



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday morning, April 21, 2022

Day 22

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Third Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Thursday, April 21, 2022

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 18

Utility Commodity Rebate Act

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity has risen.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise to move a critically important piece of legislation at second reading. I'm referring to Bill 18, the Utility Commodity Rebate Act.

We all know that Albertans have had a difficult time over the past two years. We've witnessed as much with our own eyes, and we've heard the stories from families, friends, and the constituents we represent. First there was the pandemic, accompanied by massive economic hardship and a historic crash in energy prices. Now, driven by geopolitical uncertainty, supply chain disruptions, and a federal government intent on sending spending through the roof, families and businesses are dealing with the worst inflation in decades, which has led to higher prices for everything from food to fuel. For many Albertans coping with steeper bills, the pressure on their wallet is becoming unbearable. Alberta's government has heard their calls for help, and we've moved quickly in response.

First and foremost, Bill 18 will provide Albertans with some desperately needed fiscal relief. On March 17 we announced electricity rebates to protect families, farmers, and businesses from the worst effects of skyrocketing energy prices. These rebates will provide \$50 a month for three months to compensate for the higher cost of electricity experienced in January, February, and March. That amounts to \$150 in critical assistance for nearly 2 million homes, farms, and small businesses so that they can have some relief on their utility bills. The best part: this rebate doesn't need any complicated application process or confusing documents. We're working with retailers so it will go directly onto their bills, saving Albertans time and money. Families shouldn't have to go into debt to cover their basic living expenses or have to make the choice between putting food on the table or keeping their lights on, and small businesses struggling to recover from the worst effects of the pandemic shouldn't have to cope with even more burdens from energy inflation.

Amid these challenging times we are taking real action to make life a little bit easier for everyone. Our proposed legislation will create a mechanism that lets us roll those rebates out to Albertans swiftly and effectively. Through this bill we are integrating utility commodities under a single legislative framework. The Natural Gas

Price Protection Act does not allow for rebates on electricity. In the interests of efficiency, Bill 18 will replace the original natural gas protection act in order to implement both rebates under the same act. Under this new legislation Alberta's government will have the tools to respond to these high prices we've been seeing and provide much-needed relief to families and businesses. It's not just the right thing to do. Heat and electricity are essentials. They're key to getting through an Alberta winter, and they're an unavoidable cost for just about every small business. This legislation ensures that we can move quickly and effectively to support Albertans against high commodity prices. Alberta's economic recovery and Albertans' peace of mind demand nothing less.

Since the beginning of the pandemic we've been ready with emergency measures for difficult situations, and at this time of price uncertainty that's not going to change. You can see that in other steps we've taken to make life more affordable for Albertans, like removing the provincial fuel tax at the pumps. Later this spring we will be introducing legislation to enable unlimited self-supply of energy with the option to export as well as energy storage. These new tools will help increase competition, add more supply, and bring down energy prices over time. Our government is also reviewing the province's distribution and transmission policies, and we're working with agencies and industry partners to maximize system efficiency to make sure we're getting everything we can out of ratepayer dollars.

Mr. Speaker, there is not a single conversation that I have about utilities that doesn't start and end with affordability. At a time when we have a federal government that is determined to hammer the pocketbooks of families, retirees, and students for just heating homes and, of course, a hangover from the ideologically driven policies of the NDP, this government is stepping up. Unfortunately, we were handed a broken system by the previous government thanks to their short-sighted approach to energy policy. They spent \$7.5 billion on transmission. Seven point five. We all know that new transmission is needed at times, and maintenance, of course, has to be done, but to send such a massive amount when it was clear our economy couldn't support it: an absolute shame. Albertans will be footing the bill of that mistake for years.

To give the members opposite some credit, they were not guilty of starting that overbuild, but they were absolutely guilty of not stopping it. They approved the build-out during the years they sat on this side of the House. They can't blame anyone but themselves for that, Mr. Speaker. When we came into office, we stopped it, and we are making sure that taxpayer and ratepayer dollars are treated with the respect they deserve. Fiscal responsibility is critically important when it comes to the electricity grid, and that's a quality that the previous government lacked on all fronts.

Adding onto that \$7.5 billion loss, their ideological agenda and dedication to their leftist extremist friends lost Albertans another \$1.3 billion through the Balancing Pool. Again, Mr. Speaker, fiscal responsibility is not a luxury for government; it is a necessity.

To top it off was their job-killing carbon tax, forcing families to pay to put the lights on. We put a stop to that, too, Mr. Speaker. All of these are contributing factors as to why Albertans are being forced to pay such high utility bills right now, and all are examples why we cannot let the NDP near our electricity grid ever again.

We are committed to fixing those mistakes and to providing real support to Albertans while we do that. Bill 18 will enable us to provide that support. Mr. Speaker, Bill 18, the Utility Commodity Rebate Act, is part of the suite of measures we're taking to maintain energy affordability in both the short term and the long term. From fiscal responsibility in the transmission and distribution systems to modernizing our grid to allow more supply, the tsunami of new generation that is set to come online, we're looking for ways to

improve affordability at every turn. At this current turn it is the rebates that we can offer to Albertans through the Utility Commodity Rebate Act.

I urge the members of this Assembly to support Bill 18 so we can start to implement the promised electricity and natural gas rebates and get the money into people's pockets. I would say that this is our duty as elected officials, to see this bill passed and get these rebates out as quickly as we can. Albertans deserve nothing less.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, we have an opposition – a hostile opposition – that is fighting us at every turn. I came into this Chamber last night at 7:30. I stood in front of those cameras, and I asked for unanimous consent so that we could go to second reading of Bill 18. Do you know what they said? No. They refused to go to second reading of a bill that will get \$280 million worth of supports out to Albertans.

Now, really, should we be surprised? Let's go back a couple of years. This was the caucus that filibustered a bill that would provide support to victims of human trafficking. That's right, Mr. Speaker. Victims of human trafficking, and they filibustered it. So we should not be surprised that the NDP is choosing to filibuster this. Now, I'm going to give them one more chance. This is a piece of legislation that will provide ... [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister. There are lounges. I'm hearing a lot of conversations happening, so I was wondering if maybe those individuals having those conversations could take them out to the lounges on either side of the House. The individual with the call is the hon. minister, and as everybody knows, there will be an opportunity to respond as well.

Please, hon. minister.

9:10

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess they're laughing because they think it's funny that Albertans are struggling. Well, we don't think it's funny.

I'm going to give them one more chance. The Chief Justice will be in this Legislature at 3 p.m., and with their help we can get royal assent on that bill. We can push this piece of legislation through that will get \$280 million into the pockets of Albertans. But in order to do that, we're going to need them to work with us. At 3 o'clock this afternoon I encourage the NDP – no, Mr. Speaker; I invite the NDP to work with us to help get \$280 million into the pockets of all Albertans. This is not the piece of legislation that you want to filibuster. This is the piece of legislation that you will want to support. I implore them. I invite them. Now, I can appreciate that the Energy file is a difficult file for the NDP, and not because their Energy critic doesn't know the price of electricity. That's part of it, but the Energy file is difficult for the NDP because they bungled it so badly.

I will be releasing an audit later on today that has audited the Balancing Pool's \$1.3 billion losses that happened on their watch. Now, just to put it into perspective, the Balancing Pool was an agency that actually contributed \$4 billion back to ratepayers until the NDP decided to use it to pursue their ideological agenda. I know they're angry. They should be. They should be angry at themselves for doing this to Albertans, but this is a chance for them to show all Albertans that they will support them in their time of need. Mr. Speaker, \$280 million: we would like to get it into the pockets of Albertans as soon as possible.

Please, Mr. Speaker, through you to the hon. members, stop the gaslighting. Help us get this money into the pockets of Albertans, because they're struggling.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any individuals looking to join the debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View has risen.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think, since the minister raised it, that it's worth discussing what our duty to Albertans is in this place. I think that duty starts with trust and it starts with honesty. That minister could certainly learn a few lessons about both of those things.

Ms Issik: Point of order.

Ms Ganley: We were sent here to fight for Albertans, and no matter ...

The Acting Speaker: A point of order has been called. I see the government whip has risen.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Ms Issik: Under 23(h), (i), and (j). I think that she just basically told us that the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity was a liar or misleading the House.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has risen.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, this is not a point of order. The member did not either say that they're a liar or imply that in any way whatsoever; it simply was debate about the level of trust that this government has with the people of this province. Clearly, evidence would indicate that there is good reason to believe that that is a debatable point and one which we will continue to bring up in this House.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: I don't have the benefit of the Blues. I believe that there was something in there with regard to that it could have been abusive language. However, that wasn't the point of order. I didn't hear it quite perfectly, whether it was directed at the government or the minister individually. I think that if it was something that was directed individually at the minister, then perhaps there's an apology there. But I don't have the benefit of the Blues, and I don't have perfect recollection of what was exactly stated.

What I will do is that I will take this opportunity, however, to remind all members that in order for us in this House to have effective debate and do our jobs effectively, obviously, decorum is required. I think that there have been a few comments that have been made, from all sides, that have worked against decorum. I would just take this opportunity to remind all members that effective debate is the goal.

At this point the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View has the call.

Debate Continued

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let us begin with what this bill does. It sets up a framework to allow a rebate. What does this bill not do? It doesn't guarantee a timeline and it doesn't guarantee a rebate, and that is precisely the concern that our Official Opposition has. It is our duty to stand up for those thousands of Albertans who are writing in to us who are struggling with the rising cost of living due directly to decisions of this UCP government.

They removed the cap on electricity. Electricity rates have skyrocketed. They made decisions around insurance that have

caused insurance rates to skyrocket as a result of removing the cap, and then they attempted to hide the report that proved it so that Albertans couldn't see. No one, Mr. Speaker, trusts this government to move forward with this file, so the fact that we are in a position where literally no member of the opposition has spoken to the bill yet and the associate minister is trying to pass it off to Albertans as a filibuster is absolutely absurd.

Let's begin with the history of this file. In the fall, when this Official Opposition began calling on this government to do something about electricity prices, the associate minister rose in this House and said before all members of this Assembly, on *Hansard*, on the record, that he planned to do absolutely nothing – nothing – because skyrocketing prices, Albertans unable to afford their bills were just the market working.

Fast-forward a little bit and we have the government announcing that they're going to do a natural gas rebate. I'm sure that was a great relief to many Albertans in this province who were struggling. Except, Mr. Speaker, the program wasn't real. The government came in, they introduced a budget, and they introduced a program that wasn't going to help Albertans now. It wasn't going to help them until next fall. And when they introduced it, they didn't even introduce it with its own line item of funding because they were hoping that they could hide from Albertans the fact that there was no money allocated to it. Now, they claim it's part of some giant contingency slush fund, but all that is is an attempt to obfuscate from Albertans, an attempt to hide what's actually going on.

So we had the fake natural gas rebate, and the government is still claiming that they are going to do precisely nothing on electricity. Then suddenly they changed their minds. Now they want to do electricity. Now suddenly it matters. That's fine. They come forward with a rebate that their own members have referred to as paltry because it barely touches – it barely touches – the hundreds and thousands of dollars that some Albertans are behind on their bills.

We drafted legislation, legislation that would prevent those Albertans from being disconnected from their utilities. That disconnection ban lifted on April 15. The government refused to hear from us. They refused to even debate it. They refused to have a conversation about it because they didn't think it mattered.

We went into session on February 22. It's not quite two months ago, Mr. Speaker, but it's pretty close. It's pretty close: February 22. We've been in session for two months, and two months later the government comes racing forward with this bill, a bill which is essentially copied and pasted, with minor alterations to include electricity, from a bill that existed in 2001, and we are led to believe that now suddenly this is an emergency. The same government that mere months ago was claiming that this was something they shouldn't do anything about, that this was just the market working, is now telling us that it's an emergency, that they need to rush this legislation, that took them two months to copy and paste, through the House without doing our due diligence on behalf of Albertans.

Now, I know that this government likes to claim that they were sent here with the biggest mandate. But, Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition was sent here for a reason, too. We were sent here to hold this government to account, and this government has proved on file after file after file that they can't be trusted. They come forward, they say, "Trust us; trust us on curriculum; trust us on public health care; trust us on education," and they proved untrustworthy on every single one of those files. On everything that has come forward that is of importance to Albertans, they have proven that they cannot be trusted.

They rescinded the 1976 coal policy with the stroke of a pen with no announcement. They didn't tell people what was coming. Then

they brought it back in and claimed they cancelled all the leases except that they didn't cancel all the leases; they cancelled some of the leases. Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on and on.

9:20

So I think it is our duty in this place to take the time necessary to attempt to improve this legislation, improve it because, again, the legislation is a framework that enables. It does not require the government to do anything, so we are simply meant to take on faith that this government, which has dragged its heels over months, which has waffled back and forth on whether or not Albertans need help or deserve help with respect to the costs that this government has foisted upon them – we're just supposed to trust that they're going to do that?

Suddenly it's an emergency? This government has had months – months and months and months – of doing precisely nothing on this file, but because the associate minister woke up yesterday and decided to copy and paste some legislation, suddenly it's an emergency? Mr. Speaker, it has been an emergency for months. This government has had the capacity to do something about it for months, and they have chosen not to. So to come before this place and claim that the problem isn't a government that has dragged its feet for months and months, that the problem is an Official Opposition filibustering by not even yet having spoken to the bill is just preposterous.

I think there are a few other things that ought to be addressed in the associate minister's comments because I think that it is worth setting the record straight. Let us begin back with the previous Conservative government and a series of bills, bills, Mr. Speaker, which built transmission lines, bills that the NDP opposition objected to in the strongest possible terms. We warned Conservative governments of the day that this would cost Albertans money, that Albertans would be paying for those transmission lines for decades, that they were not necessary. We warned them, and they didn't listen. They didn't listen, and they forged ahead with their ideological bent, ensuring that money was going to their friends.

So they forged ahead with those lines, and, yes, Mr. Speaker, they did result in an overbuild. But the suggestion is that when the NDP government came into office in 2015, we ought to have – what? – gone and ripped them out with our bare hands? The Conservatives had already built them. Contracts were signed. There was no getting the money back. In addition, I think it's worth noting that if you go to the projections – and these are documents that exist. If you go to the projections in terms of what projected transmission growth was and how it scaled down under our government, it proves definitively that the associate minister is – let me be charitable here and say: deeply confused about his own file.

This government is, you know, trying to blame everyone but themselves. Mr. Speaker, in addition to this, we saw a report come out yesterday from the University of Calgary that talked about why electricity costs have skyrocketed, and it is because profits have quintupled. That is the cause according to this paper by the University of Calgary, according to objective analysis, but the government doesn't want to talk about that. The government wants to wave their hands and make up stories and talk about things that never happened.

Mr. Speaker, I think the other thing worth noting, the difference between this government and the NDP when we were in government: every decision we made was made in the best interest of Albertans, of regular people walking around out there, because that was what we were focused on. That is who we were sent here to serve. The government could really stand to remember that when they stand up in this place and they try to create stories about why things are happening when they have been in power for nearly three

years – nearly three years – and they think that they are in a position to blame literally everyone else for problems which they created.

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, the idea that this legislation is the only possible way forward is completely disingenuous. There are multiple ways that this government could have proceeded. In addition, if this government's plan was to use this legislation, they could have introduced it on the 22nd of February. We're currently in April. This is a huge concern, the idea that they couldn't possibly have drafted the legislation any faster, that the Official Opposition has to let it fly through the House despite the fact that it doesn't contain any requirement to provide a rebate, any requirement to provide a rebate on a certain timeline, any requirement about who is getting the rebate. Yes, it's legislation that existed before. It existed in 2001. Yes, the government has altered it to include electricity, and that is just fine. But it's worth discussing the fact that the government had alternate policy options.

When the NDP was in government, we had a rate cap. That rate cap was already in place. They repealed it. They could have brought it back. They could have distributed the money directly to Albertans. If this was the mechanism they chose – and that's their choice; they're the government; they can choose any mechanism they like – they could have brought this legislation before this House on the 22nd of February. If – I don't know – they were still working to get their act together, which seems to be a pretty consistent problem on behalf of this government – maybe they were arguing about which one it is. Maybe they just couldn't focus on this file because they were too focused on their leadership review. Who knows why it took so long? Mr. Speaker, even if that was the case, the leadership review happened on the 9th of April. They could have sent us the legislation to look it over. They could have had that conversation with the Official Opposition. They could have given their own members the heads-up that they intended to move this ahead.

The associate minister tries to write this off as a filibuster. Mr. Speaker, I was in the House last night. I saw a bill get called and the Minister of Finance rise to move that bill and the associate minister come running in and jumping up in front of him. Even their own members didn't know that he planned to ask for unanimous consent to move that forward, so the idea that the Official Opposition ought to have known is preposterous.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is a government with a demonstrated lack of concern for the lives of Albertans. We have seen the associate minister over and over again rise in this place and belittle those concerns, belittle the costs that Albertans are facing, belittle the struggles that Albertans have when choosing whether to keep the lights on or whether to buy their groceries. Those are concerns that the Official Opposition has been listening to, that we have been raising, that we have been bringing forward for months now, and the government has been ignoring it.

Then they announced a natural gas rebate. It was a fake program. It wasn't even coming in until next fall. They didn't anticipate that it would spend any money at all. They said on electricity: they didn't need to do anything about it, that struggling Albertans was the market working. Then they come forward and say that they're going to provide an electricity rebate but no timelines, no mechanism, no discussion of when any of that is going to happen. Then we all wait. We wait for weeks and weeks and weeks. Then the associate minister, finally, five weeks later, manages to copy someone else's homework and brings forward a bill, a bill that guarantees nothing, and comes running into this House and expects the Official Opposition to pass it with zero scrutiny, with zero

concern for the fact that we are passing legislation that doesn't guarantee anything.

We could pass this legislation, and then the minister could decide not to provide the direction to the companies, and there would be no rebate, Mr. Speaker. We could pass this legislation, and there still wouldn't be – and the minister himself admitted it. He admitted it in a news conference. He was asked when this rebate would be in the hands of Albertans, and he said: well, um, you know, we're kind of hoping that the companies will work with us, and we kind of hope that maybe it's going to come out in June, but maybe it might be July. I think this idea, especially with the minister having admitted before the media that the soonest they could possibly get this rebate out the door is June, that somehow the fact that this bill wasn't passed in under six hours is the holdup, that that's the problem, is just absurd. What it is is an associate minister who is embarrassed . . . [interjection] I am happy to give way, but I am the first speaker, so no; no giving way.

9:30

The Acting Speaker: There are no interventions at this point. Thank you.

Ms Ganley: Sorry.

This is an associate minister who is, I mean, essentially embarrassed by his mishandling of the file, and he is attempting to blame it on everyone else. Well, I don't think, Mr. Speaker, that we're willing to let him do that, and I don't think that Albertans are going to buy it. I really don't think that Albertans are going to buy it. It's clear that Albertans have been asking this government about this issue for months, and the government has been failing to respond to them. So I think the attempts to blame everyone else and to claim that it's someone else's fault – I mean, add to that the fact that the associate minister is in charge. It is his file. The person who is responsible for doing something about the file is him, but he has chosen to do nothing.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? They can fling whatever they want at us. They can throw whatever wild allegations and bizarre stories their minds can invent to try and deflect from their complete and abject failure on this file, to try and deflect from their total incompetence in bringing forward this legislation, but Albertans aren't going to buy it, and it certainly will not make me sit down and stop standing up for the constituents I was sent here to serve. It certainly will not make my colleagues stop standing up for the Albertans we were sent here to serve, because those Albertans are struggling. They are struggling under UCP policies, UCP policies that have seen taxes rise, that have seen insurance rise, that have seen utility costs rise, tuition rise – the cost of borrowing on that tuition has risen – all due to the decisions of this government.

We will not stop standing up for those Albertans because whatever – whatever – the associate minister thinks he was sent here for, we on this side were sent here for Albertans. We were sent here to stand up on behalf of Albertans and to ensure that their voices are heard in this place. Nothing that they can create, no story that they can manufacture will make us stop doing that. I sincerely believe that Albertans understand the truth of this matter, that Albertans know who is on their side and who is standing up for them.

I would urge the government to take a more genuine approach to this file and to start talking about the real reasons that underlie the concerns, to begin being willing to work with Albertans and with the Official Opposition and with experts in the public. There are solutions. If this government can just stop standing up with their ideological bent and start listening to Albertans and listening to ideas and having rational conversations, there is a way forward, Mr. Speaker.

With that, I will say, you know, that I sincerely hope that we can get this done and I sincerely hope that this government starts taking their duty to the people of this province a little more seriously.

The Acting Speaker: Are there other members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this bill. Of course, it is the right of members of this Legislature to speak to the bill, and this is our very first chance to do so, in spite of the fact that we have been accused of filibustering a bill that we hadn't even had a chance to speak to. I guess, you know, as well as other things that I keep suggesting we send over to the government side of the House, perhaps we can include a dictionary. This is a very interesting bill to look at, particularly when we want to look at the history of this bill and how it arrived in this House and what has led up to this moment.

First of all, we know that the UCP is doing exactly what the UCP always does, coming too late and coming with too little for the people of the province of Alberta, just like they did in so many other areas, of course, most noticeably COVID, which resulted in a significant increase in the number of deaths in this province as compared to the per population rates of deaths in other provinces.

The same thing is happening here in terms of utility rebates. First of all, we have to remember that it was just last year that the government brought in a bill on this very same topic and failed to do it right in the first place. Again, just like they have with many other pieces of legislation, they've had to come in and correct themselves and change their own bills within the year. We've had a number of examples of that, and often it's just because they are completely on the wrong side of the issue; for example, with coal mines. When the people of Alberta clearly told them that they had to do something that they did not want to do, of course, they came in in that case and did too little too late, as they have in so many other situations in this province and in this Legislature.

Here we are reading a bill that could easily have been introduced a year ago, when these discussions were first happening. But what did the associate minister of gas say to this House when he was asked at the time about whether we should do something? He said that what they were going to do is absolutely nothing, and he emphasized the word "nothing." Then he went on further to explain that it's just the market doing what the market does, and the market is working perfectly, and therefore we won't intervene. We know that the natural position of this government and this minister is not to protect Albertans, is not to stand up and take responsibility for things but, rather, to allow the whims of circumstance to have a serious effect on Albertans without any kind of attempt by the government to do something about it and protect Albertans at a time when they need some protection from the circumstances of the era.

In this case, in fact, the government could have simply chosen to do nothing from the beginning because there was a rate cap in place. If they had done nothing, as they said they were going to do, then Albertans would have been protected to this very day. The legislation was already put in place by the previous NDP government, and that rate cap would have made sure that people already now in 2022 – in fact, it would have been in place in 2021 – would have been receiving those kind of protections that now this government is trying to figure out how to get to. Too little too late.

I think this is interesting, that we know what their position is. We know that they removed the protections for Albertans. We know that they said that they were going to do nothing. We know that they said that was just the market doing whatever it was going to do. Suddenly this morning we have the associate minister making statements such as – and I wrote this down at the moment, so I'm

going to quote it – Albertans should not have to choose between "putting food on the table or keeping their lights on."

I can tell you that having come from academia recently, before I got elected, if that kind of statement were made in an academic setting, you'd be charged with plagiarism for taking somebody else's speech. I think that this minister fails to acknowledge that that kind of comment, that kind of statement, has actually been taken from and borrowed from the opposition, who've been asking for this for a long time for these very, very reasons.

Suddenly we have the minister go against all of his instincts and arrive in this House quoting the words of the opposition and other people and suddenly see the light on why they are wrong in this piece of legislation, just as they have been with so many others such as COVID and coal mines and so on. [interjection] I will cede.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. You know, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think we just saw this bill introduced on our desks yesterday, right? I would suggest as well that it's not an insubstantial money bill, which is fine. I mean, we do want to make life easier for millions of Albertans in regard to their energy costs. I think that's a given, but we will have to work out just how much money this is – right? – and to make sure that it is spent and is disbursed in the most equal and efficient way possible. So I think amongst the many questions that I have is: what are those mechanisms? What are those ways by which we can execute what's obviously needed and do it in the most efficient way possible?

9:40

Mr. Feehan: I'd like to thank the member for that intervention because I think it does highlight a significant point, and that is the fact that while this government is now saying this morning that this is really important and that they need to subvert democracy in this province in order to move this forward, it's clear that they have done nothing to prepare for this moment, including the fact that they have just introduced the budget into this House in which there is no specific line item dedicated to this particular topic. So it tells me that there has been no real planning here in this event.

The government did not actually sit down and cost out the costs that are involved in this particular case, and they did not look at the fact that were the rate cap in place right now, Albertans would already have been benefiting from the legislation that was already in existence in the House. They didn't cost out for Albertans what the actual expenses of their delayed and problematic introduction of legislation is at this particular time.

You know, we have done a number of things to try to make sure that Albertans are in good shape in this province and are able to get through these difficult kinds of times, but this government, of course, has failed to stand up any time with that. For example, we brought in some legislation to try to extend the disconnection ban for people who are struggling at this particular time. Did this government stand up and support that? No, they did not. They did everything they could in their power to ensure that that did not happen in this House and that the legislation did not proceed forward. We know their actions speak louder than their words, that they have failed to put money into the budget for this, they have failed to plan for this, they have actually taken away the protections, and they've failed to put in new protections that have been suggested by the opposition side of the House.

In fact, we see this happening all the time. They've taken the rate cap off not only electricity but also insurance, and then in that case they hid the report that would demonstrate the fact that their move in that particular case was again hurting Albertans unnecessarily because it turns out the insurance companies were receiving great, significant profits and didn't need to have the rate cap removed

from the insurance company point of view. You know, I think it is really problematic that we find ourselves in this place, and it's really discouraging to see a government try to subvert democracy by trying to eliminate the process by which the people's representatives can actually question a bill that's being brought forward and then complaining that somehow, without even having spoken to the bill, we're filibustering the bill.

Yet if it was that important, why would the government not have put into the bill some timelines for the actual implementation of the bill and the processes that will allow that to happen? It's really important for them to not talk about it in the Legislature, but it's not important for them to actually give the rebate to Albertans. There's no timeline that forces them to do that. We know that even if we did filibuster, which of course is an absurd thing to be saying – let's say that we took two months – it still wouldn't change the date at which Albertans got the rebate because the rebate would be coming out in June or July at best, at a time when utility bills are not at their highest.

You know, what Albertans needed is they needed some help this winter. It was a very difficult winter for many Albertans. Costs were going up in many ways, many of those directly related to government actions in this House: taking the caps off utilities, taking the caps off insurance, and generally just imposing difficulties on citizens in this province. They didn't stand up, and they didn't do that kind of thing.

Now, we know that the minister has complained that the NDP were involved in . . . [interjection] Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I will cede.

Member Loyola: Please don't be sorry. I was so enthralled with your comments and insights. Of course, I know that many of my constituents have been reaching out to me on this particular issue. You were speaking specifically about help directly for Albertans this winter. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about some of the e-mails, correspondence, phone calls that you've been getting at your constituency office regarding this particular issue, Member.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you to the member. Of course, you know that I have received many, many such e-mails and so on, as I'm sure you have and I'm sure the government members have. In fact, we know they have because they're often CCed to us on the opposition side because they've heard so little back from their own MLAs.

People have indicated that they have had problems with situations, including one situation, a very difficult situation in my constituency, where someone simply ended up losing their house and having to move into an apartment because they simply couldn't pay their utility bill living on a fixed income for many years now. That fixed income has not gone up because, of course, government policy has kept the income fixed, and as a result they simply had to make the decision that they could no longer afford to live in a house and had to move to an apartment where the utility bills were included, and therefore the total cost to them was significantly smaller. You know, it's just one individual personal tragedy, but of course it's been duplicated time and time again, as we know from the many letters we've received about people who have not been able to survive this winter and could have used support from the government over the last six months to get through this difficult time.

I know that the associate minister has complained about the cost being related to transmission, which he admits in this House was actually something that was proposed by the Conservative government at the time and opposed by the NDP government. Then he goes on to complain that the NDP government didn't actually trash the decisions of the previous government when we were in office, which, you know, is a fascinating way to talk about how

government should proceed, that it's our fault that we didn't stop them from being bad. That kind of thinking is something that I think is problematic.

Of course, in the same breath he complains about the fact that when we did make some changes in the Balancing Pool, it turned out that they had put a poison pill into the contracts, so it cost us some money. He's actually suggesting that we should have done in this case what he says we should not have done in the other case, so clearly he is confused. Clearly, he does not have a logical approach to whether contracts should be cancelled or not. You know, he's simply using these as talking points in order to pull the long con that we see happening here with the people of Alberta.

This government has not stood up and been on the side of Albertans, and now they try to pull this ridiculous process here in the House where they prevent the representatives of the people of Alberta from even questioning the bill and then complain out loud to the public that somehow we are stopping the bill from proceeding when, in fact, anybody who understands the process of parliamentary democracy understands that that is not in the least bit true. [interjection] Sorry. An intervention? Yes.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Member, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford's comments on this bill and was hoping that the member could talk a little bit about timelines. We've talked about when – I know that the previous speaker had mentioned when an iteration of this bill first was tabled in the Chamber many, many years ago. But just looking at the timelines around when the Official Opposition was calling for supports and real help for Albertans as prices were skyrocketing and the fact that this bill, Bill 18, was tabled yesterday and in a passionate and off-putting speech the minister on one hand was attacking the Official Opposition and in his next breath asking for the support of the Official Opposition to pass this bill expediently through the Chamber – yet when could this government have brought forward a bill of this nature? When could they or should they have acted? I would love to hear the member's thoughts.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you to the member for that intervention. I think it is clear – and it does need to be repeated again in this House – that this government has had plenty of opportunity to bring this forward. It was at least in the fall that we were standing up in this House asking for the government to take action on utilities. That's when we were told that they would do nothing, words from the associate minister's own mouth, and we were told that this was just the market doing what the market does and that they wouldn't interfere with the market.

9:50

We know that they've had at least six months to work on this, to get this together. In fact, they could have done this all when they introduced the first failed bill, and now they're introducing the second failed bill. We know that if it was really that important to them, they could have done it in the first week we were back in the House, and that's almost two months ago. Two months ago they could have come in and resolved this and got money in people's pockets at the time they needed it most, in the middle of winter, when they really needed to protect their homes from the assault of the difficult winter that we had. So there's been plenty of time here now, and the government is trying to divert people's attention away from the fact that they have failed to act. They've acted last and they've acted least again, as they tend to in almost all situations that are important to citizens in this province.

I think that it's really shameful of the government to be in this place where they are blaming Albertans for wanting democracy to

actually occur in the process of protecting Albertans at a time when rebates or some other kind of intervention is necessary. They could, of course, if they wanted to, go back to the really good, decent legislation that was previously in existence under the NDP government and put a rate cap back on the utilities. It would be a great situation here in this province if we had done that because we would have been able to see not only the utility companies making a reasonable profit at all times through that process, but we would have seen Albertans being protected from huge increases. I can tell you that many Albertans have told me that the increase in their utility bills has been in excess of 100 per cent over the period of time.

This is the kind of thing that I think is problematic. This is the kind of thing I think this government should take some responsibility for. Unfortunately, this government's failure to take responsibility in this case is no surprise given their failure to take responsibility for almost any of the other really terrible pieces of legislation that they brought into this House. I may have to ask: why has this government not had its eye on the ball? Why is it rushing in at the last moment, trying to do something that they could easily have done in the fall sitting or could have done early on in this sitting, right in the middle of the winter that required people to pay these exorbitant utility bills?

The answer is, of course, that they were too busy being focused on their own internal fights, their own internal squabbles, and the leadership review in which their own leader has, apparently, less than 35 per cent of the support of the province of Alberta and, it would seem, has probably low levels of support even within the party. But, you know, we all have to wait now. We all have to wait until mid-May, when the results of their leadership review are over, before we see a government actually focused on governing, and that's a shame. That is something that's very problematic. Democracy has really been taking a hit under this government, has taken a hit in terms of the government trying to move ahead in this particular case without actual proper debate, as they have in other situations. It's taken a hit every time the... [Mr. Feehan's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Other members wishing to enter the debate? I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide a few comments at the second reading stage – I am the third speaker at this stage – of the Utility Commodity Rebate Act. I am one of the first speakers to provide some comments from the floor of the Legislature for this matter proposed by Executive Council. It is up to all members – it is indeed our right – to discuss this bill and to propose amendments to this bill for, you know, a period of time whereby all of us members, private members, feel that the people's work is done and we have represented our constituents appropriately.

I was reflecting last night, Mr. Speaker, on why it is that the province seems so unwilling – they're able – to solve the problems that are preoccupying ordinary Albertans right now, whether it's insurance or electricity and natural gas prices. I went back to some notes that I took in 2019 after watching the prosecution of the campaign by what has now become the modern conservatives and certainly a movement that is untethered from its previous iterations as something of a brokerage party.

In the modern conservative movement losing in theatre is the goal on public policy. On any matter of public policy it's fine not to solve the problem because that will then destabilize our faith in institutions, in politics, democracy, what we can do collectively.

You know, it's just this constant process of working the refs, of dumping money on lawyers' lawns for fool's errand Supreme Court references that are just a spectacular loss in terms of the carbon tax, in terms of yelling at various external actors. We certainly see this as a feature, not a bug, of modern conservative parties throughout western Europe as well. There's always a bogeyman. It's usually taking a page – our playbook here took a page out of Orbán's playbook, certainly, in Hungary, blaming someone else, external actors, foreign-funded, shadowy figures. But for most political parties in the history of liberal democracies winning in practice should be the goal; that is to say, solutions should be the goal.

But that's not the goal, and continuing that politics of grievance is actually what we see playing out in this little micronarrative as well. I point us to last summer, when the hon. members were talking about: what was the timeline of the Official Opposition raising this issue? Well, I recall in the summer, during the heat wave, standing up with the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View discussing the spike in power prices and the risks to the grid and affordability during the heat wave in July. After that news conference we went and got something to eat, and we wrote out a list of possible actions the government could take. We pulled up a couple of industry experts on the phone and put them on speakerphone, ran a few things past them to get their thoughts. That's what winning in practice rather than losing in theatre looks like. It's trying to find solutions, and that is why people sent us here.

I go back to my notes from 2019, just after the election. You know, the UCP went into this election believing they would win 80 seats, but they didn't get that, and they won't get an easy ride in the Legislature either. They will be opposed by a group of women and men who are honest, hard-working, and practical, who will name it when they give gifts to their corporate friends, when they bring in policies that do not have people's best interests in mind. Those were my thoughts before coming into this Chamber in, whenever it was, May 2019. We see that kind of hubris of just refusing to solve a problem reflected in this budget.

The Budget Address: let's go to that, on February 24, 2022. On page 9 we see the slapdashery, the ad hockery of even grappling with this question of utility prices.

Pushing up costs for Albertans... has elevated concerns over the costs of utilities. To alleviate the fear of spiraling utility costs, and to allow Albertan's...

Misspelled.

... to benefit from an owned resource, budget 2022...

"Budget" is not capitalized, so clearly these paragraphs were not edited. [interjection] Yes, I will give way.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Member. I just really appreciate what you're focused on right now, and I just wanted to ask you to speak a little bit about the fact that the budgets themselves were established over the last couple of months and only introduced into the House fairly recently, and they did not include clear direction as per the bill that we're bringing in the House today. It seemed to indicate that at the time of writing the budget, while they certainly had been challenged on the opposition side of the House to do something about this on many occasions, they had not in fact planned to do this as recently as a month or so ago and didn't put a clear line in the budget to indicate that they wanted to do this. I wonder if you just might spend some time talking about what it is that you found as you looked through the budget about their really lackadaisical attitude toward this.

10:00

Ms Phillips: Yeah. I mean, when we looked at the budget documents, one of the first things we did was look for the line item

of where this reference to the natural gas rebate would be. I'll go back to the speech on page 9:

... allow Albertan's ...

Misspelled.

... to benefit from an owned resource, budget 2022 implements a consumer price protection mechanism, similar to the measure Ralph Klien ...

Misspelled.

... put in place in 2006.

If natural gas prices exceed 6.50 a gigajoule, a utilities rebate will be triggered.

To be clear, the word "rebate," if one executes a simple control-F search in the budget speech, appears precisely once, and that's here.

This means Albertans needn't fear a run up in natural gas prices of the variety currently experienced in Europe and Asia.

Okay. Now, first of all, the government's own budget documents, their projections at the time, do not show at any point over the fiscal forecast period natural gas going up above \$6.50. It is now for obvious reasons having to do with the geopolitical instability and the war in Ukraine.

Having said that, this was clearly shoved into this speech at the last minute because the, you know, grammatical car crashes that we see in this section do not appear in the rest of the speech. It's clear that the rest of the speech was drafted, and then somebody woke up sometime in mid-February and went: oh, I talked to a single Albertan one time, and they seemed really worried about utilities, so maybe we should shove something in here. When we then asked TBF officials during the briefing, "Okay; so where is the budget line item?" "Well, that doesn't exist." "So where is anything for electricity?" "Well, that doesn't exist." Just absolutely no grappling with what we had been hearing from people since the previous summer, as I described.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

We understood right away that the natural gas rebate was fake and the electricity rebate was invisible. Again, continuing grievance and blaming someone else is the point, not actually solving the problem. If the problem wanted to be solved, there was a piece of legislation that they had scrapped that they could pull off the shelf and bring back in, which was very clear of where the money was coming from and where it would be going to and what aspects of the bill would be affected in terms of our electricity bills, and that was the rate cap. [interjection] I recognize that my friend from Edmonton-Ellerslie would like to make an intervention.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, hon. member, and exactly that. I was hoping that you could cover a little bit more of the rate cap, how that actually worked in favour of Albertans when we were in government, and what you're hearing now from your constituents in terms of how they appreciated that rate cap when it came to their utility bills. I would be happy to hear more about that.

Ms Phillips: Indeed, the rate cap was for the actual use portion on people's bills, and I fully recognize that there are other parts of the bill, the transmission and distribution costs, which are different across the province for different types of consumers. However, that was one piece that could be affected. In fact, I heard from a constituent just yesterday, who phoned us up and said, "So where's this rebate that I've been hearing about?" and I have no more answers after the introduction of this bill than I had before the introduction of this bill, which says something about the quality of this legislation.

The minister said yesterday, "Oh, well, the electricity thing might happen, you know, in the next few months," and "Oh, the natural gas thing might happen next year." That's what he said in the news

conference yesterday. There is no more clarity today than there was yesterday, and that is the fundamental failing of this bill. There's no one thing that you can point to and say: okay; here's how we were going to solve the problem. Again, solving the problem is not the point. Blaming someone else for our problems is the point.

Now, I've heard a little bit of other blame having to do with transmission and distribution, so I want to just put a few things on the record here because how quickly we forget. Let's go down memory lane. On November 25, 2009, Bill 50, the contentious piece of legislation that would remove the requirement for public hearings on new power lines, passed third and final reading.

Here's what Brian Mason, the great Brian Mason, had to say, with a mighty four-person opposition. Quote: I think people are going to be reminded of this every month when they get their power bill; it's almost like there's going to be a rider – PC arrogance, PC extravagance – on everybody's power bill every month. Sound familiar? Arrogance, extravagance: these are words now applied to this group of new Conservatives. For these guys it was after 35 years. For the new crop it barely took them 35 days to have those sorts of monikers applied to their approach.

Now, here we have Wildrose Alliance MLA Paul Hinman, a blast from the past: we needed a competitive and efficient power line, not one that's overbuilt, overpriced; it's not in the benefit of the Alberta advantage. Interesting.

Now we fast-forward to 2011, when the mighty Brian Mason releases a report saying that the Alberta NDP leader Brian Mason says that power bills will jump dramatically in the coming years as the government pushes ahead with massive new transmission lines. This is from April 21, 2011. [interjection] Yes, my hon. friend.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you. I just noticed that you're going back a little bit on this and indicating that it seems that government information was available quite some time ago about the potential for an increase in electricity increases and that the reason why the cap on our electricity was brought in under the previous government was, in fact, quite evident. I just wonder if you might speak to the fact that in spite of the evidence that was being provided clearly by the civil service at the time and would have been fully available to this government for the last three years, they chose not to intervene at any time in a three-year period and now suddenly they are trying to rush through a bill in the House in less than six hours. It seems the hypocrisy involved in that is quite extreme, and I think it's worth noting that when you've had three years and the evidence clearly available to you, doing things at the last second is not possible.

The Acting Speaker: Just before the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West continues, there are also two extra minutes added because that was your third intervention as well.

Ms Phillips: Okay.

The Acting Speaker: Perfect.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, there's no question that it was known to this House and to the people of Alberta that those PC decisions that were taken in 2011 were going to have an effect over the long term. These are massive decisions, multibillion-dollar projects. They don't show themselves on people's bills overnight. Yet here we are in 2011. Mason pointed to a study done by the Alberta Direct Connect Consumer Association of large industrial power consumers. The study suggests the transmission costs on power bills are set to jump by 65 per cent in the next two years. Mason says that these hikes will happen because the province is overbuilding power lines.

Then later on May 9, 2011: Alberta's New Democrats say the provincial government is being wilfully blind to evidence that new power line construction will send electricity bills through the roof. Mason said that it's time the province repealed legislation passed two years ago that allows cabinet to approve power line construction without public hearings if it deems the lines are necessary.

Now, of course, this minister has suggested that it would have been more prudent to cost the taxpayer billions of dollars extra by breaking contracts, which is not a way to welcome in new investments. It certainly does not inspire confidence in the power market, and it certainly would have undermined our ability to attract the lowest cost renewables in Canadian history or make sure that we had the right investment climate in place for coal-to-gas conversion, something that the Harper government failed to do in 2012, when they phased out 12 of our 16 coal-fired electricity plants, of which this Premier sat at the cabinet table, twiddled his thumbs, and did not give a thought to the workers that he would be affecting by those decisions of 12 of the 16 plants being phased out.

Be that as it may, now his idea is that we should have ripped up those contracts, yet this minister hasn't. Even though he rails about the coal-fired electricity phase-out, has he ripped up the contracts? He certainly has threatened to do so, not inspiring confidence for investment in renewables.

10:10

He has also sat by while the Minister of Environment and Parks raises the carbon tax on industrial emitters to \$50 per tonne. Apparently, that's not really a carbon tax. It is. It's absolutely a price on carbon. They haven't repealed the carbon competitiveness, the output-based allocations program, none of those things.

So, again, solving the problem, however the problem is defined on the other side, is not the point. The constant grievance is the point. Theatre is the point. Artifice is the point for these modern conservatives, not actually meeting the concerns and solving the problems of ordinary people.

I will cast my mind back to right around the time of estimates debate when there was an audio that came from the Finance minister's town hall where a woman came to him and said: "I have thousands of dollars in utility costs. What are you going to do about it?" He said: "Yes. My wife tells me we also have thousands of dollars in utility costs." Anyway, he did not propose a solution to the problem. No wonder his Budget Address had this kind of slapdash, grammatically incorrect sop to caring, maybe in a perfunctory and performative way, about the rising cost of electricity. You notice even in the Budget Address it says: not to solve the problem, but to solve the fear of the problem. In other words, we're not going to do anything at all to help people.

So you'll have to pardon the Official Opposition, who were sent here to practically solve problems, who were sent here with the faith that we will put people first, that the point of being here is to focus on solutions, not grievance. You will have to forgive us for wondering out loud why now the Chief Justice is going to be used in some kind of performance art and some kind of kabuki theatre this afternoon at 3 o'clock to solve this particular issue.

We would happily have even come back into the House early because everyone knew that electricity and natural gas bills were rising. We would have happily come back into this House to solve that problem early in February, as we would have been just as happy to come back in here and make legislative amendments to the Traffic Safety Act so that we could clear out that \$44-million-a-day disgrace that was happening down at the Coutts border and hurting the southern Alberta economy. We would have done that, too,

because our job is to come in here and propose solutions, not to bang the pot of grievance.

So that is what we will focus on with our amendments, with the process. We will respect the rules of this House. We will not try to abuse the process. We will make sure we are doing the people's work. We will make sure that even while the Conservatives on the other side and this modern conservative movement just go around spinning false narratives, telling fairy tales, trying to scare people with, you know, a bogeyman of who we are and what we might be – they can go around telling all those tales about us, but guess what. We will tell the truth about them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

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

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and offer a few thoughts and share some views of constituents on this issue of Bill 18, the Utility Commodity Rebate Act, because as all of the previous speakers before me have mentioned, Albertans have been loud about the price of electricity and the price of natural gas, and they want the government to do something about it. I thought I'd first share some of the e-mails that I've received to my office in Edmonton-Gold Bar and then discuss the likelihood of this piece of legislation meeting the needs that the people of Edmonton-Gold Bar have identified.

The first e-mail that I'd like to share was sent to me on Monday, February 14 of this year, "Happy Valentine's Day; your electricity bill is a thousand dollars," essentially. It says:

Good afternoon . . .

I'm writing to you today expressing concern about the recent increase in utilities rates. My heat and power rates have more than doubled in the last month. I was quite shocked to see such an increase.

. . . So many families are struggling in this current environment, and unexpected charges like this can be incredible hardships for many.

I spoke to a neighbour whose bill was close to \$1000 last month. And a fellow business owner who had to make the difficult choice of keeping an employee on staff or keeping the lights on in his business. Unfortunately he had to let an employee go. This is not sustainable for anyone.

I urge you to explore the increased charges so many Albertans are facing, and identify solutions to reel in the charges suppliers are grasping for.

That came from Lindsay, who is a resident of Edmonton-Gold Bar.

On February 8 I had another e-mail with the subject Concern regarding Utilities. It says:

My name is Serenity . . . and I am a full time University Student as well as a mother to two young children. I am writing to you today in order to highlight some concerns regarding the utility distribution charges here in Edmonton.

As you already know, times are tough right now, and Covid has hit our world hard. I am utterly disappointed to see how high the utility bills are becoming here in Edmonton. It feels as though the Utility companies are taking advantage of Albertans, and kicking us while we are already down.

Our usage of power, water and gas has been quite standard with only small fluctuations, yet my most recent bill is more than double what it usually is. \$750 in utilities this month, with nearly \$400 of that being distribution charges!

How are we supposed to feed our families when the cost of living is constantly rising, and most of us are on fixed incomes?

The price caps need to come back, Albertans deserve fair prices and shouldn't have to choose between heating our homes, or putting food on our tables!

I really appreciate you taking the time to read through my concerns, and I look forward to hearing from you!

All the best,
Serenity.

My heart goes out to this person because, of course, as a university student not only is she faced with the tremendous spike in electricity and natural gas prices, but the Minister of Advanced Education has jacked up her tuition and other related university fees as well. So she's been hit hard by a number of terrible policy decisions that this UCP government has made.

On February 15 I had an e-mail from Deb about unacceptable utility rates.

I am a homeowner . . . and I am writing to complain about the ridiculously high utility rates that I, and every other Albertan, is paying. I don't get charged all kinds of fees and distribution charges for my water, why do I pay more in charges and fees than the actual cost of the product for my gas and power?

On my latest bill (Statement date January 22, 2022), the cost for my electricity was \$107.24, and I paid an additional \$140.25 in charges & fees. The cost for my natural gas was \$112.77 and I paid an additional \$243.90 in fees and charges. More than twice the cost of the product. My senior mother, living in a 1 bedroom [apartment], receiving a \$500/month subsidy to afford her rent . . .

Another piece of important government support that has been either frozen or cut by this terrible UCP government.

. . . was charged \$79.71 for her billing period of [December 10, 2021, to January 11, 2022]. During that period, she was at my house for an entire week! She used 220 [kilowatt hours] of electricity and was charged over 16 cents per [kilowatt hour]. The cost of her electricity was \$32.39, and she paid \$47.32 in admin fees, distribution charges, transmission charges, etc.

Deb says that

this is robbery. Yes, I did call Epcor and get my mom locked into a much lower rate for her electricity, but it's all of the additional charges that the average person cannot afford.

I hope that the associate minister listened to that last point very closely, because we've heard him stand up time and again and tell Albertans to just go to their utility and beg for lower rates, which does absolutely nothing to address the distribution charges that people are paying. So that's an important point that Deb raised for that.

She goes on to say that

these incredible fees and charges have to stop. Albertans are being taxed and charged to death. I pay over \$5,000 [a year] in property taxes, my provincial taxes go up and up . . .

Something that this government has refused to address.

You know what doesn't go up?

She goes on to say:

My income. Not one penny. So I would like to know what the province of Alberta is going to do to bring these fees and charges down. When will Albertans quit being [gouged] with unaffordable fees and charges for the basic utilities we all need?

An excellent question, Deb. I wish the associate minister had come into the House today with answers to that question, but unfortunately he did not.

10:20

That leads to the next point that I want to make that Deb raised in the last e-mail that I read into the record. When will Albertans see relief from high utility prices? Well, according to the piece of legislation that we have here in front of us for debate this morning, we don't know. Not only do we have no indication from the piece of legislation that we're debating here this morning; the associate minister – sorry; I forget his title – had no further answers when he introduced this legislation in a press conference yesterday afternoon.

Now, I managed to catch a couple of clips from that press conference, and it was so uniquely bad, Mr. Speaker, that you could have sworn that it was ripped from the television show *Veep* or one of these other political satires. It was so terrible that you would have to believe that it was fiction, because you wouldn't think that any minister would actually hold a press conference and embarrass himself so badly in front of the entire province of Alberta.

He was asked over and over again: when will people see the rebates? He couldn't provide any answers. He refused to answer the question. The best that he could come up with is that maybe, if we go to the utility companies on our hands and knees and beg them to co-operate with the government, we might be able to get a rebate into the hands of people by July or end of June at the very earliest. Well, that is cold comfort to the people who have already paid thousands and thousands of dollars in electricity and natural gas bills over the last three months and won't see any reduction in their bills in the upcoming months.

I'm proud to stand with my colleagues, especially my friend from Calgary-Mountain View, the Official Opposition critic for Energy, when she says that it's our job to make sure that we hold the government accountable to the promises that they've made and pressure them into actually committing to a timeline for getting the rebates into the hands of Albertans and just coming clean with how much they can expect to be rebated.

That's the other piece that isn't clear here in this piece of legislation. We've heard rumblings and commitments made at the last minute from the Premier and other members of Executive Council about how much Albertans can expect to pay. We think that they're going to get \$50 for an electricity rebate, which is not even 5 per cent of what some of the constituents in Edmonton-Gold Bar are getting. You know: "Here's \$50. Hope you can cover the other \$950 that you were charged for electricity in the month of February." That's not help. [interjection] I see that my friend here from Edmonton-West Henday would like to intervene, so I will entertain that intervention.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've appreciated the comments so far, and like the member speaking, I also appreciate the comments that have come forward from the Member for Calgary-Mountain View as well and appreciate the work that that member has done on this file, specifically thinking back to a few weeks ago when that member called for a reinstatement of the moratorium on utility shut-offs, something that this government has been unwilling to follow through with.

When we're talking about real support for Alberta families, I mean, we've proposed as a caucus many more supports past that, even early on in the pandemic, so I find it very rich that the associate minister of natural gas is now coming back and telling us we need to rush this through when for essentially several months if not even years, looking back to early days of this pandemic, when the utility cap came off and the government decided not to reinstate that as well – I mean, there have been so many opportunities for this government to take action to show Albertans that they truly support them when it comes to lowering their bills, but they haven't.

Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: I want to thank my friend from Edmonton-West Henday for raising this important point, and it builds on something that my friend from Lethbridge-West highlighted in her speech as well, that the point of the modern conservative movement isn't to provide meaningful solutions to the people of the province of Alberta; it's only to drum up grievances and assign blame to other actors in the hopes of, you know, whipping up the mob and generating political support from that. That was a tactic that was

incredibly effective in the 2019 election, when the UCP was not in power. But I think they so effectively whipped up the mob, they made promises to the people of Alberta that they were going to be able to fix all of the problems that we were facing, and now they've fallen flat.

The old trick of whipping up the mob doesn't work anymore because everybody knows that they have the power to make progress on these issues. They have the power to implement solutions, and they don't want to do that. That's quite clear from the bill that we have here today. As my friend from Lethbridge-West said: complete political theatre.

There is a whole host of other public policy options that is available to the government that didn't even require this piece of legislation to be brought forward. As my friend from Calgary-Mountain View said, they could have left the electricity rate cap in place. Just a reminder: we capped the electricity price at 6.8 cents a kilowatt hour. The regulated rate option right now for EPCOR customers is something around 10.6 cents a kilowatt hour.

Had the government done nothing but just left the rate cap in place, electricity consumers in my riding would be paying 30 per cent less for electricity than they are right now. That's all the government had to do: nothing. I don't know why they didn't choose to do nothing, because they've done nothing on a whole host of other issues. I would say that doing nothing is their strong suit, but they couldn't leave well enough alone. They had to lift the electricity cap, and now the people of Alberta are paying, literally paying, thousands of dollars for that poor public policy decision.

That was one thing they could have done. They could have simply written a cheque to Albertans. They could have sent out a \$50 cheque to every household in the province of Alberta. That doesn't require a piece of legislation. I'd like to hear the minister of electricity tell us why he couldn't just write a cheque. I suspect that that might actually impact the bottom lines of the electricity distributors whose interests he is so interested in protecting.

We saw that during the initial stages of the pandemic when the government brought forward utility deferrals. Well, heaven forbid that EPCOR or Enmax be out money because people can't afford to pay their bills during the worst economic downturn that this province has seen in its history. "No. We need to keep EPCOR and Enmax whole, so we're going to lend them a bunch of money to cover the unpaid bills for Albertans." I suspect that's exactly what's going on here, too. This government needs to make sure that its rich friends in the electricity industry are still making more money than they've ever made before, and that's why the people of Alberta have to wait six months to get a \$50 cheque.

It's extremely frustrating that the people like Deb and Serenity and Lindsay in my riding have to wait and wait and wait at least six months, probably more. They may never even see a natural gas rebate, because we still don't have any details about how much money they're going to provide.

Mr. Eggen: They could shut their power off, then, too.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. As my friend from Edmonton-North West says, in the meantime they could have their electricity and natural gas completely shut off, and this government wouldn't lift a finger to do anything to prevent it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

I see the hon. government whip has risen.

10:30

Ms Issik: Mr. Speaker, you know, it's pretty unfortunate that the NDP have chosen to play politics with Albertans' utilities bills.

[interjections] Well, it is. They're seemingly intent on making sure that Bill 18 is prevented from being passed this morning. Let me be clear. By not providing unanimous consent last night and wasting time this morning, they've basically made sure that they've stopped \$280 million from being returned to Albertans. By the way, that amount is more than the NDP spent on their precious rate cap.

Again, it's disappointing but hardly surprising, and it's with deep regret that we've run out of time this morning. We won't be able to have Bill 18 get royal assent this afternoon. At this time I'm going to move to adjourn debate.

Thanks.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 9 Public's Right to Know Act

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General has risen.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be here today to move third reading of Bill 9, the Public's Right to Know Act, which will make it easier for Albertans to find information about crime in their community.

We believe that people have a right to know how crime is affecting their community, and this legislation is delivering on a platform commitment of ours to bring in legislation that will affirm and strengthen that right. Now, if passed, this legislation would require the provincial government to report crime and justice system metrics annually. This would involve publishing information like police-based crime data on the government of Alberta website and by tabling the information in a report to this House every year. Now, it's important to point out that while, to some, this may seem modest, I can say that it is not the case. We are merely at the starting point here.

It's important to note that this is enabling legislation. What it does is that it creates a framework for reporting crime and justice metrics not only now but as well into the future. Additional metrics can be reported as they become available to us and as we work with our partners to develop those new metrics. The minister of the day would then have the ability to enter into information-sharing agreements to obtain and then publish the data respecting crime and the justice system. Now, indeed, this is just the beginning, and there will be increasingly more data and more helpful information to a variety of Albertans in the coming years.

This piece of legislation that we're debating here, Mr. Speaker, is a first in Canada. Alberta is proactively taking a leadership role and modelling the way for other provinces. No other jurisdiction has stand-alone legislation requiring the government to report crime and justice system metrics to the public at defined intervals. This annual reporting requirement would enhance transparency by creating an expectation among the public that the government will provide Albertans with this information at regular intervals and ensure it's easy to find and easy to understand. Now, to that end, Alberta Justice and Solicitor General is looking at ways to present the raw data that we receive in more user-friendly ways. That could mean, for example, giving people the ability to examine trends over time.

Contrary to what members opposite have claimed, access to this kind of data is indeed a priority for Albertans. During a tour of the province in 2019 a former Minister of Justice and Solicitor General heard from many rural Albertans who were concerned about crime, and they also told him that they wanted more information about

what's happening in their communities. Our conversations with Albertans indicate that there's a strong appetite for this kind of information as well as valid reasons for people who want it.

Transparency is an important principle, but increased openness isn't the only benefit to legislation like this. We've all heard the saying: knowledge is power. There's a reason that expressions like this have become part of our everyday language. It's because they're often true. Information and easier access to it empowers people to make better decisions. Improving access to crime data could help decision-makers at various levels develop policies and to take actions that are based on evidence. A troubling crime trend could expose gaps in services and lead to the development of new initiatives or perhaps even new enforcement strategies.

At a more basic level this is also about giving Albertans the ability to make better decisions about their personal safety. Knowing property crime statistics in their community may cause someone to take added steps to protect their homes or their businesses such as installation of better lighting, security, other measures to deter thieves. What these examples have in common is that in all of these cases having better access to information can result in better outcomes. An informed and empowered public can help build safer communities for everyone in Alberta, and it starts with ensuring that folks have easier access to information.

I hope that members on both sides of the House will support this legislation for what it can mean to Albertans and how it can help them out in the years to come. I ask that we move third reading of Bill 9.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

To respond, I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 9, the Public's Right to Know Act, but before I launch into the bill, I just want to make a comment about the previous bill that was under discussion, Bill 18, and the final comments made that the opposition was being criticized for not giving the government . . .

An Hon. Member: Unanimous consent.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much.

. . . unanimous consent to move the bill expediently through, yet then the government adjourned debate. If the bill was that important, we should have continued to discuss it.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt; however, I think we are on third reading of Bill 12, so if we could please bring our comments back to the task at hand.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Bill 9.

The Acting Speaker: Sorry. Bill 9 in third reading.

If the hon. member could continue.

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to make that comment so that it's clear to Albertans at home that were wondering why the Assembly was not continuing to debate a bill that was so important yet brought in six months late.

But here we have Bill 9, the Public's Right to Know Act. You know, I do have a number of questions. My first reading of this bill is that everything in this bill the minister currently has the authority to do, so what we have here is either a job-description bill or a bill that allows the minister to check a box for a promise made, yet an ability the minister already had. The minister can commission reports.

Mr. Shandro: You don't know the difference between "can" and "must."

Mr. Bilous: The minister who is now yelling across the way. This bill could have and should have done much more.

I want to talk a little bit about, Mr. Speaker, the fact that this very government raided the victims of crime fund in a bill that they brought forward a couple of years ago. This bill had the capacity to be able to ensure that every dollar from the victims of crime fund would go to victims, yet it was expanded to cover a myriad of programs to which there have been a number of articles and stakeholders and not-for-profit groups who support victims of crime who were devastated and frustrated with this government and were sounding the alarm bells before this government made changes to the victims of crime fund.

Previously, since that fund was initially established in the province, all funds were going to victims. We know, Mr. Speaker, that some of those victims – well, I mean, they're all victims, but many of them suffered incredible atrocities and needed long-term support in order to, for some, get back to functioning, so those funds were critical, but the funds were limited.

10:40

I'm happy to table this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, some articles that I'm going to quote from. You know, first of all, an article that appeared in the CBC, New Victims of Crime Benefits Delayed, Existing Alberta Program Limits 'Naive,' Advocates Say, and in this the first challenge that these organizations had is that victims had 45 days after a violent crime to apply for benefits. Now, I'm no expert in this area whatsoever, but putting a limitation of 45 days after someone has experienced something extremely traumatic seems a little absurd to me. That window is so small for a person who's been a victim of a crime to apply for support. It's pointed out that Albertans used to have two years from the date of crime, and that was backed up all the way to 45 days, which is a significant change. I can tell you that the CEO of the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton had said that "this is really naive and, quite frankly, uninformed, to make a decision about what it means for a survivor to even acknowledge to themselves what happened, let alone report," which I think is a very compelling argument.

There's now also a limit of \$1,000 on reimbursements for counselling, which is nowhere near enough to cover the amount for treatment most victims need. Again, if you think about, Mr. Speaker, the fact that a one-hour session is on average about \$200 – so for a victim of a crime they would have maybe five sessions total. Again, you know, others had called this move ridiculous.

You know, it's troubling, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to pull up another article that talks about a number of not-for-profits. There's a group in this next article – it was on CTV news – entitled Concerns Raised over Planned Changes to Alberta Victims of Crime Fund. Here's an example of a group that represents 73 victims' services organizations in the province, so quite a large umbrella organization, that was raising the alarm bells over the proposed, at that time, changes that the UCP government were going to make to the victims of crime fund. Again, the frustration is that it would "allow the provincial government to raid a fund that was meant to support people and families hurt by crime." This is something that could have been in this bill: real, meaningful action to either restore the money that was taken out of that fund or to add new dollars into the fund to support those.

Now, my understanding is that when this bill was first introduced or around that timeline, the minister made comments around even the necessity of this bill and whether or not it is necessary to do what the bill enables the minister to do. You know, the challenge

that many of my colleagues have raised regarding this bill is that it does not address the concerns that Albertans have and it doesn't specify which data has to be recorded or collected. Now, I'm sure the minister – as his colleagues have been doing for every bill we're debating in this Chamber: "Oh, no. That's in the regulations. Just trust us. Trust us, trust us, trust us." The reality, Mr. Speaker, is that – and I think all parties in this Chamber are pretty aware of Albertans' level of trust in this UCP government.

So here was an opportunity to provide race-based data that would give real information to be able to look at what changes need to be made and where the system is failing people. That's unfortunate, Mr. Speaker.

Now, my understanding, again, of the data that this bill enables the minister to report on is that the minister already had the ability to create reports and share with the public. Again, it's not in the bill as far as what data is actually going to be collected. I think Albertans have reason to be concerned as far as what data will be collected, what data will be shared. I'm curious. I'm sure the minister already heard this question, but without this bill would the minister be able to publish a report on individuals on bail or on parole, as was promised in the platform? I would like to know why the minister chose not to include specifically which data will be included or disclosed. I don't know if the minister knows that and doesn't want to disclose it here in the Chamber or if the minister doesn't know as of yet. You know, maybe this bill was written hastily. I'm not sure, Mr. Speaker. Our job is to try to get answers to these questions.

Now, I'm not sure if the minister is going to be supporting Bill 204, that's in committee right now, but before this House, that was put forward by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-City Centre, which proposes the collection of race-based data, which is what many communities have been asking for in order to identify exactly where the problems lie and provide us with information to be able to make data-driven decisions. I hope that the minister will support that.

Again, Bill 204 will allow the collection of data about the justice system. Many of the constituents I've spoken with have felt frustration with our current justice system, identifying that there is significant room for improvement on it. Collecting data to be able to make informed decisions on how to improve our system, I think, is a good thing. I would hope that all members of this Chamber would support improving our system to ensure that Albertans have access to justice, quite frankly. That bill also would create the Anti-Racism Advisory Council to make recommendations based on data collected, which, again, in my opinion, is a good thing, to have the input and advice of a council.

Now, this current bill, Bill 9, does none of these things. It doesn't provide any tools to create recommendations based on the data presented. There's no direction. There's no guidance through this bill on, again, what information will be collected, how it will be used, who will have access to it. I think the bill in and of itself, from what I can see, Mr. Speaker, does nothing to address crime. As I had mentioned, it doesn't restore funding to the victims of crime. It doesn't prioritize the new victims of crime model. It doesn't prioritize hiring more prosecutors, which is one of the challenges that our system is currently facing and why we have so many cases being thrown out. The timelines lapse because there simply aren't enough prosecutors. Why doesn't this bill work to address that issue? I mean, there was an opportunity here that the government has missed. It doesn't present a plan to make sure that criminal cases are not thrown out due to delays in prosecuting them within the Jordan time frames, which, again, could've been in this piece of legislation.

10:50

As well, Mr. Speaker, I know that the associations for our municipalities, both Alberta Municipalities and the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, RMA, have been telling this government to abandon this idea of a provincial police force and to focus on addressing the root causes of crime.

Now, what's fascinating, Mr. Speaker, is that while we are debating this bill, recently – in fact, I learned of it yesterday – 10 fish and wildlife officers are being dropped from a task force that was created to respond to rural crime. Significant dollars were spent training these officers, equipping them with everything from body armour to carbine rifles, et cetera, which at first I found curious but then recognized that our fish and wildlife officers are often in remote rural areas of Alberta and can respond in a more timely manner to rural calls for help. I can only imagine how the organization within fish and wildlife had restructured in order to take on these new responsibilities, staff up, train, procure equipment, et cetera, and with a stroke of a pen they're no longer part of that task force.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is to the minister and to the government. There are fewer officers now responding to rural crime. For a government and a party that brags about being tough on crime, they're the opposite. The UCP are weak on crime and clearly are not prioritizing the safety of rural Albertans. I would love for the minister to stand up and explain to the Chamber why they dropped these 10 officers from responding after they had been trained. This isn't just taking one little course. This is so that fish and wildlife officers have the knowledge of all sections of law and the Criminal Code to be able to lay charges, to act, in essence, as an RCMP officer.

My understanding is that the training went on for more than a year, and suddenly, with no word from the minister or this government, they're dropped. Who's going to pay for that decision? You know who's going to pay for it, Mr. Speaker: rural Albertans, the very ones who have been talking about wanting meaningful action, which this UCP government promised in their platform and now they're failing to deliver.

Again, this bill could have addressed the backlog in our court system, and it didn't. It could have dropped this – I'm trying to think of a parliamentary way of framing this concept of an Alberta police force, which clearly is just trying to pander to the extreme of this government's political party. You know, Mr. Speaker, I even asked some of the accountants over there: show me the math. Show me the math on creating a provincial police force. How many millions of dollars would that cost? Millions. How long would it take for that police force to have a system that actually can talk to the existing RCMP system?

Albertans aren't asking for a provincial police force. Don't take my word for it; go and talk to the Rural Municipalities of Alberta. Don't even talk to just the association. Talk to the actual individual municipalities, rural municipalities, and how many of them are asking for an Alberta police force? Now, maybe there are one or two. I don't know. Every one that I've spoken with has said: "Nope. Not a chance. We'd like to see more funding." What they didn't want to see was what this government did, which was download the costs of policing onto municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, for those reasons and many others, I struggle with this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday has risen.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise to speak to Bill 9, Public's Right to Know Act. I appreciated the conversations that we've heard so far this morning and even before

that. You know, some of the comments that I had planned to make through this time that I have speaking to Bill 9 will likely reflect some of the words that we just heard from the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview because I also share many concerns, not only with the legislation itself but also what is clearly missing and also the bigger picture of some of the other pieces that we've seen the government move on that have had negative impacts and consequences on the justice system and supports for victims of crimes across the province.

First of all, I would again repeat that this legislation does little to address the priorities of Albertans. You know, we see in this legislation very vague references to the ability that is going to be given to the minister, but it does seem that for the entirety of what we're seeing in here, it's very likely that the minister is able to produce and request this information in the first place. I'm not entirely sure exactly why we need this legislation in the first place. I would be happy to hear some specific examples from the Justice minister, if they so choose to rise and speak to some of the, maybe, information that they've requested in the past that they haven't been able to have provided to them and exactly what they expect to get into the future from this legislation if it were to pass.

Again, from what we see in here, like many other pieces of legislation that this government has brought forward, it's very vague and leaves the opposition and many Albertans wondering exactly what the intentions were when this bill was introduced.

Now, specific to some of the things, some of the issues that we've seen and the decisions that this government has made, I think that we've heard to some extent discussions around the victims of crime fund. I plan to spend some time on that. Specifically, again, the previous member referenced this article from the CBC dated January 10 of this year and concerns that have been brought forward by many advocates within this field, but specifically in this case Mary Jane James, the CEO of SACE, the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, which is located in the constituency of Edmonton-West Henday. The work that they do is so important, and the education that they provide is so important, and the value that they bring as advocates and as supporters of the work of protecting and supporting survivors is so important.

It's always a concern when the government is bringing forward legislation that is bringing out advocates like members from the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton and they're putting forward that there are red flags in what the government is proposing. Again, I think that we've had ample opportunities or this government has had many opportunities to rectify the problems that they've created. I think that this legislation itself could have potentially been another opportunity for that, but instead, again, we see vague commitments to collecting data with little information about what exactly we might be collecting.

11:00

Just reflecting on the decision that this government made to, quote, unquote, expand the ways that the money from the victims of crime fund could be spent, first of all, we saw about 60 per cent of that fund being diverted to other programs. On top of that, in this last budget we've actually seen a 12 per cent cut to that fund. In both of those circumstances that is very concerning. We see money being diverted to paying for courts and policing initiatives and, well, they say, hiring more Crown prosecutors. It doesn't seem like that's going so well even with the added funds that they're taking away from victims of crime, Mr. Speaker, but the fact is that they are now allowed to use that money that was once entirely designated for those who are trying to deal with traumatic experiences and get the supports and therapy and everything else that comes along with it.

The previous member also reflected on the fact that the government has moved to put a \$1,000 limit on reimbursements. We see stories from previously, before that limit was put in place, where Albertans who have been victims of crime have been reimbursed or received compensation of upwards of \$10,000 in some cases. That is entirely understandable, in my opinion, Mr. Speaker, that we should be doing everything we can to support these people. Unfortunately, this government has gone in the exact opposite direction. This is just one more instance of the government completely failing on the Justice file, really, across the board.

I would say, specific to this issue, that what is potentially most concerning or most questionable about the decisions of this government is the fact that so many of them come from rural communities. I would say in many instances that the need to support victims is – or not the need, but the barriers to supporting victims in rural communities is potentially higher than we might see in urban settings. Obviously, we have more associations and advocates within our urban centres and potentially more opportunities to receive supports, whether it is from police or advocacy organizations or wherever a victim or survivor might feel safe going to. Instead of ensuring that those funds are in place and that we keep that two-year time limit, we actually saw the government go backwards, down to a 45-day time limit, which, again, might be even worse for those people in rural communities who have been victimized in one way or another. I find that concerning and question why so often the decisions of this government are actually negatively affecting rural Albertans potentially even more so than those in urban centres.

You know, we heard from the previous minister the idea of Jordan's principle and the risk of cases being thrown out because of ongoing delays based on the lack of supports in the justice system. It was also very interesting to see from the current Justice minister, when the idea that this was happening, that there was more than 3,000 cases in the Provincial Court alone that were at risk of being tossed out, that when that story initially broke, the minister actually said that this wasn't the case, that even though they've gone past this 18-month timeline, there's no chance that this is going to happen. Again, advocates from within the community came out and said that the minister was wrong. Defence lawyers came out and said that, absolutely, it's possible that, you know, upwards of 1,282 violent cases are at risk of being thrown out in the Provincial Court. So it's hard.

Again, when we look at Bill 9 and the vagueness and the lack of detail and the fact that we're being told that much of the important parts of the legislation will come through regulations, it's hard to believe that the government is on the right track, with the vagueness of it and with the track record that this government has already put forward and also with their inability to be straightforward with Albertans, Mr. Speaker. I think that the discussion around the Jordan case is a great example of that. I think that the denial of the truth or denial of the facts around the victims of crime fund through this process leaves Albertans concerned about the track record of this government.

Further, like the previous member, I have great concerns, and I know Albertans by and large have great concerns about the fact that right now, as brought forward again on April 6 of this year – the document is titled Alberta Crown Prosecutors Meet to Consider Strike. Again, we have the Crown prosecutors in the province who, rightfully so, are concerned that even though in the UCP's platform in 2019 the Premier committed to hiring 50 new prosecutors, at this point there are still 37 vacancies. So now they are considering job action because of a lack of resources, a lack of what seems like respect coming from people above them in terms of the minister and the ministry's office potentially as well as the caseloads that

continue to grow and grow. They feel that they're being unheard or aren't being listened to, and they are considering job action now.

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

Across the board it seems like the justice system or the responsibilities of this minister aren't being taken as seriously as they should be. The resourcing isn't there. There are major concerns. I think the previous member said that this government calls themselves tough on crime, but it seems like quite the opposite when we look at the decisions that they've made. I would reflect on the fact that not only are we seeing policing costs downloaded onto municipalities, even before we have this discussion about moving to a provincial police force, but they are also taking more portions of things like traffic tickets. They're taking with both hands, Mr. Speaker, not giving back with any hand; taking with both of them. Unfortunately, what this means is more costs on Alberta municipalities, which in turn means more costs on Alberta residents across the board for the money that is being taken away from municipalities, but it also means less services provided by those organizations within their community.

That really goes back to the point here of Bill 9 and the Public's Right to Know Act. Though very vague, you know, the idea of increasing the transparency and oversight and opportunities for the Justice minister to request information: I absolutely feel that in principle the idea that is put forward in this legislation is something that I am willing to support. Again, the main concern here is the lack of clarity in what exactly the minister is hoping to get out of it and also the lack of clarity if it is going to result in, essentially, more paperwork or more work for these organizations within our community on the ground, who – we, of course, with the scaling back of funds from this government, need to ensure that there is adequate staffing, whether it's policing in rural communities or otherwise, and we continue to talk about the fact that they need to be out in the community. As best as possible we need to ensure that they're in the community supporting families and not necessarily stuck behind a desk.

Now, if we are going to ask them to provide more data for the work that they're doing, which is – again, I support that idea, but we need to ensure that the resources are in place, to ensure that it's not going to mean a reduction in the people in the community and on the street level.

11:10

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I do believe that I, again, support in general the principles that are put forward by Bill 9. I have major concerns about the direction of this government overall when it comes to the Justice ministry and the justice system, but with that, I will take my seat and hear from some other colleagues.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Looking for other members wishing to join debate. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and of course yesterday during debate on Bill 9 in Committee of the Whole I made reference to dealing with issues of justice as they relate to the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the prison system here in the province of Alberta but, as well, federally. I just wanted to take this opportunity to delve a little bit deeper into what I brought up then in debate, which were the sentencing circles. I promised that I would during third reading mention it a little in more detail.

I do have a description here that I wanted to share with everybody now, and I remind all the members of the House that this is so important because this is a practice that's already taking place in many jurisdictions across Canada. The Edmonton Police Service

decided to pilot a project very recently in the last couple of years, and I want to encourage all of us to promote this because I honestly believe that this is a nonpartisan issue, that we need to work on it in terms of reconciliation with Indigenous nations all across Canada. Of course, it's a great alternative to making sure that these situations can be dealt with in a more productive manner for Indigenous people and that is more fair, I would say.

According to the document that I have, it says this, and I'll quote directly from it, Mr. Speaker. I'll be sure to table this later on today.

A sentencing circle is a community-directed process, conducted in partnership with the criminal justice system, to develop consensus on an appropriate sentencing plan that addresses the concerns of all interested parties. Sentencing circles – sometimes called peacemaking circles – use traditional circle ritual and structure to involve the victim, victim supporters, the offender, offender supporters, judge and court personnel, prosecutor, defense counsel, police, and all interested community members. Within the circle, people can speak from the heart in a shared search for understanding of the event, and together identify the steps necessary to assist in healing all affected parties and prevent future crimes.

Sentencing circles typically involve a multi-step procedure that includes: (1) application by the offender to participate in the circle process; (2) a healing circle for the victim; (3) a healing circle for the offender; (4) a sentencing circle to develop consensus on the elements of a sentencing plan; and (5) follow-up circles to monitor the progress of the offender. The sentencing plan may incorporate commitments by the system, community, and family members, as well as by the offender. Sentencing circles are used for adult and juvenile offenders with a variety of offenses and have been used in both rural and urban settings. Specifics of the circle process vary from community to community and are designed locally to fit community needs and culture.

On top of that, I want to say that I highly encourage all members of the House – a good friend of mine produced a short documentary on this particular issue. You can go on YouTube and find it just by typing in “sentencing circles,” and you can actually see the Edmonton Police Service member that actually participated in one of these sentencing circles, what they thought about it, you know, what their prejudices were before going into the sentencing circle process, and then, of course, what they thought about it once they finished the actual process.

Again I will reiterate that this is the type of legislation – these kinds of programs I wish we as a government or the government and we as a Legislature were focusing on to actually bring real solutions to real problems, and in this case the real problem being the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the prison system.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my chair. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the bill?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to ask the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 9 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading (continued)

Bill 12 Trustee Act

[Adjourned debate April 19: Mr. Nielsen]

The Acting Speaker: Looking for members wishing to speak to Bill 12, the Trustee Act. I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide some comments here at second reading of Bill 12, the Trustee Act. This is quite a lengthy piece of legislation. It's quite complicated as well, so it is for that reason that I am very grateful for the detailed and very careful work of the Alberta Law Reform Institute. These folks do something of a yeoman's task of combing through old pieces of legislation, pieces of legislation that, as identified by various members of the legal profession, require update, and make recommendations to government on how to do so after a typically lengthy and detailed consultation process with members of the legal profession and provide that analysis in both a practical way based on how those pieces of legislation have worked or not worked and also an analysis that is oftentimes interjurisdictional in nature and that references some of the academic reckoning in various law faculties with these types of pieces of legislation.

Now, a trust is, of course, a fiduciary relationship between an individual and one or more persons to hold property and to use and make decisions about that property for the beneficiaries of that trust, many different types of trust. Some of our legislation was very old, and this was the case across the country. Indeed, there is an entity called the Uniform Law Conference of Canada, which undertook a project on trustee legislation reform across the country. They made a recommendation at the time in 2012 that the Uniform Trustee Act be adopted in Alberta, but the Alberta Law Reform Institute then examined those recommendations and indicated that there were a few aspects of that work that needed to be tailored and clarified for Alberta's particular needs, understanding, as we do, all of the areas of provincial jurisdiction around property that this law reform project would affect.

I want to pause for a moment here and reflect on the value of organizations like the Alberta Law Reform Institute. There is a reason why they are so well respected within the legal profession and why they merit public support as well.

These are the types of what I like to call drumbeat-of-governing processes, that are tremendously time consuming, do not result in, you know, lightning in the sky, people's typical understandings of what we do here in the Legislature, but they are nonetheless extremely important to the maintenance of rule of law, to the equal application of the law to all individuals, to ordinary concepts of fairness that any ordinary person can understand and accept, the appropriate continuation of the business of our courts such that we do not have legislation that is antiquated or difficult to interpret or resulting in varying interpretations that then result in appeals after appeals or other inconsistencies or outcomes that, in fact, disadvantage certain groups.

11:20

This is the kind of work that, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, is quite boring in nature. Certainly, when I read through the written Trustee Act at first, given as I have some background in law courses but not having gone to law school, the Trustee Act was certainly one that reading it through made my eyes glaze over, and I had to go and read the Alberta Law Reform Institute paper, that they subsequently put out a couple of years back, to understand exactly what we were talking about here. I think that's normal even for people in the legal profession. If you don't have an expertise in these particular areas of law, the eyes may also glaze over with respect to this piece, which is why we need those experts to inform the debate through, like I said, the practical use and application of these legal frameworks but also the work of legal academics and scholars, and the Alberta Law Reform Institute contains both of those types of people.

That's how you get the best evidence-based decision-making. That is how a government that is interested in the best outcomes for

public policy conducts itself, and we would do well to revisit some of those anchors and guardrails of not only the Westminster parliamentary system but also of a properly functioning liberal democracy. Yes, we are assembled in here, a group of ordinary people. Some of us are lawyers, and some of us are not. Some of us have different backgrounds, but the fact of the matter is that we must trust and respond to appropriate expertise and evidence and not shout it out of the room because it does not automatically confirm our priors, especially if our priors happen to be a predilection for serving particular groups of folks who are not interested in evidence, the scientific method, or the rule of law.

Now, in terms of what this bill actually does, there have been amendments to the Trustee Act, but it's never been comprehensively reviewed. It's largely based on an 1893 English statute. Now, that, on the face of it, makes the case for why it might need to be updated. Our property relationships to one another were quite different even prior to the Charter. Certainly, division of property, holding of property between men and women, for example, or on the basis of national or ethnic origin was something that was already beginning to change prior to the Charter, and of course we have seen a number of changes in this regard after the Charter. That in and of itself would signal that the Trustee Act may have some inconsistencies or some places where it crossed threads with established practice around making decisions to protect and benefit others in terms of the beneficiaries.

This piece of legislation establishes more provisions for the day-to-day management of trusts, and certainly that is a piece that is very, very important to the public interest when we examine who, in fact, becomes someone who has their property managed in a trust relationship. The fact of the matter is that there are newer types of trusts, for example, for folks with disabilities, trusts that manage inheritances or significant financial gifts while receiving AISH.

For example, our government passed legislation in 2018 to make this possible, the Henson trust legislation, which, if memory serves, was repealed in some sort of ridiculous omnibus exercise undertaken by this current government. I suppose that's another thing that we'll have to fix because the fact of the matter is that an appropriate and appropriately respectful way to approach trusts for people receiving AISH benefits is something that is most certainly in the public interest. It defies logic why that would have been something that was repealed. I'm happy to be corrected that it wasn't, but I think it was.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah.

Ms Phillips: Yes. Okay. I mean, it just makes absolutely no sense why anyone would do that, but that is the situation that we're in.

The history of this particular conversation around trusts, of course, resulted in the Alberta Law Reform Institute publishing a discussion paper. There were consultations, as I indicated. There were 23 new or modified recommendations. It appears that Executive Council has included many of those recommendations in this legislation. That is a good thing. I certainly support this piece of legislation's expeditious passage through this Legislature.

I will say, however, that there's no question that both this bill and Bill 9, I mean, that we just spoke to – Bill 9 I spoke to yesterday around second reading, and then we just finished with third. This Bill 12 has moved into this current stage of debate rather quickly as well. There's no question that other pieces of legislation could move at a similar pace, certainly, if the government didn't see fit to adjourn debate on their so-called priorities.

There's no question that the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General has a number of important files to balance, this being one of them, and there's no question that some pieces of legislation

move quicker through this House than others. But, you know, along with this and Bill 9, if the minister was at all worried about the effect on folks whose affairs are managed, for example, via the office of the public guardian and trustee, then there would have been some reckoning with the challenges that the OPGT has had within this bill, and there is not.

For example, when there are victims of crime who are also folks whose affairs are managed by the office of the public guardian and trustee – those folks sometimes were former children in care, and their affairs are still managed by the OPGT as adults – what they can qualify for when they are a victim of crime: it's the OPGT that goes and gets them whatever they're entitled to. You know, it's the government of Alberta, it's the province that acts on their behalf because their affairs are under trustee of the government. So if they're a victim of a crime or even a victim of a car accident in a civil litigation affair, but certainly if they're a victim of a crime, it would be the OPGT that goes and tries to get those folks whatever they need. They don't have parents or anyone else to advocate for them. It's our job. By our, I mean with a capital "O." It's the province's job to meet those folks' needs.

What has happened since the raiding of the victims of crime fund is that those folks don't get anything if under the care of the province they somehow experienced an egregious crime such as sexual assault or aggravated assault. They don't get anything anymore. You know, I think there are five counselling sessions or something. Like, come on. Give me a break.

11:30

Some of that could have been contained, some of the challenges for folks whose affairs are managed by the provincial trustee relationship could have potentially been at some point in this Legislature. The problems with the victims of crime fund could have been appropriately reckoned with. Given that the legislation changing it was introduced in June 2020, there was supposed to be some sort of review around what victims of crime are actually getting. It never happened.

The Acting Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to Bill 12, second reading? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and offer a few brief comments on Bill 12, the Trustee Act. I want to, first of all, thank all of my colleagues ahead of me for speaking. Again, I think it's worth highlighting some of the comments that my friend from Lethbridge-West made in regard to this bill, that we're happy to see that in this particular case the government has consulted with academics and legal experts and adopted a number of the recommendations that have come forward from those people who looked closely at this issue of trusts and made significant recommendations for reform. Certainly, I would encourage the government to take that approach to a whole host of public policy decisions and not just making it up as they go, as they seem to have done on a number of other important files.

You know, I can't help but wonder what the state of the eastern slopes would have been if the government had just conducted this kind of public policy review at the very outset of its term instead of scrapping the Loughheed coal policy and then continually walking back that decision and finding some kind of a cobbled-together way of appearing to be responding to the massive backlash that it suffered while also still intent on catering to the big coal interests that this government clearly favours over the interests of average landowners.

You know, it's incredibly concerning to me, Mr. Speaker, that the Coal Policy Committee that the government struck made a number of recommendations to the Energy minister that she has

been completely silent on, a whole host of recommendations that the government refuses to even acknowledge were made in that report, much less address in other areas of public policy.

Had the government taken the approach that they've taken with this Bill 12 to other issues like the coal policy issue, I think Albertans would be in a much better place. The eastern slopes would have their future much more secure, and this government wouldn't find itself with such a severe trust deficit as it does now.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

You know, on the issue of a trust itself, I first of all want to declare that I have absolutely no conflict of interest whatsoever with this piece of legislation just by virtue of the fact that I have nothing to leave behind when I die, Mr. Speaker. As soon as I expire, the only thing that I will leave to my dependents will be a bill for the cost of cremating and disposing of my remains. I have no earthly possessions, nothing of value. In fact, the only inheritance, I think, might be the gas that they will be able to siphon out of the van and perhaps put into their own vehicles. That's it. Sorry, kids. You better keep your old man around for a lot longer because this is as good as it's going to get. There's nothing that I'm going to leave behind.

Having declared absolutely no conflict of interest, I'm pleased to offer some other comments on this piece of legislation, and I do want to pick up on something that, again, my friend from Lethbridge-West raised in her remarks on this issue, and that was the issue of Henson trusts, because I had a number of people come into my constituency office from the period of 2015 to 2018, when our government had been elected and before we took issue to allow for the creation of these so-called Henson trusts. There were a number of families in Edmonton-Gold Bar who had dependents who were receiving AISH and wanted to be able to leave behind a little bit of an inheritance but were afraid to do so because that would mean that their AISH benefits would be clawed back.

Now, I know that to members of the UCP clawing back AISH benefits isn't a severe concern, but to the families of people who are recipients of AISH, clawing back AISH benefits is a concern, and these families were put in a tremendously awkward circumstance because they wanted to be able to provide for their dependants who were not able to provide for themselves, yet by doing so, they would actually make their dependants worse off than if they had left them nothing.

That struck them as being incredibly unfair, and that struck us as being incredibly unfair, too, so that's why we took the opportunity to amend the legislation to allow for the creation of these Henson trusts, so that families of AISH recipients could leave behind a small inheritance for their loved ones who are recipients of AISH without putting them at risk of losing their benefits. I think that was an important public policy decision that left the families with their minds at ease that their loved ones would be taken care of once they passed away. It also, you know, provided for a suitable public policy position, I think, for the people of Alberta, one that the people of Alberta were happy with. I think everybody thought that that was a reasonable state of affairs; everyone, I guess, except this current government, which decided in one of its pieces of omnibus legislation to repeal this concept of Henson trusts and again leave the families of AISH recipients uncertain about the future of their loved ones once they've passed away. That's extremely unfortunate.

But saying that, I think that overall this piece of legislation is a much-needed update to the legal framework around establishing trustees, and as I said at the very beginning, I'm very pleased to see that the government relied heavily on the advice of experts like the Alberta Law Reform Institute when it decided to bring forward these changes. It is a little bit concerning to me, Mr. Speaker, that

the act only implements about 80 of the 90 or so recommendations that the Alberta Law Reform Institute made to the government on this particular issue, and I'm curious to know why those outstanding recommendations weren't adopted in this piece of legislation.

Is it that the government needed more time to work through the implications of those recommendations and that they intend to bring forward legislation at a future date to address them? Did they reject them out of hand for reasons that are unknown to us? Or did they simply – I don't know – get bored with the issue and couldn't go beyond 80 recommendations because at that point it was probably whisky o'clock on the sky palace terrace and they couldn't be bothered to complete their work anymore? I don't know, and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister of Justice or any other member of Executive Council why the government refused to address these outstanding recommendations.

11:40

But on balance I think that this is overall a significant step forward in the legal framework around trusts and trustees, and for that reason, Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to join my colleagues here in the Official Opposition in supporting this legislation.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to join debate? I do see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has risen.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to spend a little bit of time on Bill 12, the Trustee Act. As with a number of the bills lately, I have certainly found some things to be very positive about and wish to support. I think that's a particularly important area for us to be moving forward on because, as we know, the original Trustee Act was based on legislation that is literally over 100 years old, and it's really time to bring it home to this Legislature, to take responsibility for it within the context of this province, and to ensure that the Trustee Act and all the recommendations that had been brought forward are put together in such a way that it benefits the people in the province of Alberta.

I'm glad to see that the process by which we have arrived at this date has been one which I think we all can celebrate here in this province, and that is that those people who are most informed about the topic were brought together and had an opportunity to put together a review of the issues that are inherent in the area of trusts, which, of course, included not only members of the Law Society but also some members of the public who experienced some of the significant consequences of when things go wrong in the situation of trustee positions.

I'm very glad to see that the report that came out in January 2017, called A New Trustee Act for Alberta, Final Report of the law commission society, was largely adopted here in this particular piece of legislation because, you know, what we have is exactly what we like to see here in the Legislature, and that is people bringing forward recommendations based on their vast lived experience, their academic knowledge, and their legal expertise and bringing forward recommendations that are about doing some of the mundane things that most of us don't even know that much about. People that have the ability to understand the small-detail work that has to go into establishing a law such that people will be able to practise it well without too much lack of clarity in the future – I know that you can never make things a hundred per cent clear, but having this great group of people put together a good list of recommendations and then have the government adopt most of those recommendations is good.

Of course, over time we'll spend some time making sure that the recommendations that have not been adopted by the government are re-examined, just to make sure that maybe they shouldn't be included into this bill, you know, just to follow up in terms of government decision-making, but the adoption of the majority of these recommendations is good. Starting, of course, with the adoption of the Uniform Trustee Act, I think, is a good starting place. You know, this is certainly an act that we can be supportive of because we know that the place from which it has been derived has been one that has been nonpartisan. It has been focused on the law. It has been focused on the outcome of the people that will experience it. I noticed that the standards which are being put in here in all of the different sections – there are sections on who is appointed as trustees, when that trustee resigns, when there's a transfer of trustees. All of those pieces, which are the minutiae of this type of law, have all been set down on the underlying priority that we seek to reach the highest possible standard of skill and professionalism amongst our trustees, and I think that's an excellent place to begin.

It allows, of course, courts to make very clear decisions about whether or not the decisions made by trustees on behalf of others have in fact met those high standards, because the standards are clearly laid out, which is something we've been asking this government to do in a number of other acts. Can you please lay out what the standards are? Can you please lay out what it means, you know, for you when you say that you're going to produce a report? For example, in the last bill we just talked about, on the public's right to know, there is the overarching legal structure that says that a report will be produced, but then it does not say what's in the report. It's due to that lack of detail that brought us to great concern in Bill 9, so now it's nice to see in Bill 12 that we actually have a little bit more detail, that more is being provided to people who are involved in the trustee relationship. Therefore, it's providing some clarity to the court system.

I understand that the government is hopeful that this actually will mean that we'll have a reduction in the number of cases that go to court and end up in conflict or that if they do go to court, they're much more quickly settled, because the rules are established in such a way that there will be clarity as to whether or not the rules were followed fairly quickly. I know that right now the courts in Alberta are in a very difficult position. We do not have the number of appointed judges that we might have had if the government had submitted the list of needs to the federal government, as had been requested and was not fulfilled by this government, so we are short on the number of judges. We have court prosecutors threatening to strike because of the difficulties in the court system. Overall, there's just been some – it's been a very problematic few years under the UCP government in the court system, so it's nice to see that we actually have something coming forward that's going to benefit the court system and help to take some of the pressure off. Therefore, I certainly want to support it.

I'm also very encouraged to see that there is a continuation of the current prudent investor rule, that ensures that investors cannot take, you know, wild chances with the monies invested in their trusts, that they must always act in a prudent way that is for the best interests of the person who is the recipient of the trust. Now, we know that the government has had a problem with that in the past as well, under AIMCo, when they lost a billion dollars because they decided to experiment with very high-risk investments and lost a significant amount of money for the province of Alberta under the UCP government. In this case I'm very happy to see that there is a prudent investor rule, one which I think government should always kind of maintain as they move forward because I think it's important that people who are responsible for the financial well-being of others be in a place where they have to understand that

they cannot just assume any kind of possible consequence for their behaviour because it's not them that will have to bear those consequences. That prudent investment is a rule that I'm very happy to see in this list, and I wish, of course, that the government would exercise it themselves in terms of their own investment behaviour.

I also want to spend a few moments on the concern we have regarding Henson trusts. Having been a social worker for much of my career, I certainly have worked with a significant number of people who have had a need for a trust from their family because of their inability to care for their own financial needs. In my career I did spend time working in child welfare, of course, where we had some people who were unable to take care of themselves. I also worked at the Glenrose hospital in the area of people with disabilities and so on, so I have seen circumstances where we have individuals, because of no fault of their own – sometimes, for example, when I was at the Glenrose hospital, people had acquired brain injuries or were born with a disability, some congenital factor which prevented them from being able to, you know, take on responsibility for their own well-being.

11:50

I know that all of these people generally are taken care of well by their families and, of course, by many public institutions from the time that they are born till they are 18, but then what happens is that at the age of 18 a lot of that responsibility suddenly shifts to public institutions like the office of the public guardian. Of course, the actual source of income for these individuals shifts to the program which we refer to as AISH, assistance for the severely handicapped.

Unfortunately, this government has made a number of decisions with regard to people living on AISH which are problematic. They have failed to raise the rates as inflation goes up. They deindex them. They have delayed the AISH payments for three days at the end of every month, which makes it very difficult to pay your bills on time. Of course, they did all of this just to make their budget look slightly more balanced at an earlier time, no real function either for government or for the people involved. It was just simply a self-preservation act on the part of this government.

It is very discouraging, then, to see them pile onto the people who live on AISH, people who have the inability to care for their own needs, this issue of removing the Henson trust during an omnibus bill in which they just slid this in amongst many other things. The purpose of the Henson trust was really quite clear, and that was for families to participate in the well-being of their family members beyond their own life.

Now, many of us choose to do that. You know, many of us have spent a great deal of time ensuring our finances are in order so that we can pass on the benefits of our successes in our lives to our own children. This should be equally true of people who have children with disabilities. In my own case, for example, if I were to die in the next little while, all of that which I own will be passed on to my children, and it would not be subtracted from their income. They would be able to receive those monies. In fact, I could even right now provide significant amounts of money to my children as a gift, and it would not even be taxable at this time.

Unfortunately, if you're on AISH, all of that goes out the window. Gifts from your own parents suddenly come off your income. If your parents have put money aside in order to be able to provide you with resources for the rest of your life through a Henson trust, that would have been protected if the legislation had been left alone. But this government chose to remove that, and as a result, now if you set money aside for your children, that money is taken off their income, you know, which essentially means that if you have been a responsible and caring parent and you've set

money aside for your children, you essentially are saving money for the government. You're not saving money for your children. You're not providing them with the ability to do things.

Having worked with many disabled people in my career as a social worker, I know that their life is not a rich life in terms of finances. They do not have the wealth to do things they want to do. I remember one young man I worked with at Camp He Ho Ha, where I worked for three summers, put myself through university, by the name of Ricky. I ran into him on Jasper Avenue one day. I asked what he was doing, and he said that he just sits on Jasper Avenue with his coffee cup there on the end of his wheelchair. He cannot speak very well, so it's an elongated conversation. People put money into his little cup. He doesn't even ask for it. But his disability is so obvious that people come along and put money into his cup.

I said, "Oh, what do you plan to do with that?" He said, "I'm going to buy myself something to play music with." I mean, he had to go out onto the street to ask other Albertans to contribute to his life just so he could listen to some music, which is one of the few pleasures that he had available to him because his disability was such that he could not feed himself, for example. He could only move around in an electric wheelchair, because he did have enough control to be able to manipulate the chair itself. I just thought: you know, living on AISH, which is what he was living on, is not a very nice situation to be in. By the time you pay your basic rent and the extra costs of your disability, often things like wheelchairs and other kinds of things you might need or lifts in the toilet and other things like that, you really have no money. So he was actually in the position of having to sit on the corner of Jasper Avenue, collect money so that he could buy himself a small stereo of some nature.

We just thought it was really important, when we were in government, to have a Henson trust that would prevent that kind of thing from happening, and now this government has taken it away.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I'll keep my comments very, very brief. I think, as you can see, that our caucus has concurred that this bill is necessary and provides a good function, an improved function for trusts here in the province of Alberta. I certainly just want to reiterate how it reflects positively on how a bill should be researched and solicited and consulted with the people who actually use that law. This being a reflection of the Law Reform Institute consultations as well as a reflection of the Uniform Law Conference of Canada – right? – from a number of years back, it seems to hold up very well not just as legislation for the province but as part of having some concurrence with other forms of trust law in other jurisdictions across the country. Based on all of those things, I think that we can certainly support this bill, and I appreciate the minister and his department for doing work to get it done.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to join debate?

Seeing none, I am prepared to ask the question. I have noted that there is an opportunity to close debate, which has been waived.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you. I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:59 a.m.]

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