good friend from Edmonton-Whitemud has been very, very clear about this. Child care providers were provided. Now, again here I am standing up and over and over talking about how the language and what’s being said are constantly butting up against each other. I’ve heard about choice. This is a prominent word that the government has been using, providing choice to people. When you couple that with child care providers, they’re small businesses. You’re saying that we want business owners to be able to thrive in this, yet you have excluded them. It doesn’t match up, as usual.

One of the things that I’ve noticed, again, based on what I constantly hear – honestly, actually, ever since I really started to pay attention to politics, obviously not only Alberta but in Canada, I’ve never seen a government go after another level of government like the UCP has gone after the current federal government – at every opportunity, at every chance, at every level – talking about how Alberta is not getting its fair share, yet we see the government consistently late to the party, if they show up at all, leaving federal dollars on the table or waiting forever to actually get them. You would think that the government would just snap that up in a heartbeat.

Getting back to this question, you see that kind of behaviour. You see that essentially it’s a message that you’re putting out there. Small-business owners certainly, just like this one that caught me in the middle of a grocery store, are very, very distrustful. It could just be quickly alleviated by just saying: well, here’s who’s qualified. I’ve never really heard from anybody that said: well, why did so-and-so business get this much money and this business only get this much money? I don’t hear that at all, but they want to know who’s qualifying, because then they can always say: well, how come I didn’t qualify? And then maybe we can work through those kinds of things rather than, again, just waiting, allowing this to fester, allowing this to get into people’s brains that something else is going on.

It certainly doesn’t help the narrative of being, as my friend from Edmonton-South said, the most secretive government in Canada. That’s not our words.

An Hon. Member: Yeah, it is.

Mr. Nielsen: That was brought out by others. Nice try, though.

Mr. Dang: It’s the Canadian Association of Journalists.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you to my friend. The Canadian Association of Journalists. So the narrative was already there.

I remember a famous line, I think. If I recall right, it was from the 29th Legislature, members currently sitting on the government benches, members currently sitting in the government caucus that served during that time. “Well, we’re just here to help.” I heard that coming over and over and over. Well, I’m here to help. I’m actually trying to help this image that’s being portrayed for you.

If we accept these questions, get that list out there, hopefully we can start to change some of this narrative. If it is indeed the case – let’s be honest – it’s a really good way to get me into my seat and shut me up, and I’m sure there are some that would really love to do that. I’m hoping the decision will be made by members here in the Chamber to accept this question. Let’s just provide people the information. I’m sure they will accept it, and if we need to do some tweaking, I know we can work together to make that happen. But just simply denying it is just going to fuel this already growing narrative that something else is going on. Let’s just stop it where it is, and we won’t be hearing these criticisms again. Again, I’m here to help, Mr. Speaker, if the government and members will allow me to.

My hope is that they will accept this. I’d certainly love to hear more about, you know, perhaps why child care providers, including the ones that members feel that Albertans should have a choice with, were excluded. We know there’s an economic benefit to that, being able to provide affordable child care in all levels; it doesn’t matter. Albertans just want the answers. Can I guarantee that they’ll necessarily like it? No, I can never guarantee that. But at least they’ll have them, and we can work on the whys afterwards.

I’m hoping, Mr. Speaker, that we’ll get a chance to accept this, get to see some answers around this, and start to work on this image that nothing seems to happen except behind closed doors.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join the debate?

Seeing none, I am able to ask the question. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview has risen, with five minutes, I believe, to close debate.

3:10

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, yes, on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview I must state how profoundly disappointed the entire opposition is with the inability of the government to produce such simple documents, the unwillingness of the government to produce such simple documents.

Frankly, it appears as though the government does have something to hide, right? When we’re talking about a program that the government, frankly, dilly-dallied on and failed to act on as quickly as they needed to in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we are, of course, still currently experiencing – but certainly near to the beginning of it the federal government offered support, and then this government decided not to take it. Now we see the Alberta jobs now grant. Now we see that the federal government was still willing to give us some of those funds, and the government is unable or unwilling to provide the information that Albertans deserve to know.

It looks like we’ll never know what is happening behind closed doors in this government. That’s not surprising. As has been

mentioned in this place already, the CAJ, the Canadian Association of Journalists, has already declared this government the most secretive government in Canada. It's no surprise that this Premier and this government continue to have the lowest trustworthiness rating out of any government in the entire country. It's no surprise that this Premier's plummeting approval rating continues. Mr. Speaker, it's no surprise because we see them continue to shy away from transparency, run away from accountability when we ask simple questions like this.

Like I said, this is something that shouldn't have to come to this place in a written question. Indeed, it should be something that the government is willing to bring forward and able to bring forward by default. Unfortunately, that's not the situation we find ourselves in. Unfortunately, it appears that this government does have something to hide. Unfortunately, it appears the government does not believe the public has a right to know what is happening behind closed doors, Mr. Speaker. I think that's something that is going to continue to feed mistrust. That's something that's going to continue to feed distrust of this government, and I think that's something that every single member that votes on this will have to think very hard about.

It is something that I think Albertans are watching for, it is something that I think Albertans are concerned about, and it is something that I know that all the Albertans watching at home are going to be disappointed about. Certainly, I'm disappointed, Mr. Speaker. I think my colleagues in the opposition here are disappointed.

The minister got up in this place and basically said that they were unable to provide these documents for a variety of reasons, but the reality, I think, is going to be that this government is unable to provide these documents because they don't want to, because this government doesn't believe it's important to, because this government doesn't believe that that type of transparency and that accountability are important.

I think it's going to be unfortunate if we do see this fail. I think it's going to be unfortunate if we see this question rejected because, Mr. Speaker, we know that time and time again this government had an opportunity to try and improve affordability for Alberta families, to try and improve the lives of Alberta families, to try and support small businesses across the province throughout this pandemic. Instead of seeing that, we saw the government leave dollars on the table. We saw the government delay again and again when dollars were available from other jurisdictions and other levels of government. Instead of actually taking substantive action to improve the livelihoods of Albertans, this government decided to do nothing.

Mr. Speaker, I think Albertans would have preferred if perhaps this government took a do-nothing approach to more of what they did. Instead, now we're here debating the Alberta jobs now grant, the businesses that qualified for the Alberta jobs now grant, and it appears that this government is going to shy away again. They're going to remain secretive. They're going to remain away in the shadows, away from accountability. It's not something new. It's something that we see all the time from this government. Unfortunately, it's something that we're going to have to vote on very shortly here.

I remain hopeful that perhaps some members of the government caucus, perhaps the fiscal conservatives in the government caucus who believe in accountability, who believe in making sure we see transparency across all of government, will support this motion. I guess that remains to be seen, but certainly I think that the least trusted Premier in this country, the least trusted cabinet in this country, the least trusted government – the UCP government is the least trusted in the entire country. They could have done a lot of work today. They could have done a first step to rebuilding that

trust, to rebuilding that faith if they had only decided to vote in favour of this or even perhaps – as the minister said, they could have amended it. They could have changed the wording if they thought that the technical wording was insufficient. Instead, they decided to hide. Instead, they decided to run away.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[Written Question 4 lost]

Motions for Returns

[The Acting Clerk read the following motion for return, which had been accepted]

Premier's Absence

M15. Mr. Dang:

A return showing copies of all correspondence and all other records related to the appointment of the person or persons designated as Acting Premier during the Premier's 2021 summer vacation.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Premier's Absence

M14. Mr. Dang moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence, Outlook calendar entries, and other records held by Executive Council related to the Premier's 2021 summer vacation.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today. It's pretty simple. We now know that the Premier went on vacation and went into hiding over the summer as cases started to skyrocket in the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps it was his best summer ever, but for Albertans who got sick or whose surgeries were cancelled, it was anything but. The Premier was off in Europe, and he left nobody in charge. It was a dereliction of duty. Everybody is entitled to vacation, but when you leave, when you go away, you leave someone in charge. You leave somebody in command, especially when there's a crisis going on in your backyard.

So, Mr. Speaker, we requested that all the e-mails between the Premier's office and the office of the chief medical officer of health regarding hospital and ICU capacity from August 13 to August 30 be released through a freedom of information request. We were shocked with the response. There were no responsive records. How could that possibly be? The Premier stated, both in this place and in the media, on multiple occasions that between August 12 and August 30 he was in daily contact with his staff and officials. Let's say that again. He said that he was in daily contact, but he has provided no such evidence.

Albertans, I think, deserve to see the records. Albertans deserve to know who was in charge and who was steering the ship when thousands of Albertans were getting sick and tens of thousands of Albertans were being told that their surgeries were cancelled. Mr. Speaker, it's no surprise, of course, to Albertans now that the Premier was halfway around the world, operating in a far-flung time zone, while the fourth wave of the pandemic raged on and rose and surged here in Alberta. We think that Albertans deserve to have answers. We think that those who were told that it was going to be the best summer ever and instead got sick, those who were told that it was going to be the best summer ever and were sold hats to that effect – the UCP was actively fund raising against vaccine passports, was actively fund raising against measures that were

required and necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19, to end the fourth wave of the pandemic. Those measures were actively being campaigned against by the UCP government.

I think Albertans now want a simple answer. Who was in charge during that time? Who was making the decisions? Who was sitting at the front of the cabinet table? Mr. Speaker, I think that every single Albertan deserves to know. Every single Albertan deserves to know: what was the government doing, what was the Premier doing, and what records do we have to prove that? Again, the Premier has stated on multiple occasions that he was in daily contact with staff and officials – daily contact – yet they can't produce a single e-mail, right? The government can't produce a single e-mail to corroborate that. I think it's something that Albertans are very concerned about.

We talked already today about how this is the least trustworthy government in the entire country, how this is the most secretive government in the entire country, how this government has continued to hide and shy away from transparency, how this government has failed Albertans in nearly every aspect during the COVID-19 pandemic, in nearly every wave. Mr. Speaker, now we just want to know: who was making the decisions? Now Albertans just want to know: who is responsible for the lack of action during the fourth wave of the pandemic?

3:20

Mr. Speaker, we've talked a little bit about how this government is a do-nothing government. When Albertans ask this government to do less, they don't mean about public health restrictions. They mean about the attacks on health care workers, they mean about the attacks on doctors, they mean about the attacks on nurses in the middle of a pandemic, and they mean about the attacks on education workers in the middle of a pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, we need to know, Albertans need to know, the opposition needs to know, this Assembly needs to know: what was happening in August? What was happening during the Premier's vacation? Who was in charge during the vacation? Who was the Deputy Premier during the vacation? Of course, when a minister of the Crown leaves the province or leaves the country, they must designate an official. There's an official correspondence that must be made to designate an official to act in their place for a variety of legal measures. Albertans need to know who that was. They need to know: in the case of an emergency – I would argue that the fourth wave of a global pandemic is an emergency, was an emergency, continues to be an emergency – who is legally responsible for making those decisions? Who was in charge? We don't know that.

Indeed, the FOIP that returned zero e-mails shows that the Premier was not communicating with his staff, was not communicating with anybody in Executive Council, was not communicating with anybody in the chief medical officer of health's office. If he was working, if he was still steering the ship, if he was still in charge, then we should see calendar entries, we should see other records, we should see correspondence that proves that.

I think everybody in this place, I think every Albertan deserves to know who is in charge of their province at any given time, especially during a pandemic, especially when there's a public health emergency, especially then. Who was in charge? Who was making the decisions? What was going on, and who can be held accountable for the complete failure to protect Albertans' lives and livelihoods during that time?

Mr. Speaker, again, we know that thousands of Albertans got sick, tens of thousands of Albertans had their surgeries cancelled, the ICUs filled up in this province, the health care system was on the brink of collapse, and the Premier was absent. The Premier was missing in action. The Premier was halfway around the world in

Europe, and it appears as though he left nobody in charge. It appears as nobody was responsible for the province at the time, and if that was the case, then Albertans deserve to know.

Accountability will become increasingly important. The government has repeatedly rejected calls for an independent inquiry or a bipartisan committee or a nonpartisan committee to review the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, that's the pattern of this government: to hide away, to shy away, to be secretive, and to run away from accountability.

Mr. Speaker, that's why today I'm asking for a motion for a return to have these records shown to the Assembly, to have these records shown for all the people in Alberta to be able to make that assessment themselves, to determine whether they believe somebody was responsible, somebody was in charge, and somebody was the adult in the room, frankly, during the fourth wave of the pandemic.

It appears, Mr. Speaker, that that was not the case. There was nobody in charge. Nobody was making sure that the pandemic did not surge, which it did. It nearly collapsed the health care system in this province. It would have been a disaster of immeasurable proportions. Instead, we only saw tens of thousands of people have their critical, life-changing, and, in some case, life-saving surgeries cancelled. Instead, we only saw thousands of people getting sick.

Mr. Speaker, that's absolutely shameful behaviour from this government. It's absolutely shameful behaviour from this Premier. Indeed, they should produce the records. They should produce the information that tells us who had the legal authority while he was out of the country, while this government had nobody in charge.

Mr. Speaker, indeed, we've actually written the Auditor General asking for an investigation as to whether somebody had the legal authority to act on behalf of the Premier, and that investigation, I understand, is still under consideration by the Auditor General.

These are the questions that are important as we move forward through this pandemic, these are the questions that are important in regard to transparency and accountability, and, Mr. Speaker, these are questions that will remain important as we continue through the pandemic. Of course, we know right now that we are currently considering the potential for another variant of concern, the omicron variant, and if indeed – heaven forbid – the variant causes another wave of the pandemic, then we will want to know and Albertans will deserve to know who's in charge at that time.

To put those concerns to rest, this government could just fess up and show us the Premier's calendar entries, show us the Premier's records while he was on vacation, tell us why he wasn't taking the pandemic seriously, tell us why he continued to fund raise against life-saving measures, pandemic-stopping measures such as vaccine passports, why they fund raised on the best summer ever hats, and why they left no one in charge during all that time. If indeed the government was working and if indeed the Premier was working, then those records are available today.

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

The Acting Speaker: A point of order has been called.

I see the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Point of Order Repetition

Mr. McIver: Yeah. Under 23(c), "persists in needless repetition or raises matters.". Mr. Speaker, someone wrote for the hon. member a one-minute speech. It was a nice one-minute speech. Now we've heard the same speech delivered five or six times, by my count. All I'm saying is that it's a beautiful one-minute speech. I was hoping that the hon. member's, I'm sure, better command of the English

language than we've witnessed here today could expand from what somebody wrote, the one-minute speech, that we've heard five or six times in a row.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has risen in response.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that the Minister of Municipal Affairs – it changes a lot – wants to defend his record and his government's record on how they have failed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps he's a little bit embarrassed that he doesn't know who was legally responsible as well during the Premier's vacation and absenteeism, but that's certainly not a point of order at this time. I mean, there's only, I think, less than a minute remaining here. We're certainly in the midst of a debate on a very important issue, where this government failed to protect the lives and livelihoods of Albertans, and I think that this is all relevant to ensuring that we are able to have the records shown that are requested under Motion for a Return 14. I'd encourage you to rule that it is a debate.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

I do believe I see the hon. government whip has risen with something new to add. I'm assuming this is for the point of order.

Ms Issik: Sorry. I'm ahead of myself.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Okay. I am prepared to rule on this. It is not a point of order. Sometimes, obviously, the cut and thrust of debate in here can be things that people don't like to hear necessarily, and that can sometimes be a reason for individuals to rise and use a point of order potentially to insert themselves into a debate, especially in a situation like this, as there are no interventions. I will say this. There are only 49 seconds left, so we will not hear – even if the hon. minister was correct, we don't have time for a whole other version of the one-minute debate he alluded to.

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

Debate Continued

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll endeavour to fit one minute into 49 seconds for you.

Mr. Speaker, certainly, we know that this government has failed in many regards. We know that this Premier has failed in many regards, and we know that this Premier was absent for many, many days and left nobody in charge. Today we have the opportunity to correct that. Today we have the opportunity to show Albertans that this government is serious about accountability. We have the opportunity to show Albertans that this government is serious about transparency and indeed that they are trying to reverse the course that they took us on during the fourth wave of this pandemic, that they are trying to reverse the course that they took us on throughout the pandemic and trying to rebuild that trust with Albertans and regain the faith of Albertans. If they are serious about that, then they have the opportunity right now. They can vote in favour of this motion, and I would encourage every single member of this Assembly to do so.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

To debate on this, as it is a debatable motion, I see the hon. government whip has risen.

Ms Issik: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I would advise my colleagues to reject Motion for a Return 14 on the grounds that it's

an attempt to circumvent the FOIP Act. Members of the opposition well know that the Premier's calendar is regularly FOIPed, and that has actually been written about numerous times in the media. If they want the information, they could either read it in the media or submit their own FOIP and pay the relevant expenses.

I urge all members to reject this motion for a return.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. associate minister.

I now also see the Minister of Labour and Immigration has risen.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll make my submissions on this matter short. I just would point out that what we see from the NDP on this issue – and we've had this issue being raised in question period – is the 9 to 5 attitude of the NDP, that, obviously, the Leader of the Opposition, when she was Premier, never made unscheduled calls. The fact of the matter is that when this Premier has gaps in his calendar, he's often communicating, in particular with those of us who are working on the COVID file and have worked on the COVID file. Continuous communications with this Premier, as he always has questions for us: they may not be scheduled, but that's because he's a guy who is relentless in his work ethic. No matter where he is in the world, he continues to work on this file and has done that for the last 20, 21 months. He is always working on the file. He never shuts off. He is always continuously working, whether he's in this building, whether he's in this province, or wherever he is in the world, and what we see from the NDP is, obviously, that that was not the case when they were in government.

3:30

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's clear from the diatribe that we just heard from the now minister of labour why he is now the minister of labour and no longer the Minister of Health, because not only has he refused to accept responsibility for his dereliction of duty during the so-called best summer ever; he continues to stand up and defend the Premier's dereliction of duty as well.

I would like to first off start by addressing some of the comments that have been made by the Executive Council in response to my friend from Edmonton-South's request for returns for these documents. Now, the minister of labour has told us: oh, the Premier makes so many unscheduled calls. Well, table the documents, then. The minister of labour should know full well that it's not just an Outlook calendar that is a FOIPable document, that is a responsive document. Any and all phone records that the Premier generates are also FOIPable and should be FOIPable.

So if the Premier was in constant contact from some undisclosed location, then the minister of labour or the Associate Minister of – I'm sorry; I forget her title.

Ms Issik: Status of Women.

Mr. Schmidt: The Associate Minister of Status of Women should be able to produce the records. If it was, in fact, the case that the minister was making so many phone calls every day with all of the people who had the responsibility of carrying out the public health measures that are designed to protect people from COVID, then produce the records. [interjection]

Now I hear the Minister of Justice raising his voice. I wish that he had raised his voice sometime between the end of June and the end of September, when vaccine passports were in place, because there were 80,000 people who got sick with COVID, and that minister said absolutely nothing.

Mr. Hunter: Calm down. Calm down. Holy smokes.

Mr. Schmidt: I hear the Member for Taber-Warner telling me to calm down. You know what we would like to see, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Dang: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: A point of order has been called. I'm surprised, although I am interested in hearing the hon. Member for Edmonton-South. I would also just like to make a comment with regard to tone in the House. I think one of the main jobs of the Speaker is to ensure that we have healthy, effective debate, and if individuals are outright screaming at . . .

Mr. Yao: Point of privilege.

The Acting Speaker: You cannot call a point of privilege in the middle of a point of order. That's my understanding. So we will deal with the point of order first, and if it is not withdrawn, then we will move to the point of privilege.

Mr. Hunter: Point of order as well.

The Acting Speaker: You cannot call a point of order within a point of order either. What we will do is that we will deal with the point of order, this one. Then we will consider a point of privilege. Then we will consider a point of order.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Point of Order Insulting Language

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Taber-Warner repeatedly said: calm down and be professional. Under 23(j) I believe that is certainly abusive and insulting language of a nature that is likely to create disorder. I appreciate that in this place there are debates that are impassioned and in this place there are debates that are going to create uncomfortableness when members or governments are disputed. But I think that certainly every member in this place has the opportunity to rise and respond to this question and respond to this motion for a return, and if they wish to do so, the appropriate time would be when you call upon them. I wish that he would withdraw, apologize, and refrain from making such comments again.

Thank you.

Mr. Madu: Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely nothing in the comment that would resemble a point of order. The members opposite are always in this House interjecting in the course of members' statements, question period, or you name it. There is absolutely nothing in Standing Order 23 that would suggest that the comment by the member was a point of order. It is a matter of debate, Mr. Speaker, and I urge that you rule as such.

The Acting Speaker: With regard to this one I think that I'm not a hundred per cent sure that I heard the individual who made the statement that is being brought up with regard to a point of order. I will also say that with regard to abusive language I think what we can do on this one is that we can just call the room a wash, and the hon. member – no. We need to deal with a point of privilege first should it be something that is being put forward. I am not seeing a point of privilege.

Mr. Shandro: Point of order. Or are you speaking to the point of privilege?

Mr. Yao: I'm wondering if I can have some time to just organize my thoughts.

The Acting Speaker: I don't have a problem with that. I think first, though, I have to give the opportunity to . . .

Mr. Shandro: Sure. Absolutely.

The Acting Speaker: . . . the hon. Member for . . .

Mr. Shandro: He's going to be speaking to the same one I was going to.

The Acting Speaker: Taber-Warner has the call, hon. member.

Mr. Hunter: Actually, I'm going to defer to the hon. member for this point of order.

The Acting Speaker: I would consider that point of order dealt with. It sounds like we have another point of order. The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Point of Order Insulting Language

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising on 23(j). We heard the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud refer to a member on this side by saying: you are such an asshole. So I would ask that that member be . . .

Mr. Madu: Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Shandro: No. I think it was Edmonton-Whitemud who used that language.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, in response, I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South has the call.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There certainly seems to be some commentary on the side here, but I did not hear such a comment. If you did, I would be happy to speak to that, but I think that, certainly, you've already ruled on the issue of decorum in the last point of order, and I'd encourage us to move on and continue with debate.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I will state right now that I did not hear the comment as proposed, as to the wording with regard to the offensive language, that I will not repeat for the purposes of my decision. I will however put it out there that if there was a member over there on this side who made a statement as alleged, I would expect that they would get up and apologize. There is not anyone doing that. Again, I did not hear it, so I have to expect that perhaps it may have just been something that was misheard by the hon. minister.

At this stage I am looking for anyone looking to join debate now. I see . . . [interjection] Sorry. He has seven and a half minutes remaining. As we know, under these debates any member can speak and will have 10 minutes, and of course the hon. mover will have more if they choose to close debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the call.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate being able to continue my speech and being able to continue to urge all of my colleagues to vote in favour of this motion.

As we've seen, the issue of who was in charge and what they were doing while the Premier was apparently away is one that is incredibly important to the people of Alberta. As I was saying before we started dealing with points of order, 80,000 people, give or take, contracted COVID after the government declared that Alberta was open for good and that we're in the middle of the best summer ever, and 800 people have died. More than that, we know that there are a few hundred people right now in hospitals fighting for their lives and about 100 people in ICU who are hanging on by a very thin thread. We continue to see about 400 people get sick with COVID every day and that the current fatality rates – that's four people every day who are getting a death sentence. The very least that this government could do is to be completely open and transparent about where the Premier was and what exactly he did to keep his hand on the wheel while people were getting sick and dying in record numbers.

3:40

I'm sorry. I think the response from the Associate Minister of Status of Women will do nothing but inflame the already existing tensions in this province, when she tells us to go to FOIP and pay the associated costs of this. We know the costs that often come back from the FOIP office. They say: oh, well, we couldn't possibly conduct this search without requiring a certain number of people, that will cost thousands and thousands of dollars. They throw these huge numbers out there to dissuade people from pursuing their FOIP requests. I don't know why the Associate Minister of Status of Women is so intent on making people pay a financial penalty when the people of Alberta have already paid significantly with the cost to their health and the cost to their lives for this Premier's best summer ever. Why add insult to that injury and run us through the FOIP wringer? What is the associate minister and every one of her colleagues on Executive Council afraid of?

We already know the outcome of this government's failures to provide leadership and enact public health measures that actually work to protect people from getting sick and dying. The only thing that's at stake here is accountability. I think the people of Alberta deserve to know where the Premier was and what he was doing. Forgive me for not being able to take the minister of labour's word for it that he was always on the phone and working so hard. I think most Albertans would agree with me that the minister of labour doesn't have a whole lot of credibility anymore, and they're not inclined to take his word for it about anything. In fact, the fact that nobody else on Executive Council was even able to stand up and clearly, at any time, tell anybody who was clearly in charge and what they were doing to protect people from COVID-19 is a blow to all of their credibility. So nobody should trust any one of them when they stand up here in the Legislature or in front of a microphone saying that the Premier is working so hard, in constant contact, doing his best to protect people from COVID-19. Nobody believes that. Nobody believes it from any of them.

In fact, their own members of caucus don't have trust in this Premier or many of the members of Executive Council. In fact, one member of Executive Council doesn't even have trust in their own Premier. We saw a letter questioning the Premier's leadership cosigned by the Maskwacis-Wetaskiwin UCP constituency association, which happens to be the riding of the Minister of Indigenous Relations. Even the Minister of Indigenous Relations doesn't have trust in the Premier that he has sworn a duty of solidarity to.

This government has a serious public policy problem and a serious political problem. They could go a long way to fixing both of them by just releasing the records. Don't wait for FOIP. They don't have to wait for FOIP. Don't put anybody through the wringer

of going back and forth over what the reasonable costs are and all of this nonsense. Just release all of the records. Prove that the things that you've been saying about the Premier being in constant contact and working around the clock are actually true. Show the people of Alberta that if you made your best attempt to protect people from getting sick and dying – show the people of Alberta your work. Show them that that's true because the evidence that we see, 80,000 people sick and 800 people dead, certainly strongly suggests that perhaps the Premier could have done more. Perhaps the members of Executive Council could have worked a little bit harder, and it would go a long way to restoring the political problem of being so untrustworthy.

You know, Janet Brown, probably the most respected pollster in Alberta these days, was on record saying that the Premier has approval ratings the lowest they've ever been in the history of this province. Restore trust in the Premier, and release the records.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members looking to join debate on Motion for a Return 14?

Seeing none, I will offer the opportunity for the hon. Member for Edmonton-South to close.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How profoundly disappointing it is to hear from the deputy government whip here with regard to: just use FOIP. Maybe the deputy government whip needs a little bit of a lesson in terms of how the Assembly works. The Assembly writes the laws, indeed, and the Assembly makes those decisions. If a motion for a return was passed by this Assembly, it would actually, in my opinion, and would take some work perhaps by the legal counsel here to determine whether it would, in some cases, supersede even a lot of the legislation that we put in because this Assembly has that power. This is the people's Chamber. We are elected to represent Albertans, and indeed Albertans are the ones who deserve to know where the Premier was. Albertans are the ones who deserve to know what the Premier was doing.

It's not good enough to say "Just FOIP it" because indeed there are records such as phone records that my colleague was mentioning, there are records such as calendar entries, and there are records such as other correspondence made between members of Executive Council and their staff regarding the Premier's absenteeism, regarding the Premier's vacation during the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when tens of thousands of Albertans had their surgeries cancelled, when thousands of Albertans got sick, and this government did nothing. It's not only disappointing; it's actually unexpected, I think, that the deputy government whip, who is an associate minister of the Crown, wouldn't know how this place works, wouldn't know how the legislative process works, wouldn't know how this Chamber works, and wouldn't know the powers of the Legislature. Mr. Speaker, I think that's a little bit of a civics lesson for the associate minister there.

Certainly, we do need to know, and Albertans do deserve to have that accountability. We deserve to have the accountability to know why this Premier was missing. If indeed, like the minister of labour has said, the government was working and the Premier was working, then show us the calendar records. Show Albertans the truth. Show Albertans that what is purported in this place was actually happening.

We have the opportunity to regain that trust. We have the opportunity to go out there and do that work right now. We have the opportunity in this place, through a motion of this Assembly, to compel the government to show that trust, to show that proof, to tell Albertans that indeed the government was working, indeed the

government was not absentee, indeed there was somebody in charge, indeed somebody consciously made the decision that thousands of Albertans should get sick and tens of thousands of Albertans should have their surgeries cancelled. That decision, if indeed what the government is saying was true, indeed then was consciously made by a Premier who was not absent, but Albertans don't believe that. Albertans don't have proof of that.

Instead, Albertans are missing any records that show that anybody was working during the fourth wave of the pandemic. Instead, we have reports that the Premier was away in Europe, halfway around the world, and not a single e-mail record to corroborate that he worked a single day. Not a single correspondence to corroborate that he worked a single day. Okay; so he makes off-the-record phone calls, but nobody sends an e-mail to say, "Call me"? Nobody puts a calendar entry in that says, "This is the time we're going to have a call"? Nobody sends a text message that says, "Call me"? Those are all correspondence that would be covered under this motion. Those are all things this Assembly has the power to compel above and beyond what FOIP may or may not allow under cabinet confidentiality, above and beyond all those things.

Certainly, if this government was serious about accountability, if this government was serious about showing that they consciously made decisions during the fourth wave of the pandemic, then they would be willing to show those documents to us today. They would be willing to pass this motion for a return and show those documents to the Assembly. But instead we see a government in hiding, instead we see the least popular government in the entire country, instead we see the least trustworthy Premier in the entire country, instead we see a government that continues to hide and run away from accountability, instead we see a government that continues to do nothing, and instead we see a province where thousands of people got sick, where tens of thousands of people had their surgeries cancelled, in some cases life-saving surgeries such as cancer surgeries.

3:50

Mr. Speaker, that is profoundly disappointing. It is profoundly disappointing that Albertans will not know what happened, Albertans will not know who was in charge, whose fault this was, and who we will hold accountable when the cards all fall here. Really, this is about accountability. This is about the trust of Albertans and the trust in our democratic systems, the trust in our government, and the trust that in this pandemic somebody was making decisions, somebody was in charge, somebody was doing something. We don't even know whether the Premier remembered to sign away his legal obligations to a Deputy Premier in this place. We have the opportunity to fix that today, but it appears that this government is too scared to do so.

Thank you.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 14 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:51 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

For the motion:

Dang	Pancholi	Schmidt
Irwin	Renaud	Sigurdson, L.
Nielsen		

Against the motion:

Aheer	Issik	Rowswell
Allard	Jones	Sawhney

Armstrong-Homeniuk	Lovely	Shandro
Ellis	Luan	Sigurdson, R.J.
Getson	Madu	Smith
Glubish	McIver	Stephan
Gotfried	Neudorf	Toor
Guthrie	Nixon, Jeremy	van Dijken
Hanson	Orr	Williams
Hunter	Reid	

Totals:	For – 7	Against – 29
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[Motion for a Return 14 lost]

The Acting Speaker: I believe I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has risen. It's yours.

Chief Medical Officer of Health and Minister of Health Correspondence

M16. Mr. Dang moved on behalf of Mr. Shepherd that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence and briefing materials provided by the office of the chief medical officer of health to the office of the Minister of Health between July 1, 2021, and August 31, 2021.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think this is a pretty simple request because this is something that should already exist, right? These are briefing materials that were provided to the office of the Minister of Health. We already know that the Premier was absent and went on a European vacation between August 12 and August 30, and that was, coincidentally, the exact time period that cases were skyrocketing in Alberta. But during that same time period there was no action from this government. As we've talked about already, that was when the government, the UCP government, committed to their best summer ever branding. Instead of getting their best summer ever, Albertans got sick, they had their surgeries cancelled, and the Armed Forces were called in to help support our health care system. We FOIPed the Premier's office, and during that time period there were no e-mails between the chief medical officer of health and the Premier's office related to the crisis that was about to happen in our ICUs in our hospitals. Of course, again, that's despite the claim that the Premier was in daily contact with senior officials.

4:10

We saw the results. We saw what happened. We saw how many people got sick. We saw how many surgeries were cancelled. We saw our health care system on the brink of collapse. Now, I think Albertans deserve to know. Albertans deserve to know: did the Minister of Health at the time know how bad it was about to get? Did the Minister of Health know that ICUs were about to be overrun? Did the Minister of Health know that Albertans were getting sick and that they were going to have their surgeries cancelled, in many cases life-saving surgeries such as cancer surgeries? Did the Minister of Health know that this was a dire situation, that this was a situation where we would see, for the first time, really, Mr. Speaker, the near complete collapse of our health care system, that resulted in the need to call the federal government in to give military support to Alberta hospitals, to Alberta ICUs?

Did the Minister of Health know this? If he did, Mr. Speaker, then he would have been briefed on it, we assume, and there would be records of those briefings, there would be records of that correspondence, there would be records of those materials between the CMOH's office and the Minister of Health's office. I think in the interest of accountability, in the interest of transparency, in the

interest of ensuring that Albertans are able to hold this government to account, in the interest of transparency, we need to know: was the Minister of Health briefed on the situation that was unfolding in real time before the rest of us, or was the Minister of Health on vacation? Was he also an absentee? Was he also abdicating his responsibilities?

Mr. Speaker, we know that this is the least trusted Premier in the entire country, we know that this is the least trusted government in the entire country, and we know that it's in large part because we've seen time and time again this government fail to be transparent with Albertans on COVID-19. Throughout this entire pandemic Albertans have wanted answers, Albertans have wanted to know what was going on, Albertans have wanted to know who was in charge. If indeed the Health minister was aware of the situation, if indeed the Health minister was aware of what was about to happen to our hospitals, about to happen to our health care system, if the Health minister was aware that our health system was in serious risk of total collapse, then Albertans deserve to know when he knew that and when those briefings occurred and what was in those briefings.

It's very clear to the opposition and I think it's very clear to Albertans as well that this was a preventable fourth wave, that the fourth wave of COVID-19 was preventable. If the UCP government had not fund raised against vaccine passports, if the UCP had not sold Best Summer Ever hats, if the UCP had taken public health measures seriously and taken the pandemic seriously, then perhaps we could have abated. Perhaps we could have lessened the surge of the fourth wave of COVID-19. Perhaps our health care system would not have been stretched to such extremes. Perhaps tens of thousands of Albertans, some of whom had critical surgeries cancelled, some of which would have saved their lives – those Albertans today: perhaps they would have a few more years. Perhaps they would be able to go on and have received that treatment, that life-saving treatment.

We know that didn't happen. We know that instead this government left the province to fend for itself. This government disappeared. Now we're asking, my colleague is asking and I on his behalf, of course, am asking: who knew and when did they know? We need to see the records, we need to see the briefing notes, we need to see the correspondence, and we need to understand why the Minister of Health – if he was not briefed on the severity of the situation between July 1 and August 31, why that was the case, because it was becoming increasingly apparent to every single Albertan, other than the ones sitting in the government benches, that the fourth wave of COVID-19 was upon us, that we were about to enter a situation where people would have life-saving surgeries cancelled, that we were about to enter a situation where tens of thousands of people would have their surgeries cancelled, where thousands of people were going to get sick. We were about to enter a situation where so many Albertans were going to have to suffer needlessly, and the government did nothing.

We deserve to know. Albertans deserve to know. Who was responsible, who knew what was going to happen, and was the Health minister briefed properly about that procedure? Was the Health minister briefed properly about what was going on? Was the Health minister briefed at all by the CMOH between July 1, 2021, and August 31, 2021? If that is the case, if the Health minister legitimately had no idea the fourth wave of COVID-19 was coming, if the Health minister legitimately had no idea that there was an impending crisis in our ICUs and our hospitals, then Albertans also deserve to know that. Albertans deserve to know what information was available to this government when they made the decisions they did, when they made the conscious choices they did or indeed the lack of choices, because it appeared as though the government

was absentee, Mr. Speaker. Albertans deserve to know and to know who they must hold to account because Albertans want answers.

It's become increasingly clear throughout this debate, it's become increasingly clear throughout this afternoon that this government is not interested in that accountability. This government is not interested in introspection. This government is not interested in letting Albertans ask questions or indeed this opposition ask questions. Instead, indeed, it appears as though this government is more interested in hiding away and hiding the facts about what happened this summer, during the so-called best summer ever. It's profoundly disappointing, what we've seen so far.

I hope that we can move forward and understand what happened in those months because those were crucial months. Those were crucial months because those were the opportunities where we could have implemented new public health measures. Those were the opportunities where we could have implemented things like vaccine passports instead of fundraising against them. Those were the opportunities where we could have implemented more public health measures instead of campaigning against them. Those are the opportunities where instead of selling Best Summer Ever hats, we could have started having conversations with Albertans about how important it was to protect our critical care capacity and protect our ICU capacity.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, we saw a government do nothing, and now we want to know: was the Minister of Health aware of this? Was the Minister of Health aware of the dire situation in our hospitals? Was the Minister of Health aware of what was about to happen? Was the Minister of Health aware of how many people would suffer this fall, through the fourth wave of COVID-19? Was the Minister of Health aware of how many people would have their life-saving surgeries cancelled? Was the Minister of Health aware of how many people would be sleeping in ICU beds? Was the Minister of Health aware that we would be calling in the federal military to provide assistance to Alberta Health Services? Was the Minister of Health aware that anything was happening during the fourth wave of COVID-19?

Mr. Speaker, I expect what we'll see in a few moments here is somebody from the government bench rise and say: "Certainly, we're not going to release those documents. You have no right to know. Albertans don't deserve to know." I think that remains to be seen. I could be surprised. I could be wrong. I would be pleasantly surprised. I think Albertans want to know: who left them in the dark? Why were they left out in the cold during this government's so-called best summer ever? Why was nobody looking out for them during this so-called best summer ever while the fourth wave of COVID-19 surged, while so many people got sick and, instead, we saw this government on vacation halfway around the world?

Today, Mr. Speaker, we have the opportunity to fix that. We have the opportunity to hold somebody to account. We have the opportunity to look at what actually happened this summer, and this government, I hope, will support that request.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

As is often the case, the opportunity for back and forth is usually refreshing with regard to debate. I see the hon. Associate Minister of Status of Women.

Ms Issik: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to speak to Motion for a Return 16, that's been moved by the Member for Edmonton-South on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-City Centre. The motion is as follows:

that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence and briefing materials provided by the

office of the chief medical officer of health to the office of the Minister of Health between July 1 . . . and August 31, 2021.

That's for the value of our television audience today.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we've been committed to providing frequent, transparent communication to Albertans because that's what's required in a crisis. From the beginning of the pandemic Alberta Health and the chief medical officer of health have provided regular, timely updates of valuable information to Albertans.

4:20

This information has been communicated in several different ways to ensure we were able to reach as many people as possible. In-person media briefings started on March 5, 2020, and continue till today to not only share pertinent information but to provide members of the media opportunities to ask questions of Dr. Hinshaw, the Premier, the Minister of Health, the president of AHS, or whoever else may be in attendance. These briefings are held as often as required, depending on the COVID-19 situation in the province. At times, especially during the first months and early waves, they happened five days a week. To date there have been more than 250 briefings on COVID-19 in Alberta – 250, Mr. Speaker – which works out to an average of one every two and a half days since March 5, 2020, yet the members across seem to imply that we haven't provided Albertans with any information.

In addition to the briefing . . . [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, I just want to mention that if there are members who do want to have discussions, there are, of course, lounges to the side. Of course, the hon. member with the call: I'm having a little bit of difficulty hearing some of her words. What I'm asking for is obviously to take that into account.

If the hon. Associate Minister of Status of Women could please continue, there are about seven and a half remaining.

Ms Issik: In addition to the briefings, we post reminders and updates on Twitter every day and our new numbers every weekday, including new cases, positivity rate, hospitalizations, and deaths, and link to the full set of data available on alberta.ca. We disclose the most comprehensive, up-to-date information in Canada on that website, including detailed information on current and historical case counts, hospital capacity, characteristics, severe outcomes, lab testing, vaccination rates, and public health measures. I think that sharing this information with Albertans is vital during this pandemic and this public health crisis. It's fantastic to see that the Ministry of Health has so much information available to help Albertans protect themselves and each other through the pandemic.

The chief medical officer of health and other Alberta Health officials have also held various telephone town halls throughout the pandemic in order to address various topics and to reach out to specific populations, including the rural media, ethnic media, faith leaders, businesses, chambers of commerce, and others. These town halls always dedicate a significant amount of time to Q and A so attendees can directly ask officials their most pressing questions. Many of these have been held right when the topic was hot, right when people needed to know, just as things have been changing. Our town halls that have been held have been very, very helpful to our public.

You know, Mr. Speaker, we're against this motion for a return because the information is already so readily and easily accessible through the interactive health data application on the website. Not only do we provide a wealth of information to the public, but provision of material related to the request would not be subject to the safeguards employed when requests for information are made through the legislative freedom of information and privacy act

process. Furthermore, the broad scope of the request raises the risk of highly sensitive, confidential information being publicly disclosed. That's important, Mr. Speaker. This includes documents subject to cabinet confidentiality, confidential third-party business information, and personally identifying health information.

This request seems even more unreasonable for all of those reasons plus the enormous pressure on the Ministry of Health as they work tirelessly to address COVID-19. I'm sure members opposite would agree that the ministry's time could be much better spent working on Alberta's pandemic response than responding to this request, and I strongly urge all members of the Assembly to vote against this because, as I said, it would be a very poor use of government resources given that this information is publicly available.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. associate minister.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has risen.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Motion for a Return 16. That was quite a response from the government whip. Despite, I believe, the government whip having read the wording of the motion for a return into the record at the beginning of her comments, her comments that followed afterwards did not seem to reflect that she actually understood what was being requested through this motion for a return. Specifically, the information that's being requested through this motion for a return is copies of all correspondence and briefing materials provided by the office of the chief medical officer of health to the Minister of Health between July 1 and August 31, 2021, not the stats that are publicly available on the website. I note that the government whip failed to mention that although there were many daily briefings that were provided by the chief medical officer of health, during the time period in question those daily updates were not happening.

Really, the information that is being sought through this motion for a return is: what advice and recommendations and briefings were being provided to the Minister of Health? Throughout this pandemic this government has made it very clear, the chief medical officer of health has made it very clear that it is the government making decisions, that it is the government who's making decisions based sometimes on the advice or the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health but sometimes based on their own political fortunes and what they care about and what they don't care about and who they're worried about upsetting and who they want to keep happy. That's how they're making decisions. The chief medical officer of health has said clearly that she provides the recommendations and it's the government – the Minister of Health, the Premier, the cabinet – who makes the decisions.

This motion for a return is an effort to provide some transparency, much-needed transparency and accountability, on what those recommendations were from the chief medical officer of health, during this critical period of time, to the Minister of Health, because the Premier has gone on record to say that he didn't get any advice, apparently, from the chief medical officer of health during the critical time period leading up to and in the beginning of the fourth wave. He has said that if he had received that information, he would have taken action. He would have called together a COVID cabinet committee meeting and would have taken advice, which implies, of course, that no information was given to him. Now, of course, the records that we have seen to date certainly suggest that the Premier did absolutely nothing during that period of time. Not only did he take no action on COVID, but we actually don't have any proof that he did anything of any kind during that period of time.

Just for reference, Mr. Speaker, let's be clear about what was happening during the time period in question here, that is the focus of this motion for a return. On August 11, when the Premier went away and disappeared on vacation for multiple weeks – and let's be clear. The Premier went away, but it was also complete silence from the entire cabinet, including the Minister of Health, from whom we are asking for records today. On August 11, on that date, there were 501 new COVID cases and 138 Albertans in hospital due to COVID. Two weeks later, August 25: daily cases had more than doubled, to 1,076, and hospitalizations had more than doubled, to 284. This is during the time period of this request. This was happening during the time period: COVID numbers were going through the roof, cases were going through the roof, hospitalizations were going through the roof.

I don't know if I need to set out – I know this government doesn't want to talk about what happened in September and October of this year, in the fourth wave, that was completely preventable and predictable, where they not only dropped the ball; they went on vacation. During that period of time – many, many Albertans will not be able to forget that. I understand that this government doesn't want to provide transparency about what took place then because the answer is probably pretty stark: nothing. We saw the proof of that. We saw the proof of that with ICU rates going through the roof, with our health care system on the brink of collapse, with 15,000 surgeries delayed. They're still being delayed. We're still not caught up. We still have – 77, I believe, is the number today in ICU. We still had seven more Albertans die in the last 24 hours from COVID. We're not even through this fourth wave yet, and I understand that this government doesn't want to talk about it because then they'd have to take responsibility.

The question that is before this House, which we've already heard from the government whip that she's not willing to accept – and I'm sure her members: well, she's the whip; they'll follow their whip and probably will vote in alignment – what advice was given by the chief medical officer of health to the Minister of Health during this period of time?

We know there was a lot going on. There was a lot going on in our hospitals. There was a lot going on with Albertans. We also know that this is the same period of time where the government was planning on, had announced that they were going to be lifting all testing and tracing and isolation requirements. This is also the time when there were daily protests, at the Legislature and in Calgary, of Albertans saying: "It's too soon. You can't do this. We're going to see the absolute spread of COVID, and it's too soon." It was Albertans. Every Albertan – I went down. I know that a number of my colleagues went down and talked to some of the folks who were there, who were deeply concerned, many Alberta parents saying: "My kids are going back to school in two weeks, and we're lifting contacting and tracing and isolation requirements. It doesn't make sense."

Eventually, the chief medical officer of health had to backpedal a little bit, not completely, because contact tracing, despite what we hear in this House today, did not resume in schools in September. It was not an easy thing for schools to manage, and we know that first-hand, because what happened near my house – I know that I'm married to an assistant principal who had to deal with that. I heard from school principals in my area and across the province talking about it. Oh, yeah. You know what? They were doing the contact tracing in September.

4:30

There were things happening. There was information that the chief medical officer of health had to have had and had to have been providing advice on to the Minister of Health. Now, the question is:

if the Premier is saying that he did not receive any briefings saying that action was required, was it the Minister of Health who didn't pass that information on to the Premier? Was the Minister of Health also on vacation? We still don't have any answers to that, Mr. Speaker.

The disdain and the shock that this government has that Albertans still have legitimate questions about what happened this summer because it's inconvenient and uncomfortable for them to have to face the reality that their inaction, all of their inaction – let's be clear. We focus on the Premier's schedule, but I did not hear, Albertans did not hear one single cabinet minister, including the Minister of Health at the time, stand up and say anything about what was happening in our province. Every day Albertans were protesting on the steps of the Legislature because they could see it was happening, doctors were speaking out, but silence, utter silence, from this government.

I know they don't want to be held accountable. It's been their calling card their entire term as government: no accountability, no responsibility, no transparency. Well, this process is about trying to find some transparency, trying to hold some of the members accountable, and I think all of the members of this Assembly, particularly the government members, should have an interest in that, because otherwise Albertans are going to hold you all accountable, which they should, and they're going to say: you are deliberately hiding information from us, information about our health, about our livelihoods, about our family members, about our businesses, about our kids going back to school.

You had advice and recommendations. You had to have. The Minister of Health had to have been receiving information, not just what was posted on the website but actual recommendations and briefings, because decisions were both being made and deliberately not being made during the period of time in question. So the purpose of this motion for a return is to provide some answers to Albertans. Why wasn't information given from the Minister of Health's office to the Premier's office? Who really wears this? I mean, at this point the silence and the complicity of all of the members suggests you all wear it, and the refusal even now to break ranks speaks volumes. It speaks volumes about hanging onto power and clinging to those people and that doing what you're told is more important than answering to your constituents.

I urge all the members of this Assembly to, for once – I know what will happen on our side of the House, because we've been seeking on behalf of Albertans transparency and accountability for this government's actions and inactions during the fourth wave of this pandemic from day one, and we will continue to do that. I urge the members opposite to actually stand up for your constituents and ask the same questions and demand the same answers from your colleagues. What information did the Minister of Health receive from the chief medical officer of health during the best summer ever, that turned out to be the worst summer ever and resulted in the worst fall ever for our health care system, for Albertans, for businesses, for kids, for schools? I think it is imperative that the least you can do is provide that information.

I note, Mr. Speaker, that members on the opposite side are not making eye contact. They're pretty reluctant. Not surprising. I continue to think that there are tools in this Legislature which we can use for transparency, but it's at the government's political will to use them.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join? I see the hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I obviously support the submissions made by the government whip for members of this

Assembly to reject this question, and the reason is very simple. From the beginning of the imposition of the public state of health emergency as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic the NDP have sought to politicize the government response to the pandemic. They have sought from day one to use this as an opportunity to divide Albertans at a time that all of us should be coming together in the interest of our province and our people. This is another attempt by the NDP, you know, to play petty politics with the COVID response, something no other opposition party in this country or around the world has done. It is only in Alberta. It is only the Alberta NDP that have sought to use this as a wedge amongst our people.

This government will continue to be focused on keeping Albertans safe and working with the chief medical officer of health, the president of Alberta Health Services, and the Department of Health to ensure that the men and women, our front-line health care workers, who are sacrificing every single day to respond to this pandemic, have got the resources and the time they need. What are the NDP looking for? We've had debate before the floor of this Assembly on this particular issue. We've had the Minister of Health, the Premier, the chief medical officer of health, the president of Alberta Health Services having constantly to provide daily briefings, weekly briefings, monthly briefings on this particular issue.

You know, I absolutely reject this extent of partisan politics on the part of the NDP. You sit here; you listen to them, Mr. Speaker. You would think – you would think – that at a time of great adversity for our province and our people, that for once in the life of this COVID response they would really sit down and figure out a way to work with us so that we can deal with the issues that Albertans care deeply and mostly about and not partisan... [interjection] I can hear the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar heckling. I can hear that.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister, but I do just have to remind this whole House that, of course, everybody is used to and sometimes even loves a good heckle, but when it interferes with the ability of the Speaker to hear the debate, then it can sometimes become an issue.

With that, I would just offer the hon. Minister of Justice the floor with another six and 45.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The point I am trying to make is that for much of 2020 the members opposite have sought to use COVID as a political wedge. They are the only opposition political party in this country that has relied on COVID for all of their fundraising. They sit down there and accuse members opposite of using COVID to raise money whereas the opposite is the case. We as government have been focused on responding to the pandemic while they have been concerned about their fundraising efforts, and that is exactly what they have done throughout this pandemic. Two things that they have done: used the pandemic to raise money and, two, come here to, you know, use the pandemic as a political wedge. [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, I have to remind the House just one more time that the only person with the floor – and there are opportunities for every member in this House, should they so choose, to speak on this issue, so your opportunity will be there.

I think that, with that, the hon. Minister of Justice, with about five and a half remaining.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Madu: Again, Mr. Speaker, I am not surprised that the member opposite, in particular the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar,

wouldn't want to hear this, would want to sit down there and heckle, but the truth of the matter is that there are two things that the members opposite have done throughout this pandemic: raise money and, you know, use the virus as a political wedge to divide Albertans. Yet they have the audacity to sit down there and accuse the members opposite, that have spent the last 21 months responding to a pandemic, one that we have never seen in our lifetime. It's rich of them.

Mr. Schmidt: Tell us what you've done. What have you done to protect people?

Mr. Madu: The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar . . .

Mr. Hunter: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is called.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Hunter: Under 23(h), (i), and (j). The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said: tell the truth. Mr. Speaker, you have ruled on this in the past, as have other Speakers. I would hope that you would see this as a point of order.

4:40

The Speaker: Is there anyone else that wishes to – the hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that it has become quite a heated debate this afternoon in the Chamber. I didn't hear those comments myself. However, I would suggest that there have been quite a number of rulings in this place. Of course, insinuating somebody is intentionally misleading the Chamber versus asking them to provide information to the Chamber are obviously two different things. It is not the case that a member has insinuated somebody has misled the Chamber in this case. If what was heard is correct – I, again, did not hear it myself – if that was the case, nobody has stated that somebody is misleading the Chamber, and I would suggest in that case that it's a point of debate and that perhaps we can move on as there is only a short time left in this motion for a return.

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to add comments on this point of order?

I am prepared to rule. While I didn't hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar with what he may or may not have said, I do know that "tell the truth" in an off-the-record, off-*Hansard* comment has been ruled upon on numerous occasions. I think members of the 29th Legislature will remember very well Speaker Wanner ruling against the hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley, who may or may not have had a little bit of a habit of saying the same heckle. I expect better from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar if, in fact, that is what he said. At this point in time it's not a point of order; however, if I do hear the member making such allegations, it will be.

I also might just add that I've had the opportunity to have some discussion with the Deputy Chair of Committees, my hon. colleague, and I understand that the decorum perhaps this afternoon hasn't been to the level which is becoming of members. I hope that for the rest of the evening we will be able to have a much better time together.

The hon. Minister of Justice.

Debate Continued

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, again, we sat here and we listened to the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud spew all

kinds of accusations about government response to the pandemic whereas the truth of the matter is that it is those members opposite that have used this pandemic to create division, fear amongst our population, amongst our parents and our children in schools, in our various communities. The members on this side have been focused on making sure that we protect Albertans throughout this pandemic. The idea that at every opportunity that they have, they come before the floor of this Assembly to perform another political theatre should be rejected by all of us. This is the people's Assembly. This is not a movie theatre.

You know, the Premier, the Minister of Health, the chief medical officer of health, and the president and CEO of Alberta Health Services have devoted all of their time throughout this pandemic to provide our front-line health care workers with the resources that they need to better protect themselves but also to do their work of keeping Albertans safe in our various hospitals across this province. Mr. Speaker, the last thing that we need at this point in time in our history, still dealing with this pandemic, is the distraction that the NDP would want us to get involved in. We need to remain focused on the government response to the pandemic, on making sure that we protect our people and communities across this province, and making sure that our front-line health care workers, who have done amazing work, have our united support, not political theatre, not political division, not using this as a political wedge amongst the members of this historic Assembly.

I would urge every member of this Assembly to vote down this return motion because it achieves nothing other than political theatre and political division. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to the motion. Again, we are asking for copies of all correspondence and briefing materials provided by the office of the chief medical officer of health to the office of the Minister of Health between July 1, 2021, and August 31, 2021. There are a number of reasons why I support this motion, and not surprisingly.

You know, we all in this Chamber just spent a few minutes listening to the Minister of Justice go on at length about why this would be a distraction and would divide us and would waste our time. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to point out to all those watching at home that this is what this government does. If they can't answer the question, they reject the premise of the question. If they are unable or unwilling to share honest facts, the truth, what they do is that they just deflect: "Oh, it's going to waste time. Oh, the opposition is trying to divide. In this time of great adversity why won't the opposition work with us instead of asking us really hard questions and asking us for facts?" That's how this government rolls; they're unable to answer the questions that Albertans are asking.

It is not just us, Mr. Speaker. We hear every single day from our constituents. We all read it. We read it in the newspapers, letters to the editor. We read it online. We hear it in e-mails. We hear it in conversations. We hear it daily. People want answers, and this government is not giving the answers. They specifically want answers about what happened this summer.

I don't know about you, Mr. Speaker, but when I saw the Health minister at the time and the Premier stand up with their sign and declare, "Open for Summer; yahoo," I was mortified. I was absolutely mortified at what was happening, that we apparently hadn't learned anything from the previous three waves, that here we were going into summer, and we were literally getting rid of the tools that had actually kept us safe, those being test, trace, and isolate.

Now, thankfully, enough public pressure caused this government to backtrack a little bit, and then there was sustained pressure through the summer. Then, of course, in the fall we saw escalating cases, so again this government had no choice. What Albertans want to know is: what was going on during this time that cases were spreading? It was rampant, because we saw the effects in the fall. What was going on? What was the information that was coming from the chief medical officer of health?

Mr. Speaker, you'll probably know that we did have the chief medical officer of health appear before the PAC committee. Unfortunately, it's a backwards-looking committee, so we can't ask too many things that aren't in the scope of the annual report, but I can tell you that from this government and the government officials that were there, we were not getting a lot of clear information. We were asking really simple questions like: "Is COVID airborne? Yes or no?" Well, you know, it turns out there's a whole continuum.

So, once again, this is us not trying to divide, as the Justice minister would like you to believe. That's incorrect. We are trying to get information. This is the most secretive government in this country and the least trusted Premier in this country. It is our job to ask questions. It is our job to try to get information. This government should be ashamed of what they allowed to happen because of their open for summer ridiculousness, that it allowed a fourth wave, that is just still debilitating to our health care system today, that has caused so much pain and so much injury for Albertans right across this province.

I think that the least they could do is release some information so that we could get answers. Maybe at some point this government will find a little humility, release the information, and say: "You know what? We made a mistake, but we learned because we're not going to do it again, and we're not going to cause another wave. We're going to act a little differently." Instead, no. What you're getting are the things that we heard from the Justice minister, that he'd rather blame everybody else, anybody else, instead of taking responsibility for what they did.

So, Mr. Speaker, for these reasons, I support this motion, because I think it's vitally important that all Albertans, not just the opposition but all Albertans, be aware, understand, know what information came from the chief medical officer of health to this government. Let's see. Shine a light. Transparency: it's important.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. I believe he's rising on a point of privilege.

Privilege Gestures

Mr. Yao: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 15(5) I rose immediately to bring the offence to the attention of the Assembly. I appreciate being given the opportunity to prepare my arguments on this matter.

At approximately 1537 hours today, during a motion for a return, the MLA for Edmonton-Gold Bar looked across at the Member for Taber-Warner, who was facing the opposition, and at that time he made a threatening gesture and yelled in a threatening manner to the Member for Taber-Warner, which I can only interpret as a deliberate attempt to intimidate him.

In *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada* by Maingot it is stated that members are entitled to go about their parliamentary business undisturbed. The assaulting, menacing, or insulting of any member on the floor of the House or while he is coming or going to and from the House, or on account of his behaviour during a proceeding in

Parliament, is a violation of the rights of Parliament. Any attempt by improper means to influence or obstruct a member in his parliamentary work may constitute contempt. What constitutes improper means of interfering with a member's parliamentary work is always a question, depending on the facts of each case. Finally, there is some connection between the material alleged to contain the interference and the parliamentary proceedings.

Erskine May, Parliamentary Practice on page 146 states that "to attempt to intimidate a Member in his parliamentary conduct by threats is also a contempt, cognate to those mentioned above."

House of Commons Procedure and Practice, by O'Brien and Bosc, goes in to the most detail, beginning on page 108 in chapter 3.

Over the years, Members have regularly brought to the attention of the House instances which they believed were attempts to obstruct, impede, interfere, intimidate or molest them, their staffs or individuals who had some business with them or the House. In a technical sense, such actions are considered to be contempts of the House and not breaches of privilege.

It goes on to quote Speaker Bosley from a 1986 ruling.

"If an Hon. Member is impeded or obstructed in the performance of his or her parliamentary duties through threats, intimidation, bribery attempts or other improper behaviour, such a case would fall within the limits of parliamentary privilege. Should an Hon. Member be able to say that something has happened which prevented him or her from performing functions, that he or she has been threatened, intimidated, or in any way unduly influenced, there would be a case for the Chair to consider."

Further, it says:

In order to find a *prima facie* breach of privilege, the Speaker must be satisfied that there is evidence to support the Member's claim that he or she has been impeded in the performance of his or her parliamentary functions and that the matter is directly related to a proceeding in Parliament. In some cases where *prima facie* privilege has not been found, the rulings have focused on whether or not the parliamentary functions of the Member were directly involved. While frequently noting that Members raising such matters have legitimate grievances, Speakers have consistently concluded that Members have not been prevented from carrying out their parliamentary duties.

At page 110:

In circumstances where Members claim to be physically obstructed, impeded, interfered with or intimidated in the performance of their parliamentary functions, the Speaker is apt to find that a *prima facie* breach of privilege has occurred.

Incidents involving physical obstruction – such as traffic barriers, security cordons and union picket lines either impeding Members' access to the Parliamentary Precinct or blocking their free movement . . . as well as occurrences of physical assault or molestation . . .

and on and on.

There are certainly more precedents, but I do want to just indicate that there is no question, in my view, that the gesture made by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was meant to intimidate the Member for Taber-Warner as a result of the discussion that they may have been having. As such, Mr. Speaker, I would ask that you find that there has been such a *prima facie* breach of privilege by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and that we then prepare a motion to refer the matter to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo has moved a point of privilege. While points of privilege are quite rare inside the Chamber and, in particular, more rare to be called during debate, I wanted to just highlight a couple

of things for members pursuant to Standing Order 15 to ensure that all members are comfortable with the Speaker's ruling with respect to the debate being allowed to be proceeded to immediately, where members might be more familiar with the Speaker receiving written notice of an SO 15. Standing Order 15(3): "If the Speaker is of the opinion that the matter may not be fairly dealt with at that time, the Speaker may defer debate on the matter to a time when he or she determines it may be fairly dealt with."

I will provide the opportunity to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who is the point of this point of privilege, or the Opposition House Leader to make a determination if they would like to defer their opportunity to counter the arguments made by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, or, with points of privilege being such a serious matter, there may be other members who were in the Assembly at the time that would also like to provide additional content, as the Member for Taber-Warner, of course, is also part of the subject of such a point of privilege.

Standing Order 15(4):

If the Member whose conduct is called into question is not present, the matter shall be deferred to the next day that the Member is present unless the Speaker rules that, in the circumstances, the matter may be dealt with in the Member's absence.

Obviously, this standing order has been met during today's debate.

A member may always rise on a question of privilege in the Assembly

immediately after the words are uttered or the events occur that give rise to the question, in which case the written notice required under suborder (2) is not required.

This is the standing order that allows us to debate this point of privilege immediately.

The member, as he noted in his remarks, did provide notice immediately following the incident in question and subsequently has raised the remainder of the point of privilege at this point.

(6) The Speaker may allow such debate as he or she thinks appropriate in order to determine whether a *prima facie* case of breach of privilege has taken place and whether the matter is being raised at the earliest opportunity, and if the Speaker so rules, any Member may give notice no later than the conclusion of the next sitting day of a motion to deal with the matter further.

I just want to highlight that all of these provisions have been met. I'll leave it to other members to read the remainder of Standing Order 15 for a refresher.

I'll now provide the Official Opposition – it appears that the Deputy Opposition House Leader is rising to provide some comment as to whether or not they would choose to debate the matter at present or to defer till tomorrow.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this time we'd request time to defer till tomorrow.

The Speaker: The Deputy Opposition House Leader has deferred their opportunity to debate this matter to tomorrow. That will happen at the opening of the House tomorrow morning at 10.

I would like to provide the opportunity to other members to add additional comments, or they may like to defer as well till tomorrow morning at 10. Are there others? Seeing none, there is some provision to provide notice to the Assembly or to the Speaker if you change your mind.

The only comments that I would like to make in addition to the ones that have been made today are that, of course, the Speaker takes these sorts of allegations seriously. I will review *Hansard* overnight so as to be the most prepared for the discussion in the morning, including all of the electronic avenues that I have at my disposal, which include ambient microphones and other things

around the Chamber, to make a determination following the arguments made by the Official Opposition.

Are there others? Seeing none, unfortunately the time for debate of the previous matter has expired.

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose has the call.

Rural Veterinarians

524. Ms Lovely moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to recognize the important work of rural veterinarians and explore ways to increase the number of veterinarians serving rural communities.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are facing a problem that has become critical all over rural Alberta. There is an alarming shortage of large-animal veterinarians, which is putting a huge strain on those in the profession, the producers, and the animals they care about. This is why I am moving Motion 524.

5:00

There are approximately 864 vacant professional veterinary positions in Alberta, with the majority of the shortage in rural Alberta. The vacancy rate for veterinarians is around 17 per cent, which is shockingly high when compared to the provincial rate of 2.6 per cent. The detrimental effect this has on existing vets is leading to increased cases of burnout. According to the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association some of the impacts of the shortages include hours of work being 24/7, 365 days a year; lack of locum availability; complexity of cases; and isolation. It is projected that in 20 years approximately one-third of the current vet workforce will be working and only 15 per cent of veterinary technicians. These figures work against the annual increase in demand of care we will see as it increases 3.5 per cent a year.

A problem compounding the shortage is the rising costs due to the unprecedented rate of inflation. The cost of veterinarian supplies is going up, which is impacting not only the cost to the owners of the clinic; it is making vet care more expensive, which is particularly concerning for large-animal producers, whose market price has not kept pace. The shortage of vets is having an impact in other ways as well. For rural vets, much of their practice is done in the community and on location. Unlike urban clinics, where their clients bring animals to the vet, in rural Alberta vets are very often required to attend their patients on location. The shortage of vets means greater distances travelled and longer days on the road as these professionals travel to see their clients. These factors greatly affect the wellness of the vets and their families, who are under tremendous pressure in areas where there are no locums to provide backup.

While there is a shortage of vets, the availability of spaces at Canadian veterinary schools is not keeping pace. In fact, it is acting as a bottleneck and preventing many young Canadians, including those from rural Alberta, from entering the profession. For example, the number of spaces available each year at the University of Calgary vet school is capped at 50 per year. There are simply just not enough students graduating to keep up with the growing demand. The number of unfunded spaces has remained unchanged since the inception of the Calgary school of veterinary medicine back in 2005.

Compounding the lack of spaces is the fact that not all provinces offer training for prospective vets in their home jurisdictions. For example, British Columbia doesn't have its own veterinary college,

which forces their students to apply and compete for spaces in Alberta and Saskatchewan. This reduces the number of spots available to Alberta students. Without an increased capacity of veterinarian programs, we will see an increase of reliance on external sources to fill these requirements. Internationally trained veterinarians make up 7 to 9 per cent of all professionally registered veterinarians.

Alberta's veterinarians are critical to the health and wellness of so many animals. They provide care to an industry that is pivotal to our economy. We have seen an encouraging growth of female veterinarians compared to previous years, and I hope that this promising trend continues. We have need to better support our Alberta youth, who have greater likelihood of returning to their home communities upon graduation. This is likely the most cost-effective way to address the problem as increasing capacity at UCVM will offset the increase in cost to attract non-Alberta vets to practise in rural communities.

I've discussed many solutions to this problem with a number of stakeholders. Increasing educational capacity with UCVM is one solution. Increasing streams of immigration for accredited veterinarians from abroad and creating bridging programs for them is another solution. Perhaps providing priority admission to attract graduates from rural Alberta and developing retention strategies that we know will result in increasing the number of rural vets could work. Perhaps a preference to male rural Albertans should be considered. Overall, we need to review the admission requirements at UCVM to ensure there is a complementary fit for the selection of students for rural areas. I will continue to advocate that perhaps a preference to male rural Albertans should be considered. Additionally, as a province we must engage with rural municipalities to attract and welcome rural veterinarians.

Mr. Speaker, this lack of veterinarians is causing complications with the vets themselves, families, pets, farm animals, and Albertans that care for them. I encourage everyone to support Motion 524. This support means more support for rural vets and families they serve and protecting our great economy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Camrose has moved Motion Other than Government Motion 524. I see there are a number of members who have risen in the Chamber. We are going to go to the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, and then the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Hanson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise today to speak to Motion 524, especially as it addresses a big concern for rural communities like my own. I've stood in the House many times, as my colleague the hon. Minister of Health will attest to, to discuss medical staff shortages in rural Alberta hospitals. While this is still a very important issue in my riding – and I can assure the minister he's not done with me yet – I would like to transition to a similar problem discussed in this motion, veterinarian shortages in rural communities.

Based on the bit of research I was able to do on this problem, this is not isolated to Alberta and is becoming an increasing issue across Canada, but here in Alberta we have a unique predicament that I believe gets to the root of the issue. Just like with medical professionals, I believe the problem with recruitment and retention in rural communities begins with the education opportunities for our rural students. Back in 2017 the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who was the Minister of Advanced Education, announced that Alberta was withdrawing its long-time support for the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. The WCVM was jointly established by the four western provinces

– Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and B.C. – in 1963. This program is now part of a world-class hub for animal and human health that provides high-quality research, education, and clinical expertise to western Canada.

[Mrs. Allard in the chair]

On October 12, 2017, the NDP's Minister of Advanced Education announced that Alberta would not renew its participation in the WCVM's interprovincial agreement after 2020. While I am all for saving money and keeping money in the pockets of Albertans and Alberta taxpayers, I believe the \$8 million per year that contributed to this program should have been well worth it, and it is a shame that the NDP ended our co-operation in this world-class program.

Mr. Speaker, according to the University of Saskatchewan from 2013 to 2017 97 WCVM-trained veterinarians accepted jobs in Alberta, with 60 per cent of those 97 choosing to practise in mixed-animal or large-animal practices, the two practices that most directly impact rural communities. It is worth stopping for a second to say that I am appreciative of and fully support the program run through the University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. Alberta has so much to offer in education that we bring in many out-of-province and even out-of-country students because of our excellence in postsecondary education. However, the U of C program is currently only open to Alberta residents whereas the University of Saskatchewan was open to students from all of its supporting provinces, of which Alberta used to be one. In a fast-moving, intense practice such as mixed- and large-animal practices, especially in rural communities, where vets can be taking several calls any given day, I believe it was a wrong move by the NDP to cut ties with the U of S program, especially given that we helped build and support that program for over 50 years.

Under the previous agreement with the University of Saskatchewan 78 slots were allocated for students every year: 20 for Alberta, Saskatchewan, and B.C.; 15 for Manitoba; two for Indigenous students; and one for the Northwest Territories. However, there is some slightly good news that has come since the agreement with Alberta and Saskatchewan expired last year. Alberta's former 20 slots were expanded as part of a pilot project in the fall of 2020. However, those slots have a residency requirement open to students from western Canada who meet entrance requirements; in other words, not specifically Alberta students.

Perhaps the biggest drawback is that these slots are no longer subsidized, as the former slots for Alberta students were. The current tuition for each of the 58 subsidized seats is around \$13,277 a year. The tuition rate for the 25 seats that are open to Albertans in western Canada as part of the pilot program in 2020 is not subsidized and is estimated around \$68,277 per year. Madam Speaker, Alberta used to be part of that subsidized group but now is seeing an increase in tuition to attend the program of over \$50,000 thanks to the actions of the former NDP government.

Seeing results and numbers like that, it is no wonder that we are seeing a shortage of veterinarians across Alberta and Canada. My daughter-in-law is a veterinarian here in Alberta. She attended the program at the University of Saskatchewan as a student from Alberta. I've seen first-hand how this program helped Alberta students get into, without breaking the bank, one of the most competitive and highly-sought-after veterinary programs in the country. Again, thanks to the former NDP government for taking that opportunity away from our students. Attracting veterinarians to rural Alberta is hard enough, let alone when the over 300 veterinarian applicants to the U of C program last year are competing for the only 50 spots available. I'm happy to see eager

competition for such a prestigious and much-needed profession, but we need to do more to ensure that we're training enough veterinarians to do the work in Alberta, especially large animal, to meet current and future demand.

5:10

In closing, it's extremely important to ensure that we create enough opportunities for veterinary students here in Alberta and across Canada. Just like with doctors, we need to increase opportunities for rural students who want to practise in rural Alberta, and we need to do more to recruit medical professionals of all expertise and levels, whether for humans or animals, to rural Alberta. I'd like to thank the Member for Camrose for bringing this motion forward and bringing an important and growing issue for rural Albertans to light.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: I recognize the Member for Edmonton-Dcore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the chance to rise this afternoon and to speak to Motion 524 as brought forward by the Member for Camrose. Of course, first, I will thank the member for bringing forward this motion. What a great motion. This is awesome. I like it.

You know, I might surprise a few people here, but a couple of years as a preteen and a few years as a teenager were spent in a rural setting. I used to live in a little town called Warren, just outside of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and my time as a teenager was spent up in a little town called Faro in the Yukon. Having a good vet up in those areas really makes a difference. Whereas I can't necessarily speak to caring and tending for the livestock that feeds us and provides, for instance, the milk that we drink and things like that, it certainly is helpful when your pet, specifically your dog, decides to go and chase a porcupine and ends up with a couple of presents sticking right out of its nose. Thankfully, having a very good vet out in Warren was very, very helpful to have.

I think some of the conversations that I've had in this Chamber – and members that served in the 29th Legislature will probably remember him very well, the former Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright, who was a veterinarian. I had some incredible conversations on that topic with him. We even got into – gosh, it must have been about an hour-long conversation around whether you should declaw a cat or not. Certainly, for folks who have their furniture torn up, they kind of tend to say that maybe you should, and there are some folks on the other side of the conversation that say that you shouldn't. I was very grateful to have that opportunity to have those conversations with him.

With this motion, I kind of feel a little bit the same as when we were talking about creating the Alberta Aviation Council. Some of my I don't want to say, I guess, concerns are: how will the government take this motion and move forward with it? As we've heard from a couple of our speakers already, there is a bit of a shortage of good veterinarians out in rural Alberta. How are we going to get them to move out to those areas or encourage younger veterinarians to practise in those areas? I'm hoping that maybe during the course of this debate we might get the opportunity to hear from someone in the government about what their plans are in order to draw those great individuals in.

When I look at some of the things that the government has brought forward, again, kind of looking at how things tend to collide with what we say, what we've done, and what we're hoping to achieve, the cuts that we've seen in postsecondary education definitely could have an impact on our future veterinarians even

getting into the profession, let alone getting them to move out to rural Alberta to practise and look after our pets.

We've seen decisions around downloading costs to municipal governments. As they struggle to provide the services that they need to their constituents in that area, does that indeed affect a person's decision to move out to rural Alberta if they don't have the services that they need? I mean, let's be honest. We've seen a lot of doctors, for instance, that have been closing practices and moving out of rural Alberta. Whereas we might be able to attract these veterinarians there, do their families have the type of care that they're going to need, and how far are they going to have to go to get that? These are a couple of things that could go against being able to take this motion and really expand on it and grow it.

We've seen some concerning numbers around young Albertans wanting to move away. Again, that kind of ties into a little bit of: are they going to seek to work in the profession of a veterinary? How can we convince them to stay in the province, let alone trying to encourage them and incentivize them to move into rural Alberta to practise? My understanding is – and, you know, if I'm wrong, hopefully, somebody will get a chance to correct me on this – that right now we have just as many vets retiring from the industry as we're currently graduating. With some of these disincentives to get into that field, will that start to topple one way, where we start to lose more veterinarians than we're able to replace with new and incoming ones, again, when we talk about downloaded costs to municipalities, not being able to provide the services, and those disincentives to move into rural Alberta?

We always see sometimes that there's a bit of a pay disparity between, you know, those that practise in urban centres versus those that practise in rural areas. How do we change that? How do we get those individuals to be paid in the same way? I realize, obviously, that living in a large centre, there's the potential for more people bringing in their pets and whatnot.

Again, it's just: what is ultimately the plan that the government can bring forward so that this motion is not just that, a motion that we discussed, you know, for an hour and then ended up doing nothing about? My hope is that perhaps we might hear some information around that. As I said, this is a good motion. I'm more than happy to support it going forward, but it would be great to hear what kinds of plans the government could do to move on this motion so that it's not just something that we discussed for an hour and then nothing happens. There is a definite concern in rural Alberta around good, qualified vets, not only to look after our livestock, which feed the people of Alberta, the people of Canada, and even the world, but we have to look after our mischievous little fur babies that, like I said, stick their noses in the wrong place and maybe get a little unpleasant surprise in return.

I'm certainly going to encourage everybody in this House to support Motion 524, and I definitely look forward to hearing some more, maybe some stories, from others about their practical times.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I'd like to recognize the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

5:20

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm honoured to rise today to speak in favour of Motion 524, which reads, "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to recognize the important work of rural veterinarians and explore ways to increase the number of veterinarians serving rural communities." I want to thank my friend and esteemed colleague the hon. Member for Camrose constituency for bringing this motion to the floor of the Assembly, where I have an opportunity to thank

the veterinary professionals and speak of the importance of veterinary medicine to Alberta, especially to rural Alberta.

Madam Speaker, on November 22, 2021, this Assembly passed private member's Motion 522, as presented by the hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat. The motion read as follows:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly recognize the critical role of agriculture in Alberta's economy and urge the government to take steps to ensure that Alberta's agriculture and agrifood industries are essential components of the economic recovery plan...

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, are you speaking to Motion 524?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Yes.

The Acting Speaker: Okay. Thank you. Carry on. I apologize.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Just a little preamble here.

... in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We cannot speak to the importance of the agriculture sector in Alberta and the economic recovery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic without speaking to the importance of veterinarians and their clinical teams in Alberta.

As a rural MLA agriculture is foundational to my constituency of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville. Farmers and ranchers are the backbone of my constituency, with many family farms being generational. Livestock and animals are critical parts of the lives and livelihoods of these families. Cow-calf production, dairy production, and equine, bovine, poultry, sheep, and beef producers rely on veterinarians to provide ongoing health services for their livestock and their farm animals. Veterinarians are a critical part of keeping the producers in my constituency not only operational, but veterinarians in Alberta are critical to keeping Alberta producers the best in the world. They are instrumental to disease surveillance and management in our agricultural livestock sectors. We will not have economic recovery and growth without sufficient veterinary care.

Madam Speaker, veterinarians are also the cornerstone of cultural events in my constituency. Our agricultural societies host a variety of events throughout the villages, towns, and communities in my constituency and across Alberta. These events frequently include animals such as equine shows and clinics, agriculture seminars and clinics such as calving clinics, and entertainment events such as chuckwagon races and rodeos. These events are important in our communities as they foster tourism and the economic prosperity of our smaller communities. Veterinarians are critical to the success of these events. There is no rodeo, including the Calgary Stampede, no 4-H, no horse event in Alberta without the veterinarian playing an essential role in the care of these animals. We will not have the important cultural, educational, and community connection events in rural Alberta without sufficient veterinary care. Without these events our economic and community recovery will be stalled.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, veterinarians serve an essential role in ensuring that our family pets are taken care of. The COVID-19 pandemic has surged demand for companion animals in Alberta. It is impossible not to know someone who has acquired a new puppy or kitten over the last 18 months. Veterinarians are critical to keeping these animals healthy while ensuring that their owners are educated on nutrition, exercise, oral health, and socialization. We know that our pets are important to us, and we know that veterinary care ensures a healthy animal that will keep families and communities healthy, too. We will not have healthy pets and healthy communities without sufficient veterinary care.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to take this opportunity to thank veterinarians, veterinary technologists, and all veterinary clinical staff for their ongoing service to Alberta's animals and their owners during the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been many challenges such as securing PPE while managing changing protocols at the clinics that have been hard on the veterinary clinic staff, the animals, and their owners. Increased owner demands coupled with shortages of rural veterinarians and veterinary technologists have placed significant pressure on our veterinary professionals. Still these professionals have remained vigilant and committed to treating our animals and assisting the owners through the best and worst of times. Veterinarians and veterinary technologists are health care workers that deserve our thanks. They also need our help.

Mr. Speaker, veterinary medicine contributes over \$1 billion to Alberta's GDP from direct, indirect, and induced impacts. The direct GDP generated from the operation of veterinary practices is estimated to be \$582 million. This is approximately 17 per cent of the GDP contribution of tourism spending in Alberta in 2019 and 13 per cent of the GDP contribution of the crop and animal production industry in 2018. The economic impact of this profession is massive and critical to our economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot afford to leave veterinary professionals to manage the workforce shortages they are currently facing. Alberta has a shortage of veterinary professionals. Over 370 vacancies exist in Alberta today, with a significant portion of these vacancies located in rural Alberta. If we take no action, that number will continue to rise. This will cause a severe economic and health crisis in my constituency and in Alberta overall.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association, the Alberta Veterinary Technologist Association, the rural municipalities, the producer organizations, the postsecondary institutions, the constituents, and the veterinarians along with the Minister of Labour and Immigration and the current Minister of Health for working together to address the shortages in our rural communities.

Solutions are not easy as we face a global shortage of veterinarians, but Alberta-made solutions are necessary. Our rural communities, our industrious veterinary professionals, our Alberta agriculture sectors, and Albertans need to work for solutions, including investment in our postsecondary and animal science programs. Mr. Speaker, veterinarians are critical to our current agriculture sector and to future opportunities in this foundational sector. Veterinarians are critical to the sustainability of our rural communities and our rural way of life.

I am pleased to support this motion and look forward to working to find solutions that will increase the number of rural veterinarians in Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville and in all rural communities in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Motion other than Government Motion 524. The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to rise today in support of private member's Motion 524, which reads, "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to recognize the important work of rural veterinarians and explore ways to increase the number of veterinarians serving rural communities." I would like to thank my friend the Member for Camrose for bringing forth this important motion.

Just last week I had a chance to also speak to private member's Motion 522, that spoke about the importance of and how essential the ag industry is to Alberta's economic recovery. We know a

portion of that or a part of that puzzle is also related to access to veterinary care and veterinary services for our rural economy.

Speaking about veterinarians and animal health is not something that we do very often in this House, Mr. Speaker, but maybe it's something that we should do. You see, in rural Alberta the retention of rural doctors and other labour shortage-related issues tend to be high priorities, and they should be. They're very important, and I've spoken at length on these items in this House. But the labour shortage among veterinarians and other animal health care issues are very real and very important concerns among rural Albertans, especially true in my constituency of Livingstone-Macleod, where we have extensive cattle and livestock industries.

Just like those in urban communities, many of us in rural Alberta do have cats and dogs and other pets living with us – vets can specialize in these animals; in fact, my daughter works for a vet that specializes in lizards and other exotic animals – but unlike those in urban communities, our pets are often more prone to potential diseases and other ailments because of the work they do on the farm or where they spend a lot of time, outdoors.

I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about dogs and cats because I do believe, Mr. Speaker, you'll remember that when we did the intervention training, we did have some lively debate in this House about whether cats or dogs were better. I'm so happy that dogs won out and that we had concurrence in the House. Of course, being from the southwest corner of the province, in addition to those dogs and cats we have on the farm, we also have cattle. We have pigs, horses, and we have other large animals that are top of mind.

The diversity of the animals that rural veterinarians help out with can make the job very challenging and even very stressful. You see, rural veterinarians are often responsible for mixed-animal practices, which means that they must be able to take care of our small animals, our dogs and our cats, our budgies and our lizards, and also large animals like our cattle and our horses and our pigs. With many small rural communities only having one or two veterinarians, it's necessary for the veterinarians to be able to provide care to multiple species of animals. For example, a rural veterinarian could assist with something like my Maltese-poodle cross in the morning because he's got an infection and then that afternoon could be at work in a feedlot, consulting on the nutritional care of the cattle that same day. This means that rural veterinarians are not just important for the well-being of the pets that we love but are essential and very important to the economic well-being and health of the agricultural industry.

5:30

However, having to be prepared to provide care to multiple animals can also add a lot more stress to the veterinarian in their day, which may mean that they need to drive away potential rural veterinarians to urban areas, adding to the problem of rural retention, which is at a crisis level. Because of the vital role that our rural veterinarians play in the ag industry, they are often on call and working evenings and holidays, which is also another deterrent contributing to the rural retention program problem we see.

Another difficulty is the specialized care required in the cattle and the livestock industry. Some of the responsibilities these veterinarians or registered veterinary technologists have within the livestock industry include things like bull soundness exams, semen evaluation, embryo transplants, performing pen checks, necropsies, and nursing care for feedlot animals.

These responsibilities are fundamental for animal welfare, and they are fundamental to keeping our food supply safe and, in turn, require specific education and training. Veterinary education can only be achieved at five accredited postsecondary institutions in Canada, one of which, of course, is the Faculty of Veterinary

Medicine at the University of Calgary. In the past years only 30 students have been admitted to the four-year program each year, making it incredibly competitive. I am pleased that changes were made last year to increase that number to 50. However, these numbers are not enough to counter the increasing demand year after year for veterinarians and the over 370 vet positions currently open in the province. It's expected that over the next 20 years Alberta will need to double the number of veterinarians in order to keep up pace. There are currently 1,886 vets in Alberta, and among those 750 of them are in rural Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I would once again like to thank my colleague from Camrose for bringing forward this motion. With this motion urging the government to explore new ways to increase the number of veterinarians in our rural communities, our government can begin to really delve into the problems plaguing our rural vet retention. Hopefully, this will present tangible solutions to what is now a short- and a long-term problem for our rural communities, and I encourage everyone in this House, whether they are rural or they are urban, to vote in favour of this motion. A strong agricultural industry means a strong Alberta economy, and to have a strong agricultural industry, we truly do need more veterinarians in rural Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Member for Highwood has the call.

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very happy today to speak to private member's Motion 524: "Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to recognize the important work of rural veterinarians and explore ways to increase the number of veterinarians serving rural communities." I think this is an exceptionally important motion, and I'd like to thank the Member for Camrose for bringing this into the House today.

I was born and raised on a family farm just north of Cochrane, and growing up, of course, you recognize that it's not just about cats and dogs. When you're on a farm – I mean, we were a mixed farm: horses, cattle. We had a goat named Billy, strangely enough. With that, you know, we had a little bit of everything. Even at one point – and this is a longer story – we ended up with four peacocks and a ferret and bunch of silkies and Cornish game hens, but I won't go down that road. What we need to talk about is the important work that veterinarians do in our province every single day. I know that we had our family veterinarian that was with us for the bulk of the time that we were on the farm, and though it doesn't happen very often, they do work day and night, nonstop, providing care for our livestock. It's extremely important.

Now, of the 1,886 veterinarians that are currently in the province, about 750 of them, or about 40 per cent, are based in rural Alberta. Now, a further 247 of those veterinarians right now are not practising, and with rural vets not only needing to take care of, like I'd mentioned, small household pets but larger livestock such as cattle and horses, their responsibilities are far more demanding. These rural vets: we referred to them as mixed practice veterinarians, and they work day, night, evening, any time they're needed. They must be on call for emergencies, and these emergencies, like I mentioned, arise at any time.

Now, the result has been that urban veterinary positions, in a lot of ways, become far more appealing for new graduated veterinarians. It's easier for them to set up a practice in an urban centre and be able to have a large client basis and make the money that they need to. Even with that, when you talk about their spouses, they will locate themselves into far, outreaching rural areas, which makes their spouse have a hard time getting a job, which kind of

deters them from moving into these rural areas. These compounding issues continue to and have been continuing to affect the amount of veterinarians getting into rural practices and, of course, will affect the quality of the veterinary services – well, not the quality but the quantity of veterinary services available in rural areas.

Now, the difference between urban and rural mixed practice vets has been exacerbated by the overall shortage, as well, across the province. With only five veterinary medicine programs in Canada, each with a competitive selection process, that creates small classes, there's a small pool of graduates to recruit to replenish the ranks that we're going to need to replace the veterinarians that are retiring. The severe staff shortages that are being experienced across Alberta are a result of these situations, and this has led to certain clinics reducing their hours, and with that the strained, overworked veterinarians themselves are suffering burnout. This not only puts the mental health of the veterinarians at risk but also the physical well-being of the animals as the quality of care continues to diminish.

Now, the issue is not only pressing for ranchers, farmers, or rural Albertans; this is an issue that affects all Albertans. Veterinarians are a critical part of Alberta's world-class agriculture industry, and without a strong veterinary presence in Alberta livestock also cannot get the care that they need, which could have a serious potential to disrupt one of our largest industries here in the province. Increased costs of veterinary care combined with the increasing lack of staff will impact product cost, and this will eventually be passed on to consumers. With costs of groceries skyrocketing and inflation the way it's going right now, Albertans may begin to feel the impacts of these staff shortages even with no immediate connection to the animals. They don't see it, but it will take place.

Attracting veterinarians outside of urban areas is proving to be very difficult. And with many of the graduates, as I mentioned, staying in urban areas, there's going to be an increased focus that we need to put on this. To address this concern, the University of Calgary increased their class size from 30 to 50 graduates in the year of 2020. While this could relieve some strain in the province-wide shortage, the effects of these measures may not be felt in rural Alberta for many years to come.

With growing interest in pet companions in urban areas, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent and dramatic rise in the amount of money spent on domestic animals, urban veterinarians are also seeing an increase in demand. Now, this huge market and potential for success, as I mentioned before, attracts these graduates to stay in urban areas, which is causing this urban-to-rural disparity that we're going to have to address here in the province. Creating an incentive to work in rural Alberta is paramount to protect Alberta's agriculture industry, and interest in veterinarian programs themselves is not the issue. For the University of Calgary's 50 spots there were over 300 applicants. Canadian universities, however, do not have enough capacity to capitalize on this interest, so we need to grow this. As stated earlier, there are only five universities across the country – only five – all with extremely low admission rates.

5:40

Keeping all of these graduates in the province may keep the demand for direct animal care under control; however, these 50 or so graduates may not all end up directly in care of our animals. Following their education, some veterinarians never even practice with animals again. Some end up pursuing a career in biochemical research or disease control. As is the case in dealing with livestock, the potential for zoonotic diseases, diseases which can be spread from animals to humans, is a serious risk. So we've got people moving into that that won't actually help with the current shortages we're seeing. Keeping ongoing research into these areas is, of

course, extremely important for the health of Albertans, making these specialists invaluable in maintaining our food security. However, with the career possibilities available to vets, as I have mentioned, these 50 or so vets rarely make it to rural Alberta.

With dwindling numbers of veterinarians threatening Albertans province-wide, it's important to address this problem now. The demand for veterinarians is expected to peak in 2040, and having trained veterinarians in rural Alberta will be the most important thing we need to do to tend to livestock, protect our food production, and take care of our pets here in the province. Veterinarians play an incredible role in the agriculture and agrifood industries, ensuring Canada's food supply.

Mr. Speaker, I can't speak strongly enough in support of this motion. I hope all my colleagues will support this. Once again thank you to the Member for Camrose for bringing this to the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the Member for Peace River should time allow.

Ms Sigurdson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and talk about this motion that's been brought forward by the MLA for Camrose regarding concerns about rural veterinarians and just not having, certainly, enough in the rural parts of Alberta and just really acknowledging the important work that veterinarians do. My hon. colleague just sort of reminded me of certainly the tragedy that is unfolding in the province next door to us, in B.C., where, you know, many farms are under water and their whole production – they may have been dairy farmers. Just the devastation in those communities. Of course, veterinarians would be on the front lines to care for those animals and try to create a safe environment for them. So thank you to all of those professionals who are helping in that very significant tragedy that's unfolding in the province to the west of us.

My riding is Edmonton-Riverview, and that is in the heart of Edmonton, I would say. The University of Alberta is in my riding, and it does sort of skip over the river, which is kind of extraordinary oftentimes. Those natural barriers of rivers are often used by the folks who decide on how election boundaries happen, but for some reason they decided in the riding that I represent that that boundary of the natural river would not be used. Riverview, of course, is the name, so my riding does straddle the North Saskatchewan River.

Believe it or not, to everyone, my riding has a farm in it. That farm, of course, is the University of Alberta farm, and it is a place where students in agriculture can go to do research, and I've visited it many times. There's all sorts of innovative research that's going on, with cattle, different kinds of fields, gardening, you know, a myriad of things that I don't know all of the details about, but it is kind of a unique thing for an urban politician.

Absolutely, I live here in Edmonton, but I do have a farm, and I grew up in the north. I grew up in the Peace Country in a small town called Valleyview, and certainly most of my friends when I went to school took the bus to school and came from the farm. I was a town kid...[interjection]

Member Irwin: Like my mom.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Like the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood – her mom was a few grades higher than me. She was a good friend of my sister. She came from the farm, Anne Morro. Certainly, she even stayed overnight a few times at my place because she wanted to go to Guides, I think – you know, Brownies, Guides – and it was hard because she lived in the country. Anyway, I certainly grew up in a very rural part of Alberta, kind of remote at

that time. I like to tell my own children about not even having radio access at nighttime.

Anyway, I'll get back to the topic at hand. Certainly, we know that this is a significant issue in rural Alberta, that there aren't enough veterinarians. You know, I appreciate very much the Member for Camrose for bringing this forward, but it's kind of, I guess, a little bit confusing to me to have her as a member of the UCP caucus bring this forward when her government, the government that she is a member of, is sort of actively doing things to inhibit the ability for more people to become veterinarians. I mean, the devastation to our postsecondary institutions by this UCP government is significant.

Certainly, one of the big things is that I think there are 30 positions each year for students, and I think that was augmented this year specifically to a higher number. But the funding isn't there, and the devastating cuts to postsecondary – and, of course, we know that it's the University of Calgary that has the veterinarian school, so that is specifically the school. I mean, they have had, like, a \$25 million loss in provincial funding since 2019, when the UCP were elected, so over that time. I mean, sure, bring this forward, but, you know, one hand has to look at what the other hand is doing, and if you actually want to increase spaces at the universities so that you actually can train and encourage veterinarians to work in rural practice, then you've got to fund it, and this government isn't funding it.

It feels like there's some incongruence with certainly what this member wants and what the government that she is a representative of is actually doing. So I'm a bit confused by that. I hope this isn't just sort of – I don't know – a smoke-and-mirrors thing, so it's a nice motion that she can put forward just to make her portfolio look good and for her to look attractive to the voters in her area, because it feels like, you know, she has to be accountable also for what her government is doing to devastate postsecondary institutions in our province. Of course, the University of Calgary has had a significant hit. We know that the funding has been cut by 18 per cent since the UCP was elected, and as I said, it's about a \$25 million loss. This is a significant issue.

But beyond that – beyond that – we know that getting veterinarians, graduates of a university in veterinary studies, to actually go out to rural Alberta is challenging. What are they saying? About 20 to 30 per cent of the students actually want to practise in rural Alberta. A lot of them would prefer to be in larger centres. There are issues with, you know, perhaps their spouses being able to find employment in rural Alberta. I mean, there are some aspects of it that are pretty challenging because we know there has been a significant difficulty in attracting veterinarians to rural Alberta. A lot of them talk about just the extreme demands on their time, and it's very difficult because they don't have enough support in those areas. They don't want to work 24/7 – none of us want to do that; we want to have some balance in our lives – so the government really has to think about how they can support veterinarians in rural Alberta so that they don't burn out or not go at all.

5:50

Of course, another thing in this area is that there are more and more women who are part of the veterinarian profession, so then we have to think about women, who still, to this day, are generally the caregivers when a couple has children. You know, we need to make sure that there are supports for them so that they can work so they do have support for their children to be cared for in an accredited, high-quality child care centre. It's really important that that be in place, too.

I mean, I have no concerns about this motion, but it just seems like it's opposite kind of to what the government is doing to improve the

situation for veterinarians in rural Alberta. Certainly, we know that this government also has a lot of difficulty being respectful of health professionals, and this is another type of health professional. I mean, I guess the patient is a bit different. It's not a human animal – you know, it's a cow; it's a horse, cattle, or sheep – but they're still medical professionals that are working. People look at Alberta right now, with the track record of this government, and I can certainly appreciate why people wouldn't want to stay in Alberta and why they wouldn't want to come to Alberta. That is another issue, and I think the government could go a long way to developing more respect for health professionals in our province, and that may change people's decisions on whether to come to Alberta or stay in Alberta.

I would just offer those bits of advice. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there – oh, sorry. The hon. Member for Peace River had been called upon prior. He has three minutes.

Mr. Williams: Three minutes. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I want to thank all the speakers who went before me with their charming speeches and support for veterinarians of Alberta. I have met a number of my constituents who are veterinarians, sometimes at events – community events, rodeos, et cetera – sometimes in the field, and I'm grateful for the work they do in keeping our rural and agricultural economy moving.

Mr. Speaker, the first veterinarian I met actually was not in person. It was Alf Wight, also known by his pen name James Herriot, in his absolutely charming collection of stories published as *All Creatures Great and Small*. The reason I bring that up is because I think that that large volume does an incredibly good job of explaining to anyone who's not from a rural community and anyone who's not a veterinarian, including myself, that it begins with a love for the animals. That motivates them.

The recruitment to my far-flung part of the province of veterinarians is not as difficult as you might think given how remote it is because of how beautiful the land is and the love that they have for the diverse life that they get as a veterinarian. This includes working with everything from domestic pets all the way up to bison, never mind cattle. Like my colleague to my right, Mr. Speaker, we've got bison where I'm from, and the vets have their hands full dealing with these wonderful, majestic but, you know, only partially domesticated beasts.

It's a labour of love for the vets that I know, so I want to, in my short time before the end of our opportunity to speak on this, thank every single one of them in my constituency for the work they do, for the genuine care and love that they show. An important part of this motion is recognizing the important work of rural veterinarians, and that, Mr. Speaker, is what I want to focus on. Many of my colleagues did a great job talking about the second part, how we can increase the number of vets serving in these rural communities, and I appreciate their contributions, but our vets deserve also a very plain and simple and loud thank you from this Assembly for the work that they do in supporting our animals and our rural economy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the time is now 5:55, and pursuant to Standing Order 8(3), which allows the mover of Motion Other than Government Motion 524 up to five minutes to close debate, I will call upon her to close debate now.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I really enjoyed listening to the enthusiastic debate this afternoon supporting rural veterinarians in Alberta. Thank you, everyone. This is an issue that's critically important to me and my constituents, as I mentioned in my earlier comments.

I want to take this opportunity to specifically thank the following people who have been working with me on raising awareness of the shortage of veterinarians in rural Alberta. Firstly, a huge thank you to Pam Cholak with What Matters Consulting, who has co-ordinated meetings with Dr. David Chalak and Dr. Greg Andrews of the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association. Pam has gathered reports and has been available for many questions. Thank you.

On a local basis I have consulted with a number of individuals who I would like to thank: Dr. Jamie Whiting with the Camrose Veterinary Hospital; Dr. Leighton Coma with the Central Veterinary Clinic in Bashaw; Shannon, the owner of Stockyards Veterinary Services; Keegan, a veterinary medical student from the Camrose constituency; Dr. Bibby, a retired veterinarian from Camrose.

This summer I had the pleasure of a tour at the University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine organized by David Keto. The MLAs for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville and Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright also joined me. While we were there, we met students from the faculty, and I have corresponded with the UCVM class of 2024 president Sam Reynolds as well as Lauren Stoffregen, Nicole McClure, and Marisa Romagnuolo. Also, I met with Ashley Whitehead, associate dean, clinical programs; and Robert McCorkell, associate dean, academic. They gave a thorough tour, and your time and conversation are sincerely appreciated.

This summer I also had the opportunity to meet with Stanford Blade, professor and dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Life and Environmental Sciences at the University of Alberta, and several of his colleagues. Your collective insight has led to follow-up conversations with a number of ministries.

Thank you again to all the members who participated in the debate today. I appreciate your support.

Member, you had mentioned that we should give a thank you to the veterinarians. I would invite all of you to join me in a round of applause. Let's please give a thank you to our veterinarians. Thank you so much.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will end debate.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 524 carried]

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 4 the House stands adjourned until this evening at 7:30.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:57 p.m.]

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