



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, March 23, 2022

Day 14

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Third Session

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

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Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)
Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)
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Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (Ind)
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Frey, Michaela L., Brooks-Medicine Hat (UC)
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Party standings:

United Conservative: 60

New Democrat: 23

Independent: 3

Vacant: 1

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Jacqueline Lovely	Parliamentary Secretary to the Associate Minister of Status of Women
Nathan Neudorf	Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Parks for Water Stewardship
Jeremy Nixon	Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Community and Social Services for Civil Society
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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I would like to call the committee to order.

Bill 3 Special Days Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any members looking for questions, comments, or amendments at this time?

Seeing none, I am prepared to ask the question.

[The clauses of Bill 3 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Any opposed? And that was for when the committee rises.

Bill 8 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2022

The Deputy Chair: Are there any hon. members looking to join debate with comments or questions? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View has risen.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill 8, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2022. This is the exercise which is normally performed at the end of the year to deal with sort of any overages in the budget. As opposed to Bill 7, which is before us, which applies to the year's budget going forward, this applies to the year that just passed. Fortunately, as it turns out, the things that apply to the budget that just passed and apply to the budget going forward are roughly similar things. You know, this presented yet another opportunity, along with the budget that we saw introduced, for the UCP to do something to help families, and they have chosen to do nothing. It provided another opportunity to provide a real electricity rebate, to provide a natural gas rebate that wasn't fake, to provide some sort of assistance with any sort of cost, and that isn't what we see.

In addition, we see a budget which has plenty of money left over to go to those who already have more than they will ever need and nothing for those who are struggling to make ends meet. We see last year and this year roughly the same thing. In addition, last year we were going through a pandemic, yet we see no additional spending in education, and in fact we see what I would describe as significantly inadequate spending. The budget going forward sees an increase, an increase which does not align with population growth or inflation, and going backwards we see no increases at all.

For instance, my daughter will enter the public school system this upcoming September. She will arrive in school with tens of thousands of additional students and a thousand fewer teachers, not to mention the thousands of fewer EAs that will be available to help her. So children like mine who have spent the last two years in a pandemic, who haven't had the same experience that most children

have had, have probably had a lesser sort of social interaction than many children have had, will be entering the school system, and they will be entering a school system massively underfunded compared to students that went five years before them.

Now, let's begin by saying that this isn't fair. The year of your birth shouldn't be the determining factor in terms of how much funding you get for your education, in terms of whether or not there are more students in your class than were in predecessor classes. Unfortunately, that's not really the way it worked out. So we have a bunch of students who are already potentially behind, and we have fewer teachers, not to mention the students that have been in school, some of whom missed the end of the first pandemic year, and then they were in and out and in and out because, of course, this government didn't believe in investing and making schools safer.

They could have taken the time to make those investments to make life easier for students and for parents so that schools could stay in, so that there wasn't this constant back and forth and in and out, but they chose not to do that, not because they didn't have the money to do it but because they were choosing to spend it on other things.

So that is what we will see. We will see these students entering school. We will see them underfunded relative to their peers. Really, Mr. Chair, at the end of the day, I don't think that's fair to them, and I don't think that it's fair to the rest of Alberta either because this will change the trajectories of lives. This will result in students maybe not being able to learn as they would have learned, maybe not being able to contribute as they would have contributed.

Can you say exactly what the impact on each individual student will be? No, not necessarily, but you can say on a population level, because enormous numbers of studies have been done on the impact on a population level, and the impact on the population level is that it will cost us more money in the long run. This government's choice not to invest in students, not to invest in early learning, not to invest in ensuring that those students can achieve their full potential will cost us money in the long run. That is one of the things I find incredibly troubling about this.

We see also in this supplementary supply a very interesting addition. One of the additions is for physician compensation, \$173 million. What is interesting about this is that essentially this is the government finally, finally, finally, two years on in a pandemic, reaching an agreement with doctors.

Mr. Shepherd: It's not an agreement yet.

Ms Ganley: Oh, it's not even an agreement yet. I'm sorry. My colleague has corrected me. At least some sort of attempt at an agreement.

We entered a pandemic in a situation that was incredibly difficult for physicians, in a situation where this UCP government was attacking them. Not only did they tear up their contract, but they chose to misrepresent them to the public, to claim that they were grifting and taking money that they weren't owed, which I think is incredibly unfair. So we went into this pandemic with physicians who were already under attack by this government, a government who was essentially trying to attack specifically primary care. That's a big problem because primary care makes a huge difference in the lives of Albertans. It also has a big equalizing effect. You know, folks from more affluent backgrounds, from more educated backgrounds are likely to seek out treatment for their medical condition, but for some people who are not in that position, who maybe don't feel as empowered to speak up for themselves for whatever historical reasons, primary care is incredibly important to make sure we're monitoring their conditions, and it ultimately saves money.

This is the thing with this government. They like to save money now by essentially taking money from the future. They do it in education. They do it with primary care. They just have absolutely no respect for upstream intervention, for how much it saves us to treat someone's diabetes as opposed to have to perform a surgery later, for how much it saves us to help a child learn to read at the appropriate age versus paying for incarceration later. That isn't to say that all students will go down that road, but there is really, really solid evidence linking literacy rates and incarceration rates; reverse linking, obviously. That is incredibly problematic. Those are a couple of the things in here.

I'd like to sort of touch on a little hobby horse of mine as well. One of the things we see in this past-year budget is the introduction of the Kananaskis park fee. Obviously, this is an area that belongs to Albertans, that is for Albertans, that has historically been for all Albertans, and this government has sort of come in and imposed a fee on it. So now it's only for some Albertans, which is obviously problematic, especially right now, especially in this moment when more and more families are barely able to cover their basic costs with what they earn, in large part due to decisions of this government. For some people \$90 is a lot of money. For some people that's \$90 that they don't have because their electricity bill went up \$300, and they just don't have it. This government is sort of taking that opportunity from them.

7:40

Worse still, I had the opportunity to sit in estimates and watch the minister of environment try to tap dance around this issue. You know, Albertans paying that fee at least wanted to be assured that the fee was going back into the management of that park, but he couldn't tell us where the fee was going. In fact, a bunch of it – he read off a list of grants that this went to maintain. We asked – I don't know – some very basic questions that one might ask about grants, like: what are the criteria for the application? Did multiple groups apply? How did you pick between them? Nope.

We asked some very basic questions like: how do we evaluate the work that's done? Once you pick the group for whom this grant is awarded, how do you figure out what they're supposed to do, and how do you measure whether they've done the thing they're supposed to do and whether Albertans are getting value for their money? Do you know what the answer was? We pick based on "existing relationships" with the UCP. Yeah, that was the answer. Who gets the grants has nothing to do with who's best situated to do the job; it's based on existing relationships with the UCP minister. That I find incredibly problematic.

Even if these groups are doing great work – and maybe they are. I don't know. I'm not out there to assess it. In fact, no one knows. None of us will ever know because apparently we don't assess these things at all, which I think is a problematic use of money, to say the least. But even if they are doing a fantastic job, other groups may have wanted that work, other groups may have wanted the opportunity to compete, but this government decided to pick their friends. I think that that is incredibly problematic.

Another thing worth discussing, which I touched on somewhat, is the electricity program. Oh, boy. The things that have been said about this. You know, we began with the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity proudly announcing that his plan was to do nothing. Then we moved to a rushed-out \$50 rebate, which I think most Albertans have received as sort of an insult. And then we have the minister standing up and talking about skyrocketing costs and referring to them as the market working. I think that's problematic. I don't think the market is working for most Alberta families, and I think that that is very, very difficult for them. Yeah. I would consider that extremely problematic.

Another thing included in here is money that's sort of coming back from the war room, so under the supplementary estimates. Sometimes there's more money needed, and sometimes the government didn't spend all their money. It's worth talking a little bit about the war room because, I mean, it's problematic. There's really no way to say it except that it's problematic. It was designed specifically to avoid freedom of information. It is a place that the government can essentially send money and disappear it. There are no outcomes measured. No one is paying attention to what's done with the money. There's no way to FOIP it. The minister refuses to answer any questions on what's being done with the money or what's achieved. And no one measures – usually when you spend money in budgets, there are performance measures for each ministry that sort of measure the impact of the money that you are spending in order to be able to tell taxpayers that you're getting value for them. Not with the war room. No measures at all. It's just out there.

We've seen it – let's see. It's headed by a failed UCP candidate. It has impersonated journalists, attacked journalists, rendered wildly popular a strange movie about Bigfoot; maybe the only measurable impact it's had, actually, at all is the sudden skyrocketing ratings of, honestly, a not very good movie on Netflix. So there you go. That's a bit of an odd choice.

Even more interesting, last year we had a conversation at estimates, and the war room budget was to be \$10 million. We were speaking two weeks before the end of the year, so 95 per cent of the way through the fiscal year, and the minister said: "Oh, yes. Oh, yes. They're definitely going to spend their \$10 million, and we're going to spend this \$19 million on other advocacy." So \$29 million in total between the war room and the other advocacy. She wouldn't tell us what it would be spent on. She wouldn't tell us whether anything would be measured. Nothing. Then we come to this year, and it turns out that when she was telling us that she had spent the money – again, we were talking two weeks from the end of the fiscal year – telling us that she had spent, past tense, \$29 million, it turns out they didn't. So that money all went back. Who knows what happened to it?

This year again we see money going to the war room and again no idea – we're not measuring what it achieves. We have no idea what it's going to be used for. I don't know. Maybe this time they'll try to make something incredibly popular on Disney+ instead of on Netflix. Who knows? But this continues to be an incredibly problematic area. It continues to be an area without oversight. The spending of public money without the public being able to know what the money was spent on is, in my view, just exceptionally problematic. I find it baffling that the so-called fiscal conservatives on the other side of the House would just accept this, would think that it's perfectly fine for the government to spend money and not be able to indicate any value for that money.

I guess, at the end of the day, there are a lot of problematic areas in this budget. Some of the ones I would say are the biggest: definitely health care and education. Another, I think, particularly important one: supportive housing. We saw this government – and, you know, we had a long conversation in the last session with this government saying: "Oh, we're bringing in this bill. This bill is going to increase affordable housing, and by increase we mean that we're going to define affordable housing to be anything the minister points to and says that that's affordable housing. By increase affordable housing, what we actually mean we're going to do is that we're going to call a bunch of stuff affordable housing regardless of whether it's affordable or not. But don't worry. We'll put in lots of money." They did not. They did not.

I guess fast-forward to today: no money. This is super, super problematic. We have a federal government who's investing. We

have municipal governments who are asking for funding. They're asking for this funding because municipal governments pay sort of the bulk, with some assistance from the provincial government, of the cost of policing. When you don't have supportive housing, you pay a lot more for policing. Now, this provincial government is actually paying it, too, because a lack of affordable housing is also correlated with sort of cost drivers, especially in emergency rooms.

Emergency medicine is some of the most expensive medicine there is, but that is, like, wildly driven up, not to mention the impact that it has on people's lives, you know. When we're driving up, unnecessarily, people having to go to the emergency room because they have an infection that has gotten worse because they're living on the street and they're not able to clean a wound and that's tying up emergency resources that could be used elsewhere, it's expensive. It's a really expensive solution to a problem that is otherwise inexpensive.

Correctional centres: also a very expensive – very expensive – place to house people. Permanent supportive housing: definitely, a better solution. But this government chooses not to invest. I think, really, when we look at this, what we see is a failure to invest, a failure to invest in pretty much every possible way that this government could fail to invest. I think that's incredibly problematic, and I will not be supporting it.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any – I see the hon. Member for Calgary-South East has risen.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Chair. I'm not sure I would characterize record investments in health care and education as a failure to invest, especially when it was achieved while projecting three surplus budgets. I think that's good, responsible fiscal management.
7:50

Bill 8 provides the authority for the government to pay from the general revenue fund for additional costs that are not already covered or otherwise provided for during the current fiscal year. The funding in Bill 8 will ensure that the government can cover health care costs from the pandemic while also sending aid and equipment to Ukraine, providing electricity rebates to Albertans struggling with affordability and rising costs, supporting child care workers and the parents of young children, and building municipal infrastructure. The supplementary estimates include \$1.2 billion in expenses and \$1 million in capital investment. The overall increase to the deficit is minor. It's projected to increase it by about \$200 million.

This funding will go to the following five government departments: the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, Children's Services, Culture and Status of Women, Energy, Health, and Municipal Affairs. For Health, the largest item, an additional \$726 million will help cover the costs of the pandemic. This includes things like lab testing, contact tracing, rapid test kits, continuing care, acute care, vaccine deployment, and personal protective equipment. This is above and beyond what we committed in Budget 2022 to address backlogs due to the pandemic.

An additional \$231.2 million is allocated to Municipal Affairs and will be distributed to municipalities under the Canada community-building fund to support infrastructure projects that create jobs and are necessary for economic development across the province.

The supplementary amount for Children's Services is related to funding provided by the federal government. It includes \$134.7 million for child care subsidies and worker supports under the Canada-Alberta early learning and child care agreement. Bill 8 also

includes a capital investment of \$1 million to provide information technology for child care initiatives, which is, again, fully off-set by federal funds.

While Alberta is not immune to the rising cost of living, we are striving to ensure that this province is a more affordable place to live than virtually any other Canadian jurisdiction. This is in addition to the many other affordability advantages that Alberta has to offer. Bill 8 includes a supplementary amount of \$96.3 million for the Department of Energy, which will go towards a total of \$300 million for the utility consumer support electricity rebate program. With the help of this bill, we will provide \$150 in electricity rebates to over 1 million homes, farms, and businesses.

Culture and Status of Women will receive \$11.4 million in support of Ukraine, \$10.4 million of which will come from this bill. This includes \$5 million to the Ukrainian World Congress to equip 5,000 members of the Ukrainian territorial defence force with defensive equipment, \$5 million to the Canada-Ukraine Foundation for humanitarian aid, and \$350,000 to the Ukrainian Canadian Congress Alberta Provincial Council for co-ordinating the shipment of first aid and defensive equipment to Ukraine.

Lastly, in this bill there is a supplementary amount of \$55,000 for the office of the Information and Privacy commissioner to cover increases in staff compensation due to changes in the salary restraint measures on nonbargaining staff.

Hopefully, that clarifies what's being invested, and I look forward to continued discussions on Bill 8.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

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

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to speak to this supplementary supply. To the previous speaker, I guess: my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View I think was trying to make the point that the investments overall, both in this sup supply and the Bill 7 appropriations for the '22 budget, don't prioritize the spending in directions that will help the greatest number of Albertans, hard-working Albertans that are being hit hard by inflation, that are being hit hard by the current experience we all are living through.

That's part of the difference, you know, and it's a pretty major one. This side believes that there is a role for government to help and ensure there are programs that help lift the most vulnerable up and above where they are so that they can enjoy full participation in this great province, and the other side believes that helping the richest and the trickle-down on the rest of us will get us further ahead. We don't believe that. We believe in good health care, solid public education, good postsecondary education, and the other side, Mr. Chair, believes in looking at more privatization going into the future, which is built into Bill 7. It's also considered in the sup supply here.

We know that inflation is starting to eat away at the savings, at the weekly earnings of Albertans. They're not only finding that on a day-to-day basis, but when they do their taxes again this year, there's an insidious, pernicious increase in that income tax that this government has built in. I heard some of the discussion from the other side, basically wedging open the window a little bit and saying that we're going to get back to balance and that then Albertans will all enjoy the benefits because we'll change that pernicious, insidious bracket creep tax grab. It wasn't said fully like that, but it was implied. I think that that's the difference between this side and the other side. The other side holds, you know, a carrot out or way into the future and says: don't worry; things will get better. The windfall in oil and gas has really helped out this side a lot. I mean,

without that, we wouldn't be talking about three balanced budgets and your fiscal plan into the future. We'd be talking about deficits into the next three years, I guess. The plan to make Albertans pay more is also part of this sup supply.

I certainly don't have any issue with the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. I was at the meetings – I think it was Legislative Offices – where we met with all of the offices, and we heard that settlements in other areas could be rolled in if we reconsidered their budgets, and here it is. That's not an issue.

The Municipal Affairs one. Well, just generally, there are several of these increases in sup supply that have to do with federal dollars that sometimes come late in the fiscal year, understanding what those are going to be, not unlike Municipal Affairs, which is here at \$231,208,000, I think. That's the former gas tax, the building Canada fund I think it's called now. That's a flow through. That's not a result of anything other than the federal government providing those funds. They do twice a year. It's here and being flowed through to municipalities and Métis settlements on a per capita basis. Except, if they're small hamlets or summer villages or small places, they get a set amount.

That has nothing to do with this government looking to the needs of municipalities. In fact, if we were to talk about municipalities for a second, one of the things that we learned in estimates about municipalities was that Bill 77 – the restoring tax accountability bill I think it was called – that was brought in under a previous Municipal Affairs minister, really hasn't had the effect that it was hoped to have in terms of municipalities being able to put special liens on equipment and property of oil and gas companies that aren't paying their bills, aren't paying their taxes. We heard from the minister, in response to questioning from members of the government side, that it hasn't worked. Municipalities have not been able to access funds through special liens. They're there now as opposed to not being there, but their taxes still are not being paid by those who choose not to pay them or go out of business. The RMA indicates that somewhere between I think it's \$240 million to \$280 million in taxes is owed to them.

8:00

Certainly, the Canada community-building fund helps municipalities, but it doesn't help municipalities with regard to the monies owed through taxes, as RMA has indicated, and the special liens that the restoring tax accountability act, Bill 77, provided municipalities is – I don't know if it's next to useless, but it's not working. So it's a good thing that there are federal grant monies flowing to municipalities so that they can address their capital infrastructure needs and provide the kind of capital infrastructure both to city properties – city, towns, other kinds of things – above ground and below ground that keep our quality of life throughout Alberta one of the highest in the country and one of the best in the world. So that's one area I wanted to focus on.

I would like to just compliment the government around the \$10.4 million that is going to Ukraine for various supports for Ukraine people. That is laudable. It's important, not unlike other provinces and indeed the federal government. Canada is stepping up to help our friends in Ukraine, many of whom have made homes in Alberta over the years. That seems like an important thing to have in this sup supply, and I'm glad it's here.

The other thing I just wanted to point out again is another flow through – it's in the area of Children's Services – from the federal government. Just reading the narrative here, it talks about federal funding not only for programmatic support for child care, but it talks about capital investment, federally funded dollars, to provide better information technology to child care facilities. Really

important, actually, because, as our leader was saying today at the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, the ability for families to have quality child care available to them at a rate that is affordable instead of at a rate that is like a second mortgage really allows more people to get into the workforce – I think she quoted the number of 40,000, primarily women – and help drive our economy forward.

We certainly need across Alberta more and more labour, people who are willing to work, because coming out of this pandemic many companies are looking for workers, and the support that's coming through from the federal government, primarily for child care subsidy and supports, is an important way of getting back to that future we all want, which is full employment, which is having children cared for in quality environments, regulated environments, where they have the best start possible because a good start there, as we all know, sets them up for an elementary school education where they can, of course, achieve better than sometimes some of their cohort. So that's a really great thing.

I do like this other part, too, which is supporting the child care workers. We know that many of them were out of work over the pandemic, and coming back to work, you know, is difficult. There were media reports just the other week where child care centres couldn't find enough workers, so ensuring that there is, again, some federal funding for child care workers to top up wages and other things, to provide support for education, accreditation so that we know that they're working with the best information about child and youth development is a good thing as well.

I want to just talk a little bit about the next one. Okay. Children's Services. Culture and Status of Women. We heard a lot about Energy, the \$96 million which will kind of go towards the electricity support for Albertans. That's a good thing. I mean, that's an important thing to do. It's not adequate for vulnerable people, vulnerable families, who are paying exorbitant amounts for their electricity and their home heating. I'm just trying to see if it's a targeted thing. I did hear a million households and farms identified here. I'm thinking about how many million people there are in Alberta. It does sound like there's some targeting to that money, but I wonder if it shouldn't have been more targeted to those with the least in this province and those who will have the highest bills in this province relative to their incomes. That's where I would have gone with all of that. But there is some help for some, which is a good thing.

The failure to invest in places where it would do the most good is, I think, the challenge that I see with this government and bills not only 7 but 8. The fact that Albertans are struggling and some are coming out of this pandemic with exorbitant personal debt loads is something we should all be conscious of, that the government shouldn't make life more expensive for those Albertans, that they deserve better. They deserve a government that can help look out for them instead of hitting their family budget hard, as is the case with so many increases across the board as a result of government withdrawing support or jacking up fees.

Mr. Chair, the last thing I'll say is again about Municipal Affairs. What I heard when I was at the AM and RMA spring conferences that were just held here is that the government could do more to work in partnership with local authorities. It's going to be coming up later on our agenda; I think it's Bill 4. The fact that this government is not working in partnership with municipalities is a problem, and the fact that we see federal flow throughs as opposed to restoring the funding and the amount of funding that municipalities have historically enjoyed so that they can build on that and leverage it up in their communities is a failure of this government.

8:10

The federal funding that we see flow through for four out of five of these areas – or all five, actually, is a welcome relief for Albertans, who are enjoying a share of federal monies in long-term partnerships with the federal government and province of Alberta. Municipalities are the beneficiaries of those agreements. I wish we were at a point of being able to say that municipalities feel that the government has their backs, but what this government has is its hands in many of the pockets of municipalities. My colleague talked about some of those and policing, which is not before us right now, but as an example, GIPOT, other areas where, when we were government, we paid our provincial bills, government bills, and this current government gets away without paying bills. As I started off saying, into the future they talk about, you know, things will be better and you'll be better off into the future. Well, that's unfortunate. It's indicated in the priorities of this government, in sup supply as well as Bill 7.

I'll have more to say on those things later. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Calgary-South East has risen.

Mr. Jones: I'll be brief. The member opposite took issue with the prioritization of the government's Budget 2022, which is curious because it provides record funding to health care and education. I'm not sure where else the members opposite would like to see Alberta dedicate the majority of its funding, but we are certainly going to continue with our world-class provision of health care and education.

The member opposite also took issue with Alberta maximizing federal transfers as if there is more than one taxpayer. Our government bringing taxes back to Albertans from the federal government to benefit them here now, their families, is what they expect of us. That's prudent fiscal management.

The member opposite also took issue with the private delivery of health services and school choice, which, again, is curious because under their government they funded both.

I would invite the member opposite to join Albertans in celebrating Budget 2022 on the achievement of balance, the projected three surplus budgets, and to appreciate the difference responsible government and fiscal discipline make, especially in the lives of Albertans.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any – I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate those comments from the Member for Calgary-South East. If he wants to debate the budget, I'll be happy to debate the budget when we're talking about the budget. Right now we're talking about supplementary supply. Certainly, I'd be happy to talk about their budget for 2022-23 when we get to that point.

I'd like to reply to a few things that the member noted. He has talked several times, as indeed have many members, ministers of this government, about their record investments, Mr. Chair, record investment in health care, record investment in education. Well, let's talk about what the term "record" means. Record simply means that it's the highest amount that has been spent so far. Okay. Fair enough. So they spent more on health care last year than had previously been spent by any other government. Well, we also had record costs. See, population goes up. Inflation also rises. So in order for government spending to have the same impact each year, that spending has to rise. That means that every year, if a

government is actually accounting for inflation and accounting for population growth, will be a record spend. Imagine that.

Here's the kicker, Mr. Chair. His government has fallen short of funding for inflation and population growth every single year it's been in power. Indeed, their record spend on health care in this coming year's budget – and I apologize; I guess I am going to talk about that briefly – falls \$600 million short of where they would be if they had simply accounted for inflation and population growth over the last few years. So that is the record spend about which this government wants to pat itself on the back, Mr. Chair, not to mention the fact that, of course, we had record costs in the last year for the COVID-19 pandemic. Imagine that. The government spent more than ever before on health care in a year that we had a global pandemic – break out the balloons; pat the government on the back – not to mention, of course, that for the education system it was a more expensive year than we've ever had before because, again, we surprisingly had more students. Indeed, inflation drives up the costs in education as well, not to mention that schools faced greater costs because of a global pandemic.

Again, when we are talking about the fact that there is only one taxpayer, as the member just pointed out, we have to recognize that school boards had to take up additional costs because the government refused to step up to cover the costs that were necessary to help protect students in those spaces. Again, that in turn is a government that has driven up property tax and the education property tax. There is only one taxpayer, so this government devolved its responsibility onto another level of government and onto the backs of taxpayers in Alberta, and that is what the Member for Calgary-South East believes that we should praise his government for doing.

He talked about how they spent in the last year above and beyond what they committed in Budget 2022. Well, imagine that, Mr. Chair. In the midst of a global pandemic, health care costs were higher than anticipated, though admittedly I recognize that this government had pretty poor judgment when it came to that pandemic, as we saw in the third wave, as many members on that side were calling for the government to end all health restrictions even as case counts were climbing, as deaths were rising, as hospitals were overflowing, and their lack of action, acting last, acting least, indeed drove up the costs in health care. Repeat, wash your hands, rinse, and do it all again for the fourth wave in the fall except at an even higher level. Of course, they spent above and beyond in Budget 2022 because they used the health care system as a crash mat, because they put their politics ahead of taking prudent action in public health.

Let's go on to talk about what we actually have in this supplementary supply, Mr. Chair. Now, the Minister of Health was patting himself on the back today for the fact that, you know, they've increased spending on physician compensation. He specifically mentioned having brought in virtual codes, improved the virtual codes for physicians – it took place as of January 1 – and congratulated himself for that step. Now, let's be clear. That was two years – two – after doctors had begun asking the government to take that action.

Now let's talk about how this actually occurred. Here we are in February, just as we see COVID first appearing on the horizon. The pandemic wasn't here yet, but that was when this government tore up their contract with physicians. Tore up the agreement. Basically, that left physicians at the whim of the health care minister. He and his staff and others went on a social media crusade, as my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View noted, smearing doctors on social media, attacking them, putting up a government web page talking about how greedy and entitled they were.

Then we found ourselves going into a pandemic. Doctors rightfully recognized that as we were bringing in restrictions and isolation, that was going to have a massive impact on their ability to see their patients, so they reached out to the Minister of Health and said: we need support because right now we cannot bill to see a patient virtually. It was about two weeks as we were moving into the pandemic, as people were forced to stay at home, and doctors were waiting for this minister to take action. Finally he did. What did he do, Mr. Chair? He revived a code from the SARS pandemic that paid \$20 for a 15-minute visit, actually for any visit, because you couldn't bill beyond 15. It was \$20 for any virtual visit.

Now, doctors are normally paid about \$34 for a visit. In fact – what do you know? – they had just signed a deal with Telus for their Babylon app, and what were they paying Telus per visit for virtual walk-in doctors who had no history with their patients? Thirty-four dollars a visit. Alberta's family doctors were getting \$20. Doctors, of course, were reaching out and saying: "Hey, this is a problem. Can we fix this? Can we fix this? Can we fix this?" More weeks went by. Eventually the government took action. Now, this was, of course, weeks in, so doctors, of course, had been losing large amounts of income, making it more difficult for them to operate their clinics, losing money to continue to see their patients, which they did do, Mr. Chair, because they care about the health of Albertans.

8:20

Now, the trick is, Mr. Chair, that they were only able to get \$34 no matter how long that visit was. Now, normally a doctor, when they see a patient, is able to bill \$34 for the initial visit and then what's called the complex modifiers. If it is a visit that goes on longer than 15 minutes, they are allowed to add on additional amounts for the extra time that they are spending. The government did not apply that to virtual codes. That meant that doctors were spending 40 minutes talking with patients who were struggling with their health, who were dealing with mental health issues in the midst of a pandemic, and getting paid for 15.

That concern was raised repeatedly with this government throughout the course of the pandemic for two years, Mr. Chair – for two years – because this government was so intent initially on trying to grind doctors down in the midst of a pandemic as part of their war on physicians. For two years we had physicians, family physicians that were struggling incredibly. We had clinics close. We had doctors leave. We have Albertans, tens of thousands of Albertans now, that have no family doctor in part because this government took two years to take a simple step that they now want us to congratulate them for doing. That's what we have here, and when we're looking at this fee increase in physician compensation of \$173,857,000, that is in part the government finally stepping up to the table and covering these costs.

Now, also here we do have some additional spending in health care, and I did have the chance to talk about this with the minister the other night when we had some back and forth here in the Chamber as we were debating the supplementary supply before this bill was introduced. I had a chance to chat with him a little bit about some of the other additional amounts that are here. Again, Mr. Chair, recognizing that this government has repeatedly made decisions of acting last and acting least, has been spending more time fighting amongst themselves behind closed doors, waiting to take action on rising case counts, that in turn has driven up costs, and part of that is represented here in this supplementary supply.

I had the chance to ask the minister about the \$375,500,000 that is here in supplementary supply for lab testing, contact tracing, and rapid test distribution, and what I asked him about, Mr. Chair, is the

fact that during the pandemic we had health care workers who were redeployed. Now, that, of course, is understandable. In the first wave in particular, when we did not know what we were dealing with, when we had serious issues – even in the second wave, I think, it's understandable. That was a far more serious wave. Yes, the government again acted last, acted least, but still we were learning. Indeed, I had the chance to speak with some of the folks that were redeployed, including some speech-language pathologists, and that's what they said to me. They said: "You know what? We get it. First, second wave, we were happy to do this. We were happy to be redeployed to serve. We recognize the impact that that had on the children we were helping, on others, but, hey, it was a pandemic. That needed to happen."

But as we moved into the third wave, Mr. Chair, they talked about how they were surprised that at that point the government had not begun to invest in bringing other workers in to handle these situations, particularly in the case of testing sites, where they were being called in. But they said: "You know what? After doing that third wave, we were very happy to see that the government actually worked with AHS." They were hiring staff to take over some of those key things at the testing centres, what they called being line leaders, which is standing and sort of just making sure that they've got people in chairs, the lines are flowing smoothly, people are getting to the nurses to get their testing done, important work to conduct that PCR testing and keep that available. But that was not something that you needed to pay a speech-language pathologist at their rate of pay, indeed, at overtime pay. They told me that at times that would mean working at a shift premium of up to \$100 an hour to do that work, so they were very happy to see that AHS was moving to hire folks and had folks ready.

But then came the best summer ever. This government decided that it was going to declare COVID done, and even as we saw case counts rising in August, we heard nothing. The government went radio silent. We know they were fighting amongst themselves behind closed doors because members of the government have themselves spoken up and said so, but they did not take action.

What happened, Mr. Chair? Of course, we found ourselves in the midst of that fourth wave. We had to ramp up testing and everything again, and because this government had not moved quickly enough, all those folks that they had on contract and ready to go: the majority of them were gone. Contracts expired. They'd moved on. They'd found other work. So what happened? We had to call our speech-language pathologists back in to do that work – they have premiums of up to \$100 an hour – once again creating massive backlogs for children and youth who are struggling and needed that support. What I asked the minister, Mr. Chair, is: well, how much of that \$375,500,000 represents those workers who had to be redeployed, their overtime, their shift premiums, because this government chose to act last and least and let those other contracts lapse?

This is a challenge that we saw throughout the pandemic, Mr. Chair, decisions made by this government. They want to congratulate themselves now for their spending on health care and talk about how much they thank health care workers, but the fact is that every single one of those health care workers, I'll tell you, would have far preferred to have a government that would have actually listened to them when they warned about what was coming and what they were seeing on the ground. They would have far rather had their government actually take prudent action than step up now and brag about the fact that they're investing in more ICU beds. They would far rather prefer that the government hadn't filled those beds to begin with. Now, to be honest, they probably prefer both. Certainly, I think we can appreciate that we do need to make investments in our health care system.

Certainly, over the years of Conservative government we saw the roller coaster of spending that tracked with the price of oil, not unlike the current government, because – let's be clear – this spending would not be here if this government had not stumbled into an oil revenue surplus. We've seen what this government does when the chips are down, and what they do is that they make cuts, and they put that on the backs of Albertans. They put in things like a sneaky tax on inflation. They can't even be honest, Mr. Chair, when they are taxing Albertans. They try to sneak these things through the back door.

Of course, we saw much more about some of the backdoor shenanigans that have gone on within this party and indeed the last leadership race, which the Premier won, that was published today by the CBC. I imagine we're going to see much more. A lot of drama happening on that side of the House. There has been for a while.

But the fact is that the spending that we are seeing here is indeed, in many respects, likely necessary. You know what? If we had been in government, probably some of this spending would have taken place. Now, certainly, I think some of this money would have been used a lot more efficiently, Mr. Chair, because I think we would not have made that repeated decision, that this government did, to act last and act least, drive up those costs in the health care system to respond to the pandemic.

I just want to be very clear that the biggest tragedy of this pandemic is not the dollars lost; it's the lives lost, over 4,000 Albertans. Certainly, many thousands and thousands more – 20 per cent is the estimate from AHS – Albertans contracted COVID and now will likely have long COVID. Of course, we're going to have those costs appearing in the system here.

Of course, also baked into some of this supplementary spending, I imagine, though I did not get the opportunity to question the minister about it, may have been the additional premiums and overtime that had to be paid to try to cover the critical staffing shortage that we've had in this province starting since about last May is when I first began to raise concerns about that in this House as we began to see rolling closures of ERs across the province of Alberta due to a lack of physicians, lack of nursing staff. I remember talking in this House about the Galahad continuing care centre. Twenty seniors there, Mr. Chair, I believe, in May of last year were displaced due to a lack of nursing staff, again in part due to this government's pressure that it created on the health care system, pushing it to its limits.

8:30

I remember at that time, I seem to recall, the minister at the time talking about how that was going to be a short-term thing. Mr. Chair, those seniors still have not returned to Galahad. They're still separated from friends and family. The costs of all that, I imagine, are also baked into this supplementary supply.

Coming back around, Mr. Chair, while this government wants to pat itself on the back for record spending on health care and education, I have spent nearly three years now watching this government on health care, and I can tell you that no government in the history of this province has done more damage to our public health care system than the UCP, none, bar none. So I'm not inclined to praise this government for its record spending as it splashes around a little bit of cash to try to backfill the deep, deep hole they have dug Alberta into in terms of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, from the loss of physicians, that, again, we just saw demonstrated by data from the CPSA.

However much the government wants to deny it, it's concrete. There are 41 fewer doctors in Lethbridge and area than there were in 2019, when this government came into power, and 43,000

residents in that area who do not have a family doctor. That is on this government. It is their record, and no record health care spending now is fixing that, partly because they aren't really putting record spending in on physicians. They've got \$6 million that they've reannounced repeatedly, but the fact is, Mr. Chair, that just like a corporate tax cut is not simply enough on its own to bring companies into a jurisdiction, neither are some dollars thrown in belatedly after the fact enough to cover up for a government that has fundamentally broken trust with health care workers, has salted the earth and given our province a reputation under this government of one that is decidedly unfriendly to health care workers.

That's going to be a challenge, Mr. Chair, because we are in competition globally for health care workers right now. There's a CBC article that just came out talking about how many more youth are leaving our province. Let me tell you that young health care workers are leaving. Doctors are graduating, and they are not going to work in the rural areas whatever amount this government wants to put into its RESIDE program. As long as this government maintains legislation that says that any contract they have can be torn up on the whim of a Health minister, these are challenges that are going to continue.

I look forward to having more opportunity to debate this. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Next I believe I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. As you can imagine, I've got several thoughts this evening on Bill 8, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2022, and it's even hard to kind of decide where to start. You know, I think where I will start – and I've said this before in the House in terms of some of the legislation that we've seen presented by the government. Albertans find themselves in almost the same place as Oliver Twist did. They're looking to the government, and they're saying, "Please, sir, I want some more," and that goes to show you the severe lack of support that we're seeing towards Albertans.

Now, I've certainly heard this evening, you know, talking about all this record spending, everything that we're doing to increase jobs and things like that. But the thing is that I'm hearing from not only my constituents but others across the province – because I know; I'm getting copied on the e-mails that are going to all of you as well, so I know it's out there – that are very concerned about where things are going, like, for instance, the utility bills. And we can talk all we want about the rebate for gas, the fake rebate that only kicks in at a certain level, and we're just slightly over halfway there. Let me put it to you this way: people are complaining that they can't afford the bill now. What happens when it doubles? Because that's what it's going to take to hit that mark – right? – the six and a half dollars per gigajoule. They can't afford it here. This is a problem here, right now, and you're not going to help them until at least next winter.

You know, I have a constituent who's on AISH, Mr. Chair. I was hoping maybe to see something out of this for them besides what very little they get. They were hoping, you know, maybe it'll get reindexed. She's come to me saying: well, one of my utility bills has just gone up by \$300. Yet out of Budget 2022 this individual is going to lose up to \$3,000 in purchasing power. Now, if they can't even afford the bill, how are they going to be able to do anything else?

Again, you know, I've heard people jump up: oh, well, this is record spending on AISH. See, here's the problem. Remember I've

always said, Mr. Chair, that I'm listening to what people say about legislation that comes forward and whatnot, and when we think about Budget '22 and Bill 8, there's an attitude that we're fighting already. It happened just last Monday, and what was said was: "Mr. Speaker, what the opposition doesn't have a clue on is that you have to create wealth first before you have money to take care of people."

My friend from Calgary-Buffalo had kind of started to touch on this a little bit, and I think I'll expand a little further. Historically I've always seen this cycle that comes forward. You know, government comes in: "Ah, well, you know, the former government just spent recklessly and put us into debt and everything, so we've got to climb our way out of that." Then you get to the point where you're starting to make some success: "We can't help you just yet. We're close. We're almost there. Just hang on a little bit longer." Then you get to the next stage of: "You know what? We're just starting to get ahead. Things are really ramping up. We're really going to get going here. Can I just get you to hold tight a little bit longer?" People keep waiting, and then you get: "You know what? There are signs the future is not looking good. We've got to prepare for the future. You're just going to have to wait." Then when things are free-falling: "Well, things are in free fall. We can't help you now."

It's this cycle that keeps going along. It's the cycle of failing to help, and we're always leaving the most vulnerable behind based on what I was just talking about, a constituent on AISH who can't afford a utility. But what's up for offer? Oh, a whole \$150 spread out over three months in \$50 chunks. And I still haven't heard the plan as to when that's going to get paid out, how that's going to get paid out. In the meantime they're falling further and further behind, which then leads me to another constituent that's already in trouble, and now their power is getting limited. Can you imagine, Mr. Chair, not being able to have a pot on the stove and some toast in the toaster? But, hey, I've got 50 bucks for you. Come on. Really?

You all were able to bet \$1.3 billion on Donald Trump's election. You've managed to find tens of millions of dollars to go chase Bigfoot and get logos wrong. Yet we can't help some of our most vulnerable in the province to make sure that they at least have a decent quality of life because, as I believe the Minister of Community and Social Services had said: we've got to create wealth first before you're able to take care of people.

Mr. Panda: Yes.

Mr. Nielsen: I even hear people agreeing with that. How very big of you. How very big of you. I'll make sure to tell that to constituents who are coming to me and e-mailing me saying: I need help from my government.

8:40

When we see that Albertans are going to start to lose about \$500 alone in personal income tax exemptions – the famous bracket creep: I remember I actually brought up a member's statement specifically on that because, Mr. Chair, the Premier, with his hair on fire when he was an MP in Ottawa, railed against how bad that was. I believe actually it was earlier today I had a member's statement talking about being consistent, acting with integrity, standing up for your views. So either the Premier never actually ever believed that when he was in Ottawa, that bracket creep was bad, or somehow, somehow, somewhere he's decided: oh, well, that's different now.

It's very, very interesting, like I said, as we see legislation presented before us. What does it say? What doesn't it say? What's being said about it? Persistently and consistently – at least there's consistency there – those things are butting up against each other.

I've seen concerns from seniors about the Alberta seniors' benefit, potentially losing up to \$750 on that. For a senior on a fixed income that's a lot of money. Hey, I guess the attitude is already prevalent over there. Got to be rich first before you get any. The people that built our province, that have allowed us right here, right now to enjoy that, built on their backs, and we're going to say: sorry; till we're profitable, we can't do anything. Wow. I have a lot of seniors in my riding. You know, I have the North Edmonton Seniors Association. I get seniors from my friend over in Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. My friends over in Edmonton-Castle Downs and Edmonton-Manning all come to that centre. I get the opportunity to chat with them all the time, and I'll tell you that some of them were Conservative voters; they're not now. And I have a feeling that after they see this budget pass, there are probably going to be a few less after that.

You know, my friend from Edmonton-City Centre was talking about some of the things that have happened in health care and, again, the whole line of record spending and being fiscally prudent and everything like that: fiscally prudent to bet on an election, fiscally prudent to go after a cartoon character, fiscally prudent to take away diagnostic imaging privileges from chiropractors and physiotherapists, claiming it's going to save the system money. Yet now we found out that it's turning out that it's costing about \$4 million more. Not my numbers, by the way; this was the chiropractors that figured this stuff out.

I believe, actually, Mr. Chair, that's called red tape because now instead of somebody being able to go to their practitioner, quickly get an X-ray, and start to get treatment, they've got to go through the extra step of booking through their general practitioner, then getting that X-ray, then going back to that general practitioner to look at that X-ray, and then hopefully they'll pass that on to the chiropractor or the physiotherapist so then they can get their treatment.

Oh, I know you can say: well, people have the ability to just go and pay for it. How can they pay for it? You've taken away \$500 from their personal income tax, their insurance is going up, their property taxes are going up, their school fees are going up. Where are they supposed to come up with that money? You could have maybe helped them out a little bit here in Bill 8, alleviated some of those costs.

That's certainly a barrier for somebody who's on AISH. They need to get treatment. They have to go the long way, and I'm hearing about this. People are waiting weeks. I even heard one report of somebody waiting up to a year to be able to get treatment. That's ridiculous, all because, well, we thought it would be fiscally prudent, and it wasn't. I'm surprised that there hasn't been a move to reverse that by now. When the actual stakeholders come to you with a report – I know the government has it. They gave me a copy of it. I've seen it. Maybe you could invest that \$4 million into AISH.

As you can imagine, Mr. Chair, I've got some considerable problems here with Bill 8. I don't see myself in a position to be able to support this. I mean, if there were certainly some changes that were going to be coming out of this debate and this discussion that would help constituents with their rising insurance costs or rising property taxes, paying more for just simply working – and that reminds me. I've got a couple of friends who work in oil and gas. One was a j-man electrician, used to make some good dollars. Used to. It's funny; he goes to work now, doesn't get paid double time. You took that away. How does that help Albertans? Now he's on an agreement where he gets one day off a week. He's almost not even able to come home just because of the distance from Fort McMurray to Edmonton; you know, that whole change between averaging arrangements and averaging agreements. It's funny because he said quite directly: "I thought you supported me. I

thought you said that my industry was number one. But you've taken this away from me." So now he's making less, but now he's also paying more for all the things that I've been mentioning through this whole time I've been talking.

I don't really believe that the government actually believes that they're making life better for Albertans. I think it's just a line, just like the Premier used to say, when he was in Ottawa, about bracket creep. Clearly, he doesn't believe it now. I remember members that served in the 29th Legislature on the government bench and in the government caucus that used to get up and go on at length about omnibus legislation. I know that every single red tape bill I've seen so far is omnibus. Did you all actually believe it when you said it? What changed? There are a lot of things that seem to have changed, including the attitude towards helping Albertans trying to make ends meet. Instead, we're doing things like helping multibillionaires make more billions.

I'm not afraid to say it: the Walton family doesn't need your help. I think they're making enough. They're paying their utility bills. They're paying their gas bills. They're paying their insurance. They're paying their property taxes on probably multiple properties when people are having a hard enough time keeping one property.

We need to do better. Bill 8 isn't it. Mr. Chair, I would certainly urge every member of this House to oppose this piece of legislation. We need to do better. We need to look after everyone so that no one gets left behind. No one. And if I can make a suggestion, let's drop this attitude about: we have to be rich and wealthy before we help the ones that need it and that built this province that we're currently enjoying.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

8:50

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Next I believe I see the hon. Member for Calgary-South East has risen to respond.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Chair. Again, the funding in Bill 8 will ensure the government can cover the health care costs of the pandemic while also sending aid and equipment to Ukraine, providing electricity rebates to Albertans struggling with rising costs, and supporting child care workers and parents of young children. It's unfortunate that the members opposite continue to be offside with the financial expectations of Albertans, that elected us with a mandate to repair the fiscal and economic damage caused by the previous government.

We inherited a government with spending increases in many areas that exceeded population growth and inflation. Now, to be fair, some of these issues preceded the NDP government, but they saw the trajectory, and they chose to ignore it or to make it worse, to place that burden, with interest, on future Albertans. Programs were growing at 6 per cent, 8 per cent, or even more per year, putting into question if we could provide these services at the same level for our children and grandchildren without large future tax increases. Broadly, the NDP raised spending an average of 4 per cent per year. At that rate of spending, even at the budget's projected commodity prices and, again, making the assumption that they hadn't harmed businesses or our energy sector further, Alberta would have a \$6 billion deficit this year, a \$7.5 billion deficit next year, and a \$9 billion deficit in 2024.

How did they plan to pay for this? By increasing taxes, increasing regulatory burden, shutting down the energy industry. Sadly, for the Albertans that lost their jobs and saw their businesses go under, this was the NDP plan. They now claim that the balanced budget presented is solely the result of a thriving energy sector. I would

invite the members opposite to explain: if on the one hand the NDP believes our energy sector is making a significant contribution to the public services Albertans and indeed Canadians require, why did they do everything in their power to harm the industry, to chase investment away, to shut it down?

Our government took the opposite approach, an approach that has resulted in a balanced budget, an approach we can't take credit for because it was mandated to us by Albertans. We cut taxes, we eliminated red tape and unnecessary regulatory burden, and we championed our world-class energy sector, our industries, and our businesses. They criticize our approach, particularly the job-creation tax cut, but you know what happened, Mr. Chair? This year Alberta will collect approximately \$400 million more in annual corporate tax revenue at our 8 per cent rate than the previous NDP government did at 12 per cent. Our government has also cut over 21 per cent of red tape, saving Albertans and their businesses an estimated \$1.2 billion while making Alberta a desirable place to invest.

Listening to the debate tonight, it's clear to me that the members opposite aren't upset with the budget or the supplementary estimates we're debating tonight. They're upset that Alberta is doing so much better now that they aren't in government, that their job-killing policies have been removed, forgetting that Albertans put us here to do just that. Despite their narrative of fear and cuts, the province is providing world-class public services more efficiently and more sustainably, and the province is projecting surpluses instead of deficits. Albertans are getting back to work and, maybe worse for the NDP, back to normal.

I invite the members opposite to join Albertans in moving forward and to celebrate the remarkable turnaround of our province. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Are there any members? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has risen.

Member Irwin: Oh, gosh, I don't know if I can follow that. I sure wish – what's his riding, the environment minister? I sure wish he were here because he repeatedly rails – sorry. I sure wish he was listening. He might be listening. I'm not going to refer to his presence or absence. He's always railing against us for using notes, and I haven't seen such an incredible use of notes as I did tonight, multiple times, in fact.

Anyways, I do feel sorry for Calgary-South East because, clearly, he's the appointed one to speak tonight. I would hope that some of the other MLAs, if they are so passionate about their budget and about Bill 7 and Bill 8, which we're talking about tonight, supplementary estimates, that they, too, would join this debate and share their passion with the House and, in fact, share their passion with their constituents, because, as my colleagues have shared tonight, we are hearing very much directly from our constituents, who are struggling.

Mr. Shepherd: Apparently his, too.

Member Irwin: Yeah. Apparently his, too, and in fact I do hear from a lot of folks from all over this province, many of whom do not find that they get a response from their UCP MLAs.

Mr. Panda: The thing is, unlike them, we did it drama free.

Member Irwin: Again, I hope that perhaps the Minister of Infrastructure will join in the debate as well, because I'm sure he's quite passionate about the supplementary estimates as well. I will await his entering the debate.

Member Ceci: With bated breath.

Member Irwin: Yes, very much with bated breath.

You know, I did have a chance to speak to this bill last evening as well, and I actually was in the midst of talking about education when my time ran out, and my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora actually continued my train of thought. She had just mentioned the fact that I'm home in my riding to a lot of incredible community schools. I represent mature neighbourhoods in the core of Edmonton with, you know, a lot of old schools. Delton school is one of those schools. It's a fantastic school. It's in the community just north of where I live, with just amazing staff and students there. It was actually the number one capital ask on Edmonton public's list, Delton school, yet it didn't make this government's cut for funding.

We asked the minister multiple times, actually, the Education minister, if she would be willing to come with myself and the Education critic and tour Delton school and just see how much need there is in that community, and unfortunately she has not accepted our request. You know – always the optimist – hopefully she still will because it's not too late to do the right thing for my constituents.

You know, I don't have a lot of time here, so I won't get into as much detail as I did yesterday, but education is a big one for us. My colleague from Edmonton-City Centre gave a great summary yesterday of health care. I wanted to get on the record, because I didn't get a chance yesterday, just a couple of comments from my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud. She didn't get a chance to hammer this one home on Children's Services in sup supply. Just two days ago the Minister of Children's Services admitted, thanks to the incessant prodding of my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud, that she has not spent \$55 million of her provincial budget on child care out of \$350 million in 2021, and she won't say what she's doing with that money. That's quite concerning to my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud, who, as we know, as our Children's Services critic, has been in touch with countless stakeholders and talks to both parents and families accessing child care and also to child care providers and is kind of wondering: what the heck is happening with that funding?

My colleague has pointed out that it's likely a breach of their agreement with the feds, which states quite explicitly that they can't replace provincial funding with federal funding. I would love to get some clarity on that. It seems like there are a lot of questions that remain when it comes to these supplementary estimates, so if anyone in the Chamber has some light to shed on that, we would love to hear it.

You know, I noticed the Associate Minister of Status of Women in – I just noticed her. I try not to refer to presence or absence, but I had the opportunity in budget estimates to ask that associate minister questions about Status of Women, and while Status of Women might not be explicitly tied to supplementary estimates, there is a little bit in there about culture and the funding given to Ukraine.

9:00

I do need to get on the record again just the fact that this government had an opportunity – I just had to talk about women, you know – to invest in women and to really bolster that associate ministry, but instead they chose to continue to minimize the importance of that ministry. And it started before this associate minister took over, so I'm not blaming her. Immediately one of the first moves we saw from this government was, obviously, throwing Status of Women in with culture and multiculturalism, making a large ministry and not having a stand-alone ministry for Status of Women.

You know, I raise for this minister, too, just some of the big concerns that we have, actually concerns that don't necessarily require large numbers on a budget line but do require support from this government, and those are things like gender-based analysis plus, GBA plus, which is a proven policy approach to ensure that programs, proposed legislation, any policies that a government is putting forward are viewed from an intersectional lens and that the impacts of said document pieces are very much thoroughly assessed. That makes for better decision-making. That makes for evidence-based decision-making, and we weren't able to get from this minister any answers on why something like that would be fully thrown out in this government's business plans.

I needed to get that on the record. Again, I've said it many times in this House already in this short time that it feels like we've been – well, maybe it doesn't feel like a short time we've been in session; sometimes it feels like a very long time. But, you know, I've said it many times that this government had a true opportunity, as was noted by one of the members over there on that side, with windfall revenues, oil prices higher than they've been in a long time. What an opportunity this government had to make a visionary budget – right? – to tangibly improve the lives of our constituents, and they chose not to. [interjection] Well, hopefully, we'll hear more from Calgary-South East, because clearly he's got a lot to say today.

They chose not to. You know, it's not shocking from this government, but it certainly is disappointing, especially at a time when they can't point to not having the funds to do so. I just don't think – and I've said it multiple times in this Chamber – that bragging about a balanced budget is something that you should be doing when people are still struggling.

That leads me to my last point tonight – I talked about it at length last night, but I'll talk about it again – and that's utility bills. It's about affordability, about the fact that our constituents are telling us every single day that they're struggling. And as I shared the other night – well, I believe it was last night, maybe the night before; all the nights blend together – it's not just my constituents in Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. It's constituents in Morinville-St. Albert, where we were door-knocking. It's constituents in Strathcona-Sherwood Park, where we were door-knocking, right? It's constituents all over this province, many of whom are in UCP ridings. I just can't understand how it is, when I'm trying to help folks, when my staff are trying to help folks that we're hearing from – you know, it's hard. Especially, it's hard when you can say: "Well, the government has got a \$50 rebate they can give you. I mean, you're not going to get it right away, and I know it's only going to make a very tiny dent in your bills." It's hard when we don't have concrete help for them.

I mentioned earlier today in the Chamber that the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity's offer was, you know, that your constituents can call the Utilities Commission and that they can also just figure out a fixed-rate contract, right? And my point earlier today was: why is this government telling Albertans to just go figure it out on their own? Why not take those steps as a government? Why not? I mean, we know that affordability is an issue that's impacting folks from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Why not address that, right? Why not? Especially if you think you're heading into an election here shortly, why not make some moves that are truly going to improve the lives of the folks that you represent?

You know, with that, I could speak a whole lot longer. Oh, gosh, I could talk about AISH. I could talk about housing some more. Hey, I could even talk about Walmart, like my colleague did there. Don't get me started on praising Walmart. But I will avoid doing that, and instead I will end my remarks.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Associate Minister of Status of Women has risen.

Ms Issik: Mr. Chair, I move to adjourn debate on Bill 8.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Chair: I see the hon. associate minister has risen again.

Ms Issik: Thank you. I move that the committee rise and report Bill 3 and report progress on bills 7 and 8.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East has risen.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 3. The committee reports progress on the following bills: Bill 7 and Bill 8.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Any opposed, please say nay. That is carried and so ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 3 Special Days Act

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Minister of Culture has risen.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise and move third reading of Bill 3, Special Days Act.

Alberta is a province rich in diversity, culture, and heritage. Throughout the year Albertans across the province come together to recognize special days and months. In some events it is a day of great celebration and dance and music, and for others it is a much more sombre day of reflection and remembrance.

We have seen an increasing number of requests for special day recognition, which is a good thing because it means that our province is growing, that people are coming together and in many cases looking for a chance to celebrate. Mr. Speaker, the Special Days Act is internal housekeeping, really, not quite as exciting as actually celebrating, say, Alberta Francophonie Month or Black History Month or as fun as heading to the mountains on Family Day, but it is legislation that is important as it will standardize the process for how Alberta's government recognizes special days. So it's really an act of order and good government. The current process is quite ad hoc and lacks clarity for many people, so this act will give guidance and allow ministers to make ministerial declarations and to make it faster and easier for the date to be acknowledged.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Yes, Mr. Speaker, private members will still be completely free to make private members' bills. This has nothing to do with those regulations in the standing orders. As well, should this act be

passed, the web page that will be created for it will be used to track these events for all Albertans so that they will be able to see and understand and easily find out which days and months have been officially recognized in and by the province of Alberta. Sometimes we see duplicate requests, and sometimes we get questions not quite knowing what's happening or what might be happening for a day or a month that has official recognition. Having this information online, consolidated in one place, will help Albertans save time and find the information they need, including guidelines and regulations that will be developed with it.

For those wondering, the process remains the same for those making requests for special days recognition. You can either write the relevant cabinet minister or submit a request using the request-a-declaration form that will be on alberta.ca. Mr. Speaker, it's important to acknowledge these dates, and we just want to make it easier.

9:10

Before I finish, you know that Alberta was the first province in Canada to recognize Family Day, under Premier Don Getty, which is a day recognized under the Special Days Act. Quite frankly, without federal support often, Alberta has been a leader in cultural support, one of the first provinces in the country to establish a Minister of Culture, a Department of Culture, and we continue that tradition now. Just a short while ago Alberta's Glenbow became the first museum in Canada to soon have perpetual free admission thanks to a gift to the museum. Alberta continues to lead in the whole cultural field. Processes may change over time, but coming together, promoting cultural awareness, and remembering our shared heritage is the one thing that remains the same.

Mr. Speaker, I'm asking again that all members of this House support Bill 3, the Special Days Act. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. the Minister of Culture has moved third reading of Bill 3, the Special Days Act. Is there anyone that would like to speak to third reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Happy to rise this evening to add some comments, I guess, on Bill 3, Special Days Act. You know, at the end of the debate we'll be happy to support it. I guess I have I don't know if it's questions but just maybe some comments that, hopefully, going forward, will be taken in good faith, as they're given. As we know, the bill will allow the declaration of special days, weeks, and months in perpetuity. Of course, we know that right now Albertans can actually already do that. I kind of wonder a little bit about: is this really sort of like a red tape thing? I've heard maybe some comparisons there.

I guess what I'm concerned about, Mr. Speaker, is that, you know, if we are actually looking at Bill 3 as a form of red tape reduction, I fear that may start to trigger a snowball rolling down a hill, as we have heard over and over again, sometimes ad nauseam, about the government wanting to reduce its red tape by one-third and whatnot and get to that one in, one out. So if we're kind of putting in some red tape here, is there going to be a rush now to try to find something else to get rid of here? I know that we tried to make a bit of a big deal around Albertans being able to cut their Christmas trees and not having to pay the \$10, but they still had to fill out the form. Yet we called that red tape reduction. Hopefully, that's not how Bill 3 is being used.

I guess – maybe it's a little harsh to say – I have a concern around Bill 3, and I think it would be prudent of me to bring it up. In terms of priorities, Mr. Speaker, right now Albertans are trying to figure out ways to pay their rising insurance costs. They're trying to figure out ways to pay their rising property taxes, their rising tuition and student loans, you know, and to figure out how to get their money

to go further as they have to pay more income tax. We're focused on this as an actual piece of legislation. The Minister of Culture had mentioned that this is about cleaning up the process a little bit, making it easier, making it smoother. I'm totally onboard with that. Is this really a focus piece that we should be looking at versus some of the other things that, really, I think Albertans are hoping to get help with?

I know we had spoken a little bit earlier this evening, on Bill 8, about some of those things and, obviously, the concerns that we've heard from constituents about this. Again, not that I'm against a smoother process or whatnot, but honestly I really don't remember getting phone calls from constituents saying: "We need a bill to address special days. We need the government to prioritize this over making sure our health care workers have the proper staffing that they need." I mean, it's all great fun, you know, dandy that we get the opportunity to recognize these special moments or to remember things that have happened in history in order to make sure they never happen again, but if there's no relief for you to be able to leave work to be able to go to these special days or special remembrance periods because you're busy working your 16th hour of what was supposed to be a 10-hour shift – again, I don't want to sound like I'm not supportive of Bill 3 because I am, and I'm fully prepared to vote in favour of it. I appreciate the minister bringing it forward and allowing us to discuss this. I just really wish there'd be more of a focus on things that are top of mind right now for Albertans.

As I had mentioned earlier this evening in debate, I bet if I went to my one friend who doesn't get double time anymore, only gets one day home per week, working six and one, the gas price right now – it's just unaffordable for him to actually go home to be with his wife and then go back up to work. You know, would he rather see that addressed, or would he have rather seen Bill 3? I'm pretty sure I would know his answer, Mr. Speaker. I probably wouldn't repeat it, to be honest with you, just knowing my friend. Again, one tiny example around priorities.

I guess the other concern that I may have, and I've kind of voiced this: I guess the example would be the private member's bill bringing in an aviation council. Great idea. I was fully supportive of it, but I had a concern of that bill being used as a bit of a political tool for appointments to it. You know, my hope is certainly that that is not taking place. Speaking with the member, I haven't heard of anything like that yet, which is good. It's there doing its job promoting the aviation industry, but are we potentially going to see, maybe, some abuse of this with the government leading up to an election? I would hope not. To sit here and spend the time to debate this bill and have individuals be promised: well, we'll bring forward the special day if you vote for us. I hope that that would not be the case, Mr. Speaker.

I guess the one shortcoming: when we do declare these days, there is a bit of a short time limit on that. I know the minister did mention that private members are still able to bring forward legislation for that, which could result in kind of a more permanent declaration. I'm kind of hoping that maybe there could have been a clause for something a little more permanent. Obviously, there would probably need to be criteria for that, and I'm not opposed to that sort of thing either. Just, you know, maybe a small shortcoming. Maybe we can look at another time to add that in and just make the bill a little bit better and a very useful tool for Albertans.

9:20

I'm not going to belabour it. I know one of my colleagues also has some things to say on this. I do appreciate the time to be able to add some comments, and I hope that some of things I say, you

know, are taken in good spirit. Again, I'm happy to support Bill 3 when we get a chance to vote on it here in third reading.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 3, Special Days Act, on behalf of my constituents. Bill 3 proposes changes around how to, you know, declare special days. If this bill passes, it will make slight changes, and there are a lot of questions around even what we will achieve after that. The declarations of days, weeks, and months in perpetuity: Albertans do have this mechanism or provisions already, to request these declarations of special days, weeks, or months by the government. They can do it through the website.

The biggest concern to me is that in this spring session of the House we're seeing what we're debating not only with this bill, with the other pieces of legislation: it seems the government still has not learned their lesson and still seems pretty out of touch with Albertans, with what is happening. I was listening to a radio talk show yesterday. The Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction was speaking and providing quite a bit of information. When it came to the question that – the host, I think, asked questions around if the minister can deliver the information that tied the achievements and numbers so that it would help Albertans understand how they are benefiting from what is happening in the House. There was not really a meaningful answer to that.

More than that, I've been, myself, on the radio talk shows, and I did actually pose questions in this House based on the callers' requests and demands, what they were asking, a number of constituents and people from my neighbour ridings – like, they're close to my office, a few blocks away from my office – walking into my office, sending e-mails. Their concern was affordability, particularly the rising cost of gas prices at the gas stations, the rising cost of natural gas, and skyrocketing prices of electricity. That is where I heard from an angry young man: "My credit card is full. I don't know. What should I do? I'm calling the service providers, but they are telling me that if you can't pay the bill, shut off your heat and put on a hoodie."

Those are the kinds of concerns I'm hearing, and I was expecting, you know – we are all members from different ridings, even members from different parts of the province, and we get the chance to go back weekly if not daily during session. I'm very sure the messages in their communities are not going to be very different. What I'm hearing in my area is people calling me and seeking my intervention. Unfortunately, I cannot. My position is limiting that. Families living across from schools are not being able to have their kids accepted because of the capacity issue. They're on a wait-list, and they're in fear that they will end up going to a faraway school and that will change their whole lifestyle and nature of work or their ability to work. Where bus service is not an option also: a number of those issues. The class sizes.

I attended the grade class, grade 6 students, the past week. Their desks are cramped, and their classes are crowded. These students share these concerns. I'm amazed at the way these 6th grade students, I think, at the age of 10-12, talk about their experience, how it has changed within three years, marching the classes together from one room to another room, due to lack of teachers in their school, due to lack of education staff in their school.

I received a letter from a constituent that she has graduated from the University of Alberta and she's not able to find a job in the tech sector in Alberta. I can agree to that concern as I do have my own son, my own nephew, graduated in digital media and IT. They're struggling to find a job in Alberta for the past two years and going

through a lot of interviews right now. All of those proposals and all of those options are from either Ontario, Vancouver, or from different parts of the country.

That letter also said that she's so glad and thankful to the previous government that she was able to achieve and able to afford higher education, benefited from the tuition caps. Now her sister is also – her younger sister, her sibling, is struggling to manage between her fees and studies and finding jobs. Her fees have jumped almost to double. That is a long letter, two pages of letter, that I received in my office.

I was wishing after this issue – and that issue was not normal inflation. It was not something that cannot be felt when you see the utility prices, the gas prices raised to 300 per cent. The people who paid \$900, their bills jumped to \$1,900. Insurance is the area I just tried to refrain from discussing, but, you know, I think I have a duty to speak of my constituents' concerns. The rising cost of insurance as well is, like, 40 per cent. It's just a joke.

9:30

So those are kind of the concerns. I was at two events today, and I'm in my office, and that's what was being discussed. That's what we hear from our constituents, and that's what we wanted to discuss, and that's why I wanted to have this information on the record, that I do listen to my constituents and we do represent their concerns and their issues in the Assembly, that all members of the Assembly can come together and be serious about addressing their issues.

This bill is not one of those that I can go back to my constituents and claim that, you know, the government is serious about your concerns. The government is serious, and they are willing to address, and they're listening: that is not the message that this bill sends back.

We are spending – I think we are halfway through this spring session, and not even a single debate I could participate in that is focusing on what Albertans are going through. Alberta has seen unprecedented, you know, revenue in the last at least six, seven years, but Albertans are not feeling it. Albertans are not feeling that. They're happy about a balanced budget, but that balance is not really visible on their tables, in their daily lives.

The bill we discuss: as I said, there are a number of questions around it. I will be happy to hear from the minister or anybody from the government House members exactly why we are discussing this bill, what kind of changes Albertans will benefit from when we already have legislation where Albertans can request for a special day, month, and week. I definitely have a lot of questions on this bill, and I will be sharing and putting these questions in the House and will be happy to hear from the ministry.

With that, I conclude my remarks on this bill, and I'll be happy to seek the opportunity in the future to discuss and raise my questions around this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question.

The Minister of Culture to close debate.

Mr. Orr: I'll waive.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 2

Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022

[Adjourned debate March 22: Mr. Rutherford]

Ms Issik: I rise to ask for unanimous consent for one-minute bells for all of Committee of the Whole.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Bill 2, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022, is before the Assembly. Are there others wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 2, which is the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022. This is the act which implements the budget. We are, of course, in estimates and in budget debate, so we've had many opportunities to speak about the budget, but I am excited to speak about it again. I think the thing that I want to focus my comments on in this instance, because it deals specifically with it in this particular bill, which deals with taxation, is what the Premier used to refer to as the sneaky, pernicious, backdoor tax grab, which is to say failing to index to inflation. What that means is that as Albertans are seeing costs rise with inflation and significant costs rising, some faster than the cost of inflation – I think perhaps specifically of, you know, the costs of utilities, natural gas, electricity, that sort of thing, also insurance. Massive increases.

We're seeing costs rise. We have been for a while seeing wages sort of struggle to keep up. This was actually one of the issues that drove me originally into politics, having to deal with this sort of increased income inequality and how it hollows out the middle class and ultimately the impact on civil society and, actually, on democracy in the end because I think that creation of greater inequality is actually very bad for democracy. A number of other factors there, the hollowing out of the media, but this is definitely one of them. Yes, we're seeing this government sort of slowly bracket creep to increase taxes.

This isn't a small amount. Over the course of this government's fiscal plan they have admitted that this is \$1 billion – \$1 billion – coming out of the pockets of Albertans. These are everyday, middle-class Albertans that are giving up this \$1 billion to this UCP government. Meanwhile they have billions of dollars to give away to corporations. Now, they claim this will create jobs. There are not only a lot of good studies on how this, which is really just trickle-down economics, doesn't work, but there's also proof right here in Alberta. They implemented it, and you know what happened? It didn't create jobs, which is what everybody said was going to happen, yet they proceeded anyway.

In the first year when they dropped the corporate tax rate and it didn't create jobs, they thought: "Wow. That sure didn't work. You know what we should do? We should definitely triple down and accelerate it and give it away faster and create no jobs." I don't know. I feel like, personally, if I started a program and the program didn't work at all, I wouldn't think that I should do it more. But there you have it. That's the UCP for you.

So while they're giving these billions away to corporations, who send it out in dividends to overseas shareholders, to people who are very wealthy, they are taking that money and backfilling that hole that they have created in the budget from everyday Albertans, from middle-class Albertans struggling to get by. They are struggling, Mr. Speaker. We hear from them every day. They write in to our offices from across the province to tell us that they are struggling, that families with two kids and two jobs are struggling to make ends meet. They're struggling to pay the rent and the mortgage, to buy food, and to pay their utilities. What that means when they have less and less money in their pockets, in the pockets of those middle-class

Albertans, is that that's money they are not spending in the local economy.

9:40

We know that low- and middle-income Albertans are way more likely to spend their money in the local economy, so this government, by taking money away from those low- and middle-class Albertans and transferring that wealth to very wealthy people, many of whom don't even live in this province, is actually sort of hurting our local economies. They're hurting small businesses that could be getting that. That's a big, big problem.

These Albertans aren't just struggling under income taxes that this government is raising, because this government has also raised their property taxes. You may ask: how is that possible? Well, they cut MSI funding. They cut police funding. This is funding that goes to municipalities. Municipalities can't carry deficits the way a province can, so they don't really have a lot of options. They can either cut services or they can raise taxes.

It gets even worse for rural municipalities because this government downloaded onto them massive costs for what they claim is their rural crime strategy. Really, it's not theirs at all. They're not paying for a dime of it. They sort of forced that upon municipalities, municipalities who, incidentally, always had the option. They always had the option to buy into a contract for additional RCMP officers. They chose not to, so this government did it for them. That will raise property tax bills for those residents, some of them up to \$400 for a family. That's very problematic.

Then there's the cost of insurance. Ah, the cost of insurance. We hear about this all the time. Folks are struggling. Now, this government loves to talk about how it was the fact that we put in a cap that caused them. First off, the cap was 5 per cent, and that wasn't this year, when inflation is large. That was in past years when inflation wasn't nearly that large. Now, these folks love to rail about the fact that we accounted for population and inflation in our budget, that some budgets' population and inflation increases added up to 4 per cent. "That's ridiculous," they say. "How could anything possibly cost 4 per cent more? That's insane." Meanwhile, with insurance, we capped it at 5 per cent, five being larger than four, and these folks say: "Oh, that's ridiculous. How could you hold insurance companies to only 5 per cent a year? How could they possibly live within 5 per cent a year?"

Mr. Speaker, that's absurd. That's absurd. Five per cent a year is totally reasonable. In fact, our Finance minister at the time – the best Finance minister in history – went out and had conversations with those insurance companies and said: "You know what? We're going to give you a chance to prove yourselves. Demonstrate to us why your costs are going up more than 5 per cent a year, and we are happy to listen." But this UCP government pulled the cap, and they didn't require that demonstration. That's why it is so absurd that they stand in this place every time and say: "Oh, it's because the NDP held it to 5 per cent. That's why they went up." That's ridiculous. If it was true that 5 per cent was insufficient, all the UCP had to do was ask them to generate the report that they were already generating for the NDP government, the report that they were already working on. They let them get away without putting in that report, and it's because they knew. It's because they knew that they didn't need more than 5 per cent, so they didn't make them prove it. They just gave them whatever they wanted at the cost of Albertans.

Tuition – tuition – is also a thing that goes up in this budget. Not just tuition but the interest on student loans. People out there wanting to go to university, wanting to better themselves are having to pay that increased tuition, and they're having to pay increased costs on that debt. That makes a big difference, Mr. Speaker, in

people's lives, and it makes a big difference, too, in terms of people's ability to better their situation.

You know, I'm very lucky. I had parents that were in a position to finance my first degree because they both had degrees. My mom, for instance: her parents worked hard, and they saved a lot of money to pay for that first degree. My mom was born in Scotland, and her parents came here when she was four years old because there was no work over there. I believe that her dad, my grandfather, had, I would say, roughly an 8th grade education. They came here and they worked hard. They put her in university, and she did the same for me, and I hope to do the same for my daughter.

The point is that that trajectory that we were able to achieve because of affordable tuition is a trajectory that this government is closing off to people in a similar situation, to people coming here from other countries to better their situation. I think that that's really sad, because I very much believe that your ability to go to university should be based on – well, I mean, ideally, everyone would go – how hard you work and your achievement and that sort of thing, not on whether or not your parents have enough money. So that's another big one.

One that I think is incredibly problematic in this is the Alberta child tax benefit. Because this hasn't been indexed, families are losing on average \$450 a year, and that money is a big deal, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta child tax benefit I feel like we don't talk about enough. That was something that was brought in under the NDP government. It cut child poverty in half. It cut child poverty in half. Again, that was our Finance minister who did that, and that's an incredible achievement. It's something we should be very, very proud of. It's certainly not something that we should be seeking, like this UCP government is, to erode. When we make progress, when we move forward, when we lift children out of poverty, we should stick with that. We should do more of it, not what this UCP government is doing, which is eroding it.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure I have told this story before in the House because it was very, very meaningful to me. Before the 2019 election I was out door-knocking. I knocked on the door of one particular woman who came to the door, and I said, you know, "What are your views on politics?" She said, "I don't follow it much." I said: "Okay. Well, has anything the government done impacted your life?" And at this time it was NDP government. She said: "Oh, well, I'm actually trying to go back to work right now after the birth of my third child, and I had tried to go back previously after previous children. It was really hard because I couldn't afford to have someone look after my kids while I was going on interviews." And she said, "Now I get the child tax benefit, and it meant that I was able to afford to pay someone to watch my kids while I went on a job interview, and it was just such a relief."

The story stays with me, Mr. Speaker, because it reminded me why I do what I do. It reminded me why I come to this place, why I run in elections. For that woman that action on behalf of the government made all the difference. Maybe it was only a small difference, you know, not having to, like, try to figure out what to do with her kids while she went on interviews for jobs, but for a lot of people that's life changing. You know, being able to go into an interview calm and composed and put together and knowing that you're able to pay someone to provide high-quality care for your kids while you're going back to work is a big deal. It made a big difference in her life, and I'm sad to see this government try and erode it. I wonder if she were in the same situation today, what the impact would be.

9:50

This also is a budget that doesn't account for inflation, which, again, is extremely high, the highest it's been in 30 years, for any

sort of benefits. That's AISH or the seniors' benefit or Alberta Works. I believe that is the program. It means that a senior couple will have \$750 less in their pocket. That may not seem like an enormous amount of money, but for people living on the edge – and there are a lot of them, Mr. Speaker; we hear from them every day in our offices – it is a lot of money, and it does make a big difference.

So I don't support this bill, and honestly I don't think the UCP members should support this bill either. I think that if they're really listening to their constituents, they know that they shouldn't support this bill. They must have . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022, and follow the very able and capable debate of my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View, who I think very succinctly summed up what this bill means for Albertans, for Alberta families. It means higher costs. It means less money in their pockets at a time when this government is choosing to give more dollars away to those who already have a lot. Profitable corporations: they're getting more dollars from this government. Insurance companies: absolutely, they are making more money under this government. Average Albertans: they are taking home less. At a time when Albertans are facing record costs with inflation, from their utility bills, from their insurance costs, this government is charging them more and giving them less.

Now, that flies in the face of what this government purports to be, Mr. Speaker, certainly the very populist appeal that it rode into office on. Certainly, it's absolutely contrary to the Premier's own past history and the promises that he made, but sadly it is the reality of what Albertans are facing under this government.

This budget, Mr. Speaker, as enabled by Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022, the budget implementation act, marks a grand achievement on the part of the government, that achievement being that it is now collecting more tax, more revenue from individual personal income tax than it is from corporations. This government came into office with their promises of their \$4.5 billion corporate giveaway, immediately moved forward on that, gave hundreds of millions of dollars away to companies that immediately pocketed those proceeds and took them out of the province, did not create a single job, did not invest in a single thing. In fact, they turned and laid Albertans off.

And, in thanks for that, the government turns and gives them more dollars and, in turn, now puts the burden of the tax system on the individual Albertan. Those same folks that lost their jobs with those companies who pocketed the corporate giveaway from this government are now paying more tax to this government, higher utility bills, more property taxes, paying more for insurance. This government has shifted the burden from those who have to those who have less.

Under this government something they were doing through the back door, something that they swore they would never do, and that is raising income taxes on Albertans. Now, of course, the tax rate, Mr. Speaker, has not in fact changed, and the Minister of Finance will pat himself on the back for that, and he will stand and he will speak very proudly of that. But the fact is that he is taking more income tax from a vast number of Albertans because he deindexed the income tax brackets, something the Premier, as we have talked about quite a bit – and it's been quoted, and the videos are available on social media – railed against, that practice, when it was a Liberal government in Ottawa, but it is the practice of this United

Conservative government in Alberta. As I said earlier, they do not have the guts to tax Albertans honestly. They do it under cover.

The basic personal exemption for Alberta income tax in 2019, Mr. Speaker, was \$19,369. Under the UCP in 2025 the personal exemption will remain \$19,369. Now, if they had left it indexed, if they had not used this underhanded way of taking more tax dollars out of the pockets of Albertans, that personal exemption would be \$22,219. So every year this government is taking more dollars away from Albertans at a time when this government is costing them more. If the income tax system had remained indexed through 2025, all Albertans would have seen an increase in the basic personal exemption of \$2,850.

So, simply put, on that measure alone, the statistically average family in Alberta is paying more than \$500 extra because the UCP government is taxing inflation. At a time when they are giving dollars away to corporations, when they are giving record profits to insurance companies, they are costing average Alberta families \$500 more. Now, of course, they will pat themselves on the back because they're giving them back \$50 a month on their \$700, \$800, \$900 utility bill, but at the same time they are taking \$500 away, Mr. Speaker.

Now, as my colleague for Calgary-Mountain View noted, it wasn't enough for the government simply to charge every Albertan more income tax, they also decided that they would take away dollars from those who need them most through things like the Alberta child and family benefit as they degrade and erode the value of those benefits every single year. Indeed, a family with two children will lose about \$485 in income because the government is not increasing the ACFB with inflation. As my colleague noted, that is a benefit that helped cut child poverty in this province by 50 per cent, in half, one of the biggest impacts we have seen in terms of a government policy in ending child poverty in this province, and this government decided, at a time when it was handing more dollars away to profitable corporations, taking away the cap to let insurance companies, with no accountability, raise their rates to whichever level they should choose, that families being lifted out of poverty should pay \$485 more. That's quite the Alberta advantage under the United Conservative government, Mr. Speaker.

We know that overall, under this government, Albertans are paying more than \$1 billion in additional income tax – \$1 billion, Mr. Speaker – out of the pockets of everyday Albertans in a way that this government cannot even be honest about. They will not admit it, but they're happy to take it. The most vulnerable Albertans, the folks who are struggling the most, are losing every single year. Again, while this government gives away dollars to profitable corporations, while it gives away those dollars to insurance companies, while it raises property taxes, while it defunds municipalities and increases the burden on people, they are also taking dollars away from seniors and people that are living with disabilities.

10:00

The annual AISH amount in 2019 under our government, Mr. Speaker, was \$20,220. The annual AISH amount under this government in 2025 will be \$20,220, not one dollar more under record inflation, rising costs in every aspect of these individuals' lives, not one dollar more because those dollars are going to profitable corporations. They are going to insurance companies. They are going to utility companies. They are going to this government's friends.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The annual AISH amount, if this government had not made the unconscionable decision to deindex these benefits, would have been \$23,195, Mr. Speaker. That is \$3,000. That is a huge amount for an individual who is making such a small amount per year. But this government decided to balance its books, to show its fiscal prudence. It would take that \$3,000 away from individuals who are living with a disability, who are already struggling to pay rent and buy food, because that's politically convenient for them.

The Alberta seniors' benefit in 2019 under our government: \$5,145. Under this government in 2025 it will still be \$5,145. If it had stayed indexed, it would have been \$5,902. Seniors, Mr. Speaker, indeed are struggling right now with rising utility costs, with rising insurance costs because this government, again, wants to prioritize its political friends, wants to prioritize profitable corporations, wants to prioritize covering its own bottom line and looking good even at a time of record oil revenues, which they did nothing to earn.

They'd rather splash those dollars on their energy war room. They would rather burn those dollars on their 1 and a half billion dollar gamble on the re-election of Donald Trump and take those dollars away from seniors and people living with a disability. It's shameful, Mr. Speaker. But that is the decision of this government, however much they try to obfuscate, however much they try to deny, however much they try to shake their fist at Ottawa to distract from this unconscionable action on their part.

It's also interesting in this bill, Mr. Speaker, that the act is modified. They make a modification to the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act to make it explicit or to clarify – that's a favourite word of this government to do things that they want to do and want to claim were already there even though they're making the change. They like to talk about how they are clarifying legislation. This was quite clear before, actually. This was something that we put in place under our government, but of course then this government clarified legislation to say that they had the right to tear up the contract with doctors whenever they wished. They are, at least, in this act, apparently, modifying to make it explicit or clarify that only the AMA, the Alberta Medical Association, can negotiate on behalf of doctors for compensation.

Again, Mr. Speaker, what we have here is the government trying to cover up for things it has previously done and its decision in 2020 to use the powers they awarded themselves in Bill 21 to tear up the contract with Alberta doctors whenever they wish, simply at the whim of the minister, a one-sided agreement. Of that legislation, of course, the minister at the time said that he was clarifying a power that he believed he already had.

Now in this act we see them backtracking once they realized the damage they have done, as indeed we see that they have continued to drive doctors out of our province, that we have fewer doctors in many areas now than we did when this government came into power, that we have far more Albertans without a family doctor than when this government came into power, that we have severe problems in many areas of the province having doctors like anaesthesiologists and others that are badly needed to dig us out the hole that this government has put us in coming out of this pandemic, with the tens of thousands of cancelled surgeries.

We have rolling closures of ERs across the province of Alberta because we do not have enough physicians to cover, hospitals that are struggling right now at 130 per cent capacity and do not have enough coverage to look after patients overnight, so I suppose I at

least support this part of the bill as the government again attempts to backfill a small amount of the damage they've done.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

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 Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2022. It's actually a bit of a tough act to follow my colleagues the Member for Calgary-Mountain View and the Member for Edmonton-City Centre. They've raised so many of the issues and concerns that I, too, share with respect to what's in this bill but, most importantly, what's not in this bill and what it does not address. They've gone through in great detail, outlining precisely the impact, for example, of bracket creep, which is, I know, an obscure term. Frankly, until I was elected as an MLA, I wasn't familiar with what that term meant, but I became familiar with it quite quickly in 2019, when the Premier did deindex personal income tax.

At the time I was quite – you know, I spoke out, actually, and spoke to media a little bit about it because it was quite shocking to me when I heard, of course, that the Premier had spoken out against this very kind of change, which basically means that as inflation affects your personal income, actually your tax bracket, you get bumped into the next tax bracket. That's pretty much what it means. The personal exemption continues to be small, and it doesn't apply to you, and you get bumped out of that personal exemption phase in your income sooner because, basically, personal income tax is frozen. The Premier spoke out against that many times. In fact, he's got a long and lengthy history on record in the Houses of Parliament speaking out against it and calling it an insidious and pernicious tax creep and referring to other Members of Parliament at that time as “bracket creeps.”

I think at this point, though, three years into this government, it's not so much the hypocrisy that shocks me anymore about the Premier and the UCP government in terms of the actions they take but, I think, an overall concern and question that continues to come up, which is: what are the principles of this government anymore? What do they really stand for? They seem to very quickly shed the things that they claim are most important to their core beliefs at the drop of a hat, and they do it for insidious reasons. They were easily – like, look how quickly the Premier was able to give up something he had railed against for years, this idea of bracket creep, and how quietly and quickly he did it willingly when he became Premier of this province. It wasn't simply that he failed to index personal income tax; he actually ended that practice. It was something that was in place, and he actively took a measure to end that practice, to go against something that he claimed as part of his principles for so long.

That really, I think, speaks volumes about this Premier but also this government, because I have yet to hear any member of the government caucus stand up and explain that complete abandonment of their principles. What they're doing, of course, is raising revenue, raising taxes on Albertans but not having the courage of their convictions to say that's what they're doing, and that's perhaps because nobody knows anymore what their convictions are. I think my colleagues outlined exactly what that means in terms of what it's going to cost Albertans, what it continues to cost Albertans, so I want to speak a little bit about some of the things that my colleagues also spoke to, which were about the deindexing of many benefits that Albertans receive, particularly low-income Albertans.

10:10

I want to talk a little bit about the Alberta child and family benefit. Now, in 2019 this government made a decision to combine two previous benefits, of which one was the Alberta child benefit, which, you know, we brought in as the Alberta NDP, which was critical, as my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View spoke to, in actually reducing child poverty in this province. We know that benefit programs like that are critical. They are perhaps the most critical tool in alleviating child poverty. The UCP government in 2019 combined that with the Alberta family employment tax credit and put it all together into the Alberta child and family benefit. Now, in 2019, when that happened, of course, what the government didn't address was, first of all, that \$50 million less was actually being provided in benefits to vulnerable families. And let's be clear. These benefits go to lower income families primarily, and they are meant to help them with the costs of raising a child and raising a family.

So not only did they mention that they are actually investing fewer dollars, \$50 million less at that time, into this benefit, but they also failed to speak to the reality of the changes they made, which were that, yes, they did provide slightly higher benefits to the lowest income families. We're talking about \$10,000 in annual income. Those are the families who are getting a slightly higher benefit. They dramatically not only reduced the eligibility, made many low-income families ineligible for this benefit, but it actually meant that they received a lot less even if they were still receiving the benefit. For example, Mr. Speaker – and I think it's important to get a sense of what we're talking about here – we're talking about how families earning \$25,000 or more a year saw a drop in their benefit. Twenty-five thousand dollars a year: that is very low income, yet they're actually receiving less in benefits under this government.

The same is true for a family of two parents and two children living at the poverty line, which is under \$40,000 per year in this province, who now receives – well, actually, sorry. In 2019 they received \$500 less per year than they were before. So they actually cut a number of families off it. Now we find out, of course, that they're also not indexing this. And that is becoming more and more relevant at a time when we're seeing the cost of living and inflation – rents are going up because utilities are going up. Everything is going up for these low-income families, and they're actually not going as far with less money, with less purchasing power.

Just earlier this week, Mr. Speaker, we asked the officials from the Ministry of Treasury Board and Finance what analysis they did to actually assess in this past fiscal year what the impact would be on those receiving the Alberta child and family benefit, on those receiving AISH, on those receiving the seniors' benefit. What would be the impact on their purchasing power of failing to index their benefits to the rise in inflation? We asked this question multiple times because we got very interesting answers, and the response that became very clear from Treasury Board and Finance was that they did not assess that because that was not their goal. Their objective last year was to bring down those benefits to be in line with other provinces.

That was their policy objective, actually to lower those benefits and the purchasing power that goes along with them. That was actually their stated outcome: reduce those benefits to make it more in line with whoever the UCP government is comparing themselves against to serve their purposes on this day. When asked about what the impact would be on families, they could not give an answer. I think that's exactly what we're seeing with this

government. They crow about a balanced budget, with a surplus, actually, and do not seem to understand at all that that budget is doing nothing for families. They're not seeing that benefit. They're very proud of it. Conservatives will all vote for a surplus budget – right? – a balanced budget. They're super proud of it. But they don't answer for the fact that their constituents are struggling with higher costs than ever, and there is nothing in this budget to actually make their lives more affordable. They're not seeing what this government is crowing about. They're not feeling it.

I know that that's true for all of the constituents of the UCP caucus members as well. I was door-knocking, as I usually do, in my riding this past week, and it was the number one issue that came up at the doors. I am certain it is coming up at the doors. If they are door-knocking – I don't know if they're spending most of their time actually on a leadership review – they should be listening to their constituents, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. That was great timing. As you know, it is 10:15, and I do hesitate to interrupt the hon. member. However, pursuant to Standing Order 64(4) we must now proceed to Committee of the Whole to vote on the appropriation bills.

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole (continued)

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I will now call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 64(4) I must now put the following question: does the committee approve the following bills, Bill 7, Appropriation Act, 2022, and Bill 8, Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2022?

[The voice vote indicated that the motion carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 10:16 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

For the motion:

Aheer	Long	Rehn
Allard	Luan	Rowswell
Amery	Madu	Sawhney
Copping	Neudorf	Schow
Ellis	Nicolaides	Sigurdson, R.J.
Issik	Nixon, Jason	Singh
Jones	Nixon, Jeremy	Toews
Kenney	Orr	Walker
LaGrange	Panda	Williams

10:20

Against the motion:

Ceci	Irwin	Pancholi
Deol	Nielsen	Shepherd
Ganley		

Totals:	For – 27	Against – 7
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[Motion carried]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 64(4) the committee shall now immediately rise and report.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. members. I believe I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bills: Bill 7 and Bill 8.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Does the Assembly concur in the report?

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for concurrence carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 10:22 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

For the motion:

Aheer	Long	Rowswell
Allard	Luan	Sawhney
Amery	Madu	Schow
Copping	Neudorf	Sigurdson, R.J.
Ellis	Nicolaides	Singh
Issik	Nixon, Jason	Toews
Jones	Nixon, Jeremy	Walker
Kenney	Orr	Williams
LaGrange	Panda	

Against the motion:

Ceci	Irwin	Pancholi
Deol	Nielsen	Shepherd
Ganley		

Totals: For – 26 Against – 7

[Motion for concurrence carried]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading (continued)

Bill 4

Municipal Government (Face Mask and Proof of COVID-19 Vaccination Bylaws) Amendment Act, 2022

[Adjourned debate: Mr. Rutherford]

The Acting Speaker: Thank you. Are there any members wishing to join debate on Bill 4?

Seeing none, I am prepared to ask the question, noting that the close of debate has been waived.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Government House Leader has risen.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to everybody for their hard work tonight and all that progress. Therefore, I will move that the Assembly adjourn till tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:27 p.m.]

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