



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Fourth Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, December 13, 2022

Day 9

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 30th Legislature

Fourth Session

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Reid, Roger W., Livingstone-Macleod (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Party standings:

United Conservative: 60

New Democrat: 23

Independent: 2

Vacant: 2

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Rick Wilson	Minister of Indigenous Relations

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Turton

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education has an introduction of a visitor.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to stand here today to introduce an outstanding former MLA to the Assembly, through you. Seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, is the Hon. Stockwell Day. Stockwell served as the MLA of what I believe to be the most beautiful constituency, my constituency of Red Deer-North. He served from 1986 until 2000. During that time he served as the minister of labour, the minister of family and social services, and Provincial Treasurer. He later moved on to a successful career in federal politics. I'm blessed to have his guidance and friendship, as many also here in the Assembly today experience. I would ask that we give him the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: It seems to me that perhaps I should have asked the minister to do the introduction, because I am pleased to invite to the Assembly and welcome back the former Member for Calgary-South East, the Hon. Rick Fraser; the former Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, the Hon. Luke Ouellette; and the former Member for Calgary-Elbow and leader of the fourth party, Mr. Greg Clark. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, also seated in the Speaker's gallery today are some constituents from the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. Please join me in welcoming Matthew Rowley, Brian Rowley, and Esther Rowley. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The hon. the Minister of Indigenous Relations has an introduction.

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you the president, Beverly Allard; vice-president Aretha Greatrix; and board member Richard Leask from the Indigenous Congress of Alberta. The Indigenous Congress of Alberta aims to serve Indigenous people from across Alberta who do not feel actively acknowledged by any other representative body. Over the past two years it has supported over 100,000 Indigenous individuals with COVID-related support. Let's ensure they receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the

Assembly the amazing staff of the Edmonton-Decore constituency office. Joining us today in the gallery are office manager Irshaad Khan, caseworker David Mandrusiak, and first-year social work student out of Grant MacEwan Mahat Abdi. Gentlemen, please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Yao: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to introduce to you and through you Jenn McManus of the Canadian Red Cross. She's the vice-president for Alberta and Northwest Territories, whom I got to know through her supporting Fort McMurray through fire and flood. Please show her the warm reception of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the entire Assembly two of my great friends from Cypress-Medicine Hat. First, we have Garret, one of the hardest workers I know and one of the best directional drillers in all of Alberta, and his wife, Mandi, a realtor and a very hard worker, a great volunteer for Conservative caucuses. Mandi and Garret Campbell, could you please stand and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Turton: Mr. Speaker, I'm very happy to introduce to you and through you councillor Stuart Houston. Mr. Houston is a close friend, a former mayor, a current member of Spruce Grove city council, and recipient of the Queen's jubilee medal. I'm proud to say that our vibrant community is a better place because of the hard work he has contributed over decades of public service. Councillor Houston, please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

Postsecondary Institutions and Downtown Calgary

Ms Ganley: Mr. Speaker, over the next decade 100,000 Albertans will finish high school and start looking to the future. This will be the largest group in history. We need to give these young Albertans, our future leaders, real opportunities right here at home or they will leave. At the same time, Calgary's downtown has been forced to contend with office vacancy rates not seen in decades. Overcoming these challenges will be critical to building a resilient economy, but there is a solution.

Alberta's NDP has committed to establishing a new downtown Calgary postsecondary campus. We proposed a downtown campus as part of our Alberta's Future project, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Calgary Economic Development and the Calgary Chamber of commerce recently released reports supporting a new campus, and the city of Calgary has already committed to contributing \$9 million.

Research indicates that downtown campuses support the creation of more start-ups, the development of more inventions, and more licensing deals. We're already starting from a position of strength because of our world-class institutions. The University of Calgary, for example, is the top start-up creator amongst research institutions in Canada. Today we sent a letter to postsecondary presidents requesting a proposal for this exciting new campus. We can convert empty office space into housing and other usable spaces. This new campus can be a place where Albertans can live, work, and learn.

We know postsecondary education is an economic driver. That's why we will move quickly to undo the damage caused by the UCP to postsecondaries, cuts that totalled nearly \$700 million. We will have a real plan to keep education affordable. We will increase access. We will be willing partners with postsecondary. Alberta's NDP knows that investing in postsecondary is an investment in a better future. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Member for Calgary-Peigan.

Edmonton Public Safety and Community Response Task Force

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues are impacting every community in Alberta, including in our province's capital. These are serious issues which are disrupting the lives of Albertans, and they are so often interconnected. That is why over the past three and a half years Alberta's government has taken significant steps to address these top-of-mind societal issues, from eliminating user fees for publicly funded addiction treatment to announcing \$187 million to address addiction and homelessness in Alberta's two largest cities. This government has taken action, and there is still more work to be done.

That is why I am pleased that the ministers of Mental Health and Addiction; Public Safety and Emergency Services; Seniors, Community and Social Services; and Municipal Affairs have come together to form the Public Safety and Community Response Task Force. This task force will be responsible for rolling out the initiatives funded by that \$187 million. Their efforts will include further increasing addiction treatment capacity, providing addiction and mental health treatment in correctional centres, creating hybrid health and police hubs, expanding medical detox services, deploying harm reduction and recovery outreach teams, piloting a service hub model to increase access to recovery, and improving access to affordable housing options that support recovery.

Mr. Speaker, our government has made addictions treatment and prevention a top priority, and this is one more step in that direction. Albertans can be assured that our government is taking a fair and compassionate approach in addressing the addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues that our communities are facing. Every Albertan deserves the opportunity to pursue recovery and should be supported in that pursuit, and every Albertan deserves to feel safe as they commute to and from work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Bob Neufeld

Mrs. Allard: Today I rise to honour a truly remarkable Albertan. William Robert Neufeld, known to most as Bob, was born on September 12, 1929, and passed away on December 2 at the age of 93. A lifelong resident of Grande Prairie, Bob was a visionary, a community-minded leader, and an inspiration to anyone having the fortune to know him.

I first met Bob and his wife, June, in the fall of 1997. Twenty-five years of friendship later and my family is grateful for these dear friends who became family, serving as adopted grandparents to our three children. Bob was like a second father to my husband. He was an innovative teacher and coach. He pioneered the Grande Prairie composite high school outdoor ed program and the high school hockey league and curriculum, both of which were subsequently adopted province-wide and replicated as far away as Australia. He was a trendsetter and a visionary, bringing passion to his role as an educator and shaping programming for thousands of students all over the world.

1:40

There is so much to share about Bob that I could fill hours. Here are some highlights. He was a founding member of the Grande Prairie Storm hockey team. He was the founder of Camp Wapiti in 1963, and for the past 59 years and counting, Camp Wapiti has allowed youth to learn more about nature, the outdoors, and the faith that guided Bob his

entire life. He was a founder at Nitehawk ski hill. For those who use the hill, Bob's bump training area is named after him. He was the founder of the Wild Kakwa Society, working over three decades to gain official recognition of this nature reserve. He was a lifelong member of McLaurin Baptist church. Not many can say that they were a member of anything for 93 years.

The longest serving ski instructor in Canada, teaching for over 50 years, in April of this year Bob was honoured for his service at a celebration in Jasper, where he gleefully took to the slopes at Marmot Basin at the age of 92. Bob received several awards, including the sovereign's medal for volunteers in 2005, the Alberta commercial travellers sportsman of the year in '68, and the honour medallion presented by the Canadian association for health, physical education, and recreation in 1978. In addition, it will be my tremendous honour to award Bob the Queen Elizabeth platinum jubilee medal posthumously.

Bob Neufeld was a champion of our community and our province. We loved him dearly. May he rest in peace.

Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, I stand in this House every day to represent the constituents of Edmonton-Meadows, their hopes, their ideas, and their concerns as we work to build a better future for all. My constituents couldn't be more clear that they don't support the job-killing, undemocratic sovereignty act. In my riding I have heard from business owners who are worried about the economic impacts this government's actions are having on their livelihoods. COVID was disastrous for businesses. They needed support, but this government abandoned them. Now the government is asking small businesses to face further economic uncertainty just so the Premier can make useless power grabs. When will it stop?

I've also heard from members of my riding who are immigrants. They have faced unfair challenges over the last three years, losing their jobs, struggling to feed their families, and worrying about whether or not they could make ends meet. The sovereignty act gives the provincial government an undemocratic amount of power but leaves immigrants in this province to face chaos, uncertainty, and unpredictable futures. Mr. Speaker, over 23 per cent of Alberta's population are immigrants. They are a fundamental part of our province, and they have every right to feel confident that this government cares about them.

I want to be clear that an NDP government will care about them. We will grow immigration and get people better access to credentialing. We will support small businesses, helping them combat the rising cost of inflation and shortage of skilled workers and more. We will repeal the job-killing sovereignty act, move immediately to restore investor certainty, and build an economy filled with good-paying jobs. I can't wait to make all of this a reality come May 2023. Alberta NDP will build a better future for all.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East has a statement to make.

Health Care System

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is a first-class province that prides itself on delivering exceptional public services. We have highly trained professionals across all areas who are committed to serving Albertans year-round. We hold ourselves to world-class standards, and our health care services are no exception. Alberta's government has prioritized health care and has allocated a record budget of \$23.59 billion to further strengthen the health care system.

Alberta has the best front-line health care workers in the world, and we will work to have the right supports in place to ensure Albertans

get the care they need when and where they need it. The Premier, the Minister of Health, and AHS official administrator Dr. John Cowell have announced our government's plan to improve EMS response times, decrease emergency wait times, and reduce wait times for surgeries. Since the pandemic Alberta Health has been running at overcapacity, and people have been facing long wait times during emergencies and for key surgeries.

I recognize the inconvenience and distress this has caused for those who are on the waiting list and their families. That's why getting back on track has been a top priority. We want to offer a health care system that Albertan families can trust and depend on. I am confident in the initiatives that Alberta's government has put forward to address the issue.

I want to share important news on emergency wait times. Currently the emergency wait time at Alberta Children's hospital is two hours and 19 minutes; at Peter Lougheed Centre, two hours and 43 minutes; and at Rockyview general hospital, two hours and eight minutes. The complete information for emergency wait times can be seen at the AHS website. The government of Alberta has accelerated the changes, improvements necessary to once again efficiently offer consistent, quality care for Albertans across the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Human Rights in Iran

Member Loyola: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On December 10 each year we mark Human Rights Day and the 71st anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights, a milestone document that proclaimed the inalienable rights which everyone is inherently entitled to as a human being. Today I would like to take this opportunity to speak about the human rights violations happening in Iran right now.

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, was arrested on September 13 in Tehran by Iran's morality police for allegedly wearing a hijab in an improper way. Iranian authorities said that Amini had a stroke while in custody. She died in a hospital on September 16. Protests, which erupted in many parts of Iran following news of Amini's death, have continued daily and expanded around the world even as Iranian authorities restricted access to the Internet. At least 488 people have been killed since the demonstrations began in mid-September, and according to Human Rights Activists in Iran over 18,200 people have been detained by authorities.

Yesterday the government in Iran carried out the second execution. Majid Reza Rahnava was hanged in public on Monday after being convicted of killing two members of security forces. This public and open execution is intended to terrify the people of Iran. They are designed to stifle opposition.

More than before, the Iranian people need us to hear and amplify their voices. The Alberta Iranian community has hosted many demonstrations here in Edmonton and Calgary in support of freedom of expression, protection for human rights, and specifically for the brave women of Iran, who are leading the charge and risking their lives. I stand in this House along with all members of the Alberta NDP caucus to call on the Iranian government to stop this repression, and I also call on Albertans to support the Iranian people in denouncing the human rights violations taking place in Iran. I also call on this Premier, her cabinet, and all members of this House to do the same and stand in solidarity with the Iranian community and the many Iranian Canadians that now call Alberta home.

Multiculturalism

Mr. Toor: Mr. Speaker, during the holiday season we can clearly see the extent that multiculturalism has enriched the lives of many Albertans. Newcomers from all over the world, of many backgrounds, ethnicities, faiths, cultures, and languages, have been coming to Alberta with the hopes of fulfilling their dreams. Today, in addition to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, people from more than 200 ethnic groups call Alberta home and celebrate their cultural heritage with pride. They are at the heart of our success as a vibrant, prosperous, and progressive province. The diversity of Albertans is a fundamental characteristic of our heritage, of our identity, and it's important for everyone who lives here, whether their families came here centuries ago or only recently, in the past few years.

Our schools, places of worship, workplaces, and other foundational institutes benefit from multiculturalism. As we continue to build a more inclusive and open province, we recognize that multicultural society is a work-in-progress. We must continue to promote the values of respect, inclusion, and many other commitments that have sought to promote multiculturalism. Along with Alberta's strong multiculturalism policies, we must recognize the rich cultures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This may require us to confront painful truths about our history and society, learn from them, and take meaningful action together to address those issues and ensure everyone is treated with respect and able to participate equally in economic, social, cultural, and political life in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, during this holiday season, let's celebrate the cultural diversity that makes us who we are. Thank you.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Alberta Sovereignty Act and Indigenous Rights

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I had the opportunity to meet with the chiefs of Treaty 6. We spoke about their concern with the Premier's sovereignty act, which they assert will impact their treaty rights here in Alberta. The chiefs reiterated to me that the Premier passed her flagship bill without any consultation with them, something that contradicts the very statements the Premier has made in this House. Will the Premier admit today that she failed to consult with any of the currently elected chiefs of Treaty 6? Will she correct the record and then apologize?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, as I've said many times before, when we drafted the Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act, the very first principle in that act was to respect treaty rights and land claims and Aboriginal rights as defined by section 35 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That was essential in the discussion. This is not about interfering in our First Nations and their ability to be self-governing. This is about us asserting Alberta's right to be treated fairly and equally in Confederation. We just want to be treated the same way as Quebec. That's what the bill is all about.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, respect would be demonstrated by apologizing for failing to consult.

Now, another one of their concerns is the Premier's new power to direct public agencies, everything from police forces to municipalities. The Premier also mused about withholding grant funding from organizations that don't comply with her political agenda. So this is a

question that I'm asking on behalf of Treaty 6 Grand Chief George Arcand Jr: will the Premier pledge to never withhold provincial funding from First Nations who do not recognize or support her job-killing sovereignty act?

Ms Smith: That's an easy one. Yes. I've said on the record that I support Jordan's principle, which is the exact opposite. I want to look for opportunities so that we can partner with First Nations to address their issues on-reserve. Part of the agreement that we signed last week, an MOU, was to support our First Nations in mental health and addiction. I'll be meeting with the Treaty 6 chiefs tomorrow to talk about their areas of concern. Every time I meet with chiefs – and I've met with about seven or eight in the last week – they identify issues that are causing tension and concern in our relationship, and that's what I'm going to work with them on solving.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that is an issue, that is a problem, a concern for chiefs is the fact that this Premier did not consult with them prior to introducing the sovereignty act. Meanwhile, while the chiefs all acknowledge, for instance, the value of the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, which the opposition also supports, they told us that they are concerned about the impact of this act on their ability to protect their air, their land, and their water, to feed their elders and their children. Will the Premier pledge to never use the sovereignty act to interfere with the land rights of treaty holders in any way, even where they disagree with it?

Ms Smith: Once again the answer is yes. This is all about making sure that Ottawa stays out of our jurisdiction. The way I've described it to the chiefs that I've spoken with is that they have fought a battle over the last number of years to get sovereignty respected and to extract themselves from the paternalistic Indian Act. We get treated the exact same way by Ottawa. They interfere in our jurisdiction all the time, and we are looking forward to pushing back and being treated exactly like Quebec.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

Health Care System

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Premier suggested that after just three weeks with Dr. Cowell she's hearing that health care is now, quote, better than ever, so much so that Dr. Cowell is already, quote, moving on from ER and ambulance crises. But here's what that actually looks like: ERs overwhelmed with sick children, more unfilled paramedic shifts, more nurses leaving front-line care, public health officials resigning, and a Premier who will not endorse the flu shot. Is this, quote, better than ever? What exactly does the Premier think a crisis looks like?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, we identified three priorities that Dr. John Cowell is going to be addressing. He has made progress on addressing a fast track into our emergency rooms, and we're beginning to see the results. A few weeks ago we were seeing wait times of 12 and 14 and 17 hours. We're not seeing that today. In addition, we're going to see changes happening with EMS. We're looking forward to announcing some of those in the new year. Based on the feedback that we've gotten from our paramedics, now the big issue is that we've got 69,000 surgeries on our surgical backlog, and we've got to make sure that we start addressing that so that nobody has an unreasonable wait.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the crisis in ERs and ambulances is not addressed. Come on.

Now, aside from having John Cowell talk to people at AHS for three weeks, the Premier could also take real, practical action to set standards for health care in this province. In an op-ed published yesterday, the former HQCA chair, Dr. Trevor Theman, says about our Bill 201: setting and reporting on standards make good sense. Dr. Paul Parks, president-elect of the AMA, agrees. Why doesn't the Premier listen to these doctors and then stand up and declare she will vote in favour of Bill 201 here in the Legislature?

Ms Smith: I can tell you why I won't vote in favour of Bill 201. It's because there's a clause in there that would deny the private sector the ability to do chartered surgical centres. We have an excellent example of a chartered surgical centre that opened up in Edmonton. They're going to be doing 4,500 surgeries. If this bill passes, what's going to happen is that it's going to limit the ability of private-sector entrepreneurs to be able to get in and start clearing the surgical backlog. I have no problem supporting the reporting of standards, but the NDP have gone too far.

Ms Notley: Well, actually, Mr. Speaker, if the bill passes, this government will be held to account for reporting and meeting standards of public health care which otherwise they've been ambivalent about. All Albertans deserve to get the health care they need when and where they need it. A good start would be setting those proper standards. Our proposal empowers the Health Quality Council to do just that, yet the UCP has refused to even debate our bill. The Premier could commit to supporting it today and starting real work, not a conversation for three weeks but real accountability and responsibility. Why not?

Ms Smith: The NDP is a little bit late to the conversation, because that's exactly what we announced when we put Dr. John Cowell in place on November 17. We identified at least 10 different measures that we're going to look at. I've had a meeting with the statistics division of Alberta Health Services. They have identified the measures. They've asked for a few weeks to be able to get the benchmarks and then be able to show some improvement in reporting. I'm looking forward to the NDP supporting our measures when we're able to reveal those in a couple of weeks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Automobile Insurance Premiums

Mr. Sabir: "Alberta drivers are getting hosed, often royally." Those are the words of *Calgary Sun* columnist Rick Bell, and he's right. Alberta has the highest rate of auto insurance in Canada according to a new report by Ernst & Young. Older drivers, younger drivers, those with experience, those in an accident: everyone is paying more here. The Premier refused to commit to any action yesterday. Rick Bell thinks cutting insurance costs is a slam dunk. Why doesn't the Premier agree? Why does she refuse to act?

Ms Smith: I've learned that you ignore Rick Bell at your peril. He always has his finger on the pulse of what people are talking about, and it is true that we have seen an escalation in insurance going back to, quite frankly, the NDP's time in government, when they were . . . [interjections] No. It is true. Between 2015 and 2019 insurance went from \$1,178 to \$1,406. That's 5 per cent per year. Exactly. It's only increased 12 per cent in the last . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: The point is, Mr. Speaker, that the approach of the NDP didn't work, and it ended up causing people to lose their insurance,

having to pay up front. We absolutely agree that there does need to be a solution. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall is the one with the call.

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, that was a lame answer, but we have a solution. Later this week I will be tabling private member's Bill 206, which will impose an immediate one-year freeze on auto insurance. This would give us time to clean up the mess caused by this UCP government, and it will take effect immediately upon proclamation. Will the Premier rise in this House right now and commit to supporting my legislation?

Ms Smith: There's no question that Albertans are in the middle of an affordability crisis, and the issue of insurance goes back to 2015. They didn't solve it. I know they're trying to suggest that they did, but here's the fact of the matter. Alberta does have the second-highest insurance rates in the country. We used to have an advantage in our insurance, and clearly we . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The Premier.

Ms Smith: Clearly, we need to take a closer look at it. I've tasked the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance to work together with the minister of affordability to find a solution for Albertans, and I'm looking forward to reporting that back when they've had a chance to talk to the industry.

2:00

Mr. Sabir: Another non answer. So many of my constituents rely on their vehicles for work. I will be sharing the Premier's comments with them.

We know that the UCP connections to insurance lobbyists run deep. They helped Jason Kenney get elected in 2019, and they have backed numerous members of that cabinet. Albertans are rightly asking if it's only UCP insiders who can get ahead under this Premier. They are getting hosed. They want transparency. Will the Premier commit to tabling, by end of the business day today, a full list of the meetings her ministers have had with insurance industry lobbyists?

Ms Smith: I haven't met with any insurance industry lobbyists, but we are going to meet with the insurance industry because if we're going to find solutions that are both short term and long term, then we need to engage with the industry to find out what those would be. I know simplistic solutions like the one proposed by the NDP . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. You might not like the answer, but the Premier has the right to give one.

Ms Smith: Look, I know that the simplistic solutions proposed by the NDP of capping rates at 5 per cent per year – it resulted in an increase of 5 per cent per year. We are in a position where that solution didn't work either, so we need to talk with the industry and find a solution.

Finance Minister

Ms Phillips: Yesterday the Finance minister talked at length about how hard he's working to hijack Albertans' retirement savings and to force us all to file our taxes twice and cost us hundreds of millions of dollars to do so. To his credit, when the minister wants to inflict bad ideas on Albertans, he does so with confidence, with zest, with esprit de corps. His sneaky income taxes are no different. We've

just found out from a freedom of information request that the Finance minister knew months ago how much more we'd be paying in income tax, but he hid those amounts from Albertans. Premier, in the interests of transparency, why aren't we getting those tax increases back, retro to 2019?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, it just is amazing how the members opposite simply don't want this government to look for opportunities and solutions for Albertans. We inherited a fiscal train wreck from the members opposite, who were spending 4 per cent more every year while their revenues were going down. We presented a budget in 2022 that ultimately resulted in a \$500 million surplus. Had we continued on their track, it wouldn't have been a surplus; it would have been a \$6 billion deficit.

Ms Phillips: Well, just as he refused to answer the question, he refused to be honest about his income tax hikes for years, even when asked about it in this House. He let our taxes rise with inflation. As a result, we're all paying more. He wouldn't tell us how much more, but the Finance minister knew that by 2024 his sneaky tax hikes would be taking \$868 million a year more from Albertans, a cumulative \$2.2 billion in higher income taxes, but he hid that information. Why doesn't the Premier fire this Finance minister, that refuses to level with Albertans? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, we were very transparent with Albertans in 2019. Any programs that we paused the indexing on: we were clear with Albertans that when we brought our fiscal house in order, we would resume indexing, and that's exactly what we're doing. More importantly, we're not spending the next generation's income, like the members opposite would. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Phillips: The Finance minister claimed that he didn't increase income tax. That was false. His last budget miscalculated inflation. Oops. The same budget also claimed that wage growth would be greater than inflation. Wrong again. He refused to even acknowledge the harm he was causing as 40-year-high inflation took more and more from Albertans. The Finance minister got it wrong. He implemented Jason Kenney's bad ideas. He put party over province. He didn't level with Albertans about how much he was costing us. So why, Premier, beyond his 46 per cent of the vote, does he still have a job?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, we have two case studies here. The members opposite, when they were in government, raised taxes on everything that moved, increased regulatory burden, sent tens of billions of dollars of investment packing, and delivered successive deficit budgets. We dropped taxes, created the most competitive business environment possible. We're attracting investment, leading the nation in economic growth, and we've got a balanced budget. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Edmonton Public Safety and Community Response Task Force

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every community in Alberta is facing addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues. Constituents consistently raise concerns. We have seen numerous stories coming out of Edmonton of assaults and attacks on hard-working Edmontonians commuting within the city, and the

government has a responsibility to act. To the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction: can you please explain how this government intends to address addiction, homelessness, and public safety in Alberta's capital city?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Mental Health and Addiction.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is absolutely right. Every community in our province has been impacted by addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues, and Edmonton has been hit especially hard. Today my colleagues and I announced the creation of the Edmonton Public Safety and Community Response Task Force, and I look forward to working with them to provide more life-saving services to Edmontonians who are struggling with addiction and homelessness while enhancing public safety.

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

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for his answer. Given that there's no one solution to addiction and its associated social issues and given that collaboration with all aspects of a community is essential in supporting those who are affected by addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues and given that the task force that was announced this morning is responsible for implementing initiatives that will help provide more life-saving services to Edmontonians, can the minister explain who will be serving on the task force and why the representation is important as the province continues to tackle these issues?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have brought together a talented pool of local leaders who work collaboratively on addressing these issues in Edmonton. The membership will include councillors Hamilton and Cartmell, Chief Billy Morin, Chief Issac A. Laboucan-Avirom, four cabinet ministers, and others as well. Other municipal and emergency services representatives will be there to help out. I am confident in our ability to work together to tackle these significant issues facing Edmonton, the capital of our province, a place where I grew up. I'm happy to help, and so will the rest of our government. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. member.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the government has committed \$187 million to address addiction and homelessness in Edmonton and Calgary and given that Edmonton continues to be hard hit with addiction, homelessness, and public safety issues and given that this government has committed to building a recovery-oriented system of addiction and mental health care, can the minister please explain what initiatives the Edmonton Public Safety and Community Response Task Force will be responsible for implementing?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Mr. Milliken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Edmonton Public Safety and Community Response Task Force will implement a series of initiatives as part of a \$187 million plan to address addiction and homelessness in Alberta's urban centres. This includes further increasing addiction treatment capacity, providing addiction and mental health treatment programs in correctional centres, creating a hybrid health and police hub, and so, so much more. I look forward to working with this talented group, and I'm

sure that we will be able to come to a conclusion in order to help Edmontonians with regard to mental health and addiction issues going forward.

Thank you.

Canada Pension Plan

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, in 2013 the current Premier stood against an Alberta pension plan. She knew that removing Albertans from the CPP and replacing it with a provincial pension was wildly unpopular and went against the wishes of the majority of Albertans. An Alberta pension plan is an absurd proposal that will unnecessarily complicate retirement for many Albertans. It will also allow this provincial government, with its terrible track record, having lost the trust of all Albertans, to gamble with their retirement. Will the Premier stand here today to agree with herself from 2013?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, part of my mandate letter from the Premier was to investigate the merits, the opportunities, and the risks of an Alberta pension plan, and I intend to do just that and report to Albertans. I believe there is great potential in an Alberta pension plan, the potential to bring down premiums and the potential to improve pension benefits for Alberta seniors. But we will complete our work and report and engage with Albertans; the NDP would have us not do so.

Ms Gray: Given that finding supporters of this idea is worse than finding a needle in a haystack and given that top economists, academics, and worker representatives have all said that Alberta leaving the CPP is incredibly unpopular and will not happen without, quote, a very big fight and given that this government has done nothing to prove itself capable, can the Premier please explain why she's so willing to defy the wishes of the Alberta public on something that is risky, that is expensive, and that is going to cost Albertans' retirements?

2:10

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, again, the member opposite continues to rule out the consideration of an opportunity for Albertans, for Alberta businesses. Why would they pre-empt the report? Why would they not be interested in taking a look at the facts, the actuarial work? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore will remain in order.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, we're going to complete our work, the actuarial work, the econometric work, and we're going to report to Albertans and engage Albertans because they deserve to know.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, given that the analysis has been done and the idea is bad and given that Alberta pensions are not the Premier's fun money and given that during a debate she opined that they could use this money to fund other government programs, it is clear that an Alberta pension plan is a waste of time and resources. It is not supported by Albertans, and as my colleague said, and I quote, it is catastrophically stupid. Will the Premier stand here today, back away from this awful idea, protect retirement security for Albertans, and focus on the real issues?

Mr. Toews: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are focusing on the real issues, the issues of affordability, the issues of health care, the issues of investment attraction and job creation. At the same time we're taking a look at the opportunities, the benefits, and the costs of an Alberta pension plan. We're looking forward to a report.

Technology Industry Investment in Alberta

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, in the UCP's first budget the Finance minister called economic diversification a luxury and proceeded to cut several tax credits, including the Alberta investor tax credit, which delivered a 3 to 1 return on investment. As a result, investors pulled out of Alberta, venture funds that were on the verge of being announced dried up, and companies that were expecting investments were left empty-handed.

Mr. McIver: Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. You might not like the question, but the member has the right to ask it.

The hon. the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, is my time restarting?

Mr. McIver: Still wrong.

The Speaker: I don't restart their time. I won't . . .

Mr. McIver: Four, three, two . . .

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays will come to order. Oh, my. Of all people. [interjections] Order. Order. Order. We've come this far.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview will go from the top.

Mr. Bilous: Oh. In the UCP's first budget the Finance minister called economic diversification a luxury and proceeded to cut several tax credits, including the Alberta investor tax credit, which delivered a 3 to 1 return on investment. As a result, investors pulled out of Alberta, venture funds that were on the verge of being announced dried up, and companies that were expecting investments were left empty-handed. We also saw investors leave for other provinces. To the Minister of Technology and Innovation: why won't this government reinstate a tax credit which was working to attract investment and diversify the economy?

The Speaker: The Minister of Technology and Innovation.

Mr. Glubish: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. Let's talk about facts; let's talk about numbers: in 2016, \$68 million in venture investment; in 2017, \$37 million; in 2018, \$100 million. That was under that government when they were in power. In 2019 we turned a corner, \$227 million; in 2020, \$445 million; in 2021, \$561 million; and in the first three quarters of this year, \$509 million. We're on track for record investment in venture capital. We are getting the job done.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you to the minister for confirming that the investment we're seeing today was because of the tax credit that our government instated years ago.

Given that investment in early-stage tech companies has dropped significantly and given that we're seeing tech investment grow across the country but Alberta pales in comparison – we aren't even keeping pace on a per capita basis – why is this government holding our province back and hurting our competitiveness?

Mr. Glubish: Mr. Speaker, the NDP never let the facts get in the way of a good story, but let me correct the record. In the first half of this year we saw a 66 per cent increase year over year in investment in venture capital in Alberta when the rest of the country was down by over 20 per cent. We are leading the country in the rate of investment in venture capital and in the tech industry. The

NDP had a failed program that was seen as overly burdensome and that the industry didn't like. We are instead creating the conditions to open up economic activity and investment across every industry, including technology. Technology is not just an industry; it's the future of every industry. These numbers show that we are getting the job done.

Mr. Bilous: Given that the minister recently said that the AITC did not create long-term sustainable tech companies even though I recently met with a company that said it would not be here today if it wasn't for the AITC, given that the minister also said the worst thing we can do for tech is to make it easier for people to invest in tech and given that the minister also said he doesn't want to put taxpayer dollars at risk even though the venture fund he used to work for relied solely on taxpayer dollars, how can the minister be so out of touch?

Mr. Glubish: They clearly have no problem misrepresenting the facts, as that member just did.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

Mr. Glubish: Let me correct the record. The fact is that I said that the worst thing we could do for investment is to encourage people to invest in bad deals where they lose their money because then they will never invest in tech again. We want to create the conditions to ensure that good companies get investment and that investors make money because then they will be addicted to investing in tech, and that's a good thing for the tech industry in Alberta. That's what I said, Mr. Speaker. He grossly misrepresented the facts, and shame on him for doing so.

Affordability Plan and Fuel Prices

Mr. Yao: Mr. Speaker, inflation and affordability are the largest issues facing Albertans right now. While this is not a problem unique to Alberta, federal fiscal mismanagement and looming increases to the carbon tax threaten to make inflation worse before it improves. This government has made strides recently in providing cost relief to Albertans, including electricity rebates and reducing the provincial fuel tax. To the Minister of Affordability and Utilities: how will our government continue to respond to the inflation crisis and deliver relief to Albertans?

The Speaker: A point of order was noted at 2:16.

The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through our affordability action plan we are taking steps to protect Albertans from inflation-driven cost-of-living increases. If passed, the inflation relief act will provide stability on utility bills, including up to \$500 in electricity rebates and natural gas price protection, to help Albertans power and heat their homes this winter, with peace of mind. We are passing on even more savings – 13.6 cents a litre, including GST – to Albertans at the pumps by eliminating the provincial fuel tax for six months. We are also providing \$600 over six months to low- and middle-income families, seniors, and vulnerable Albertans, making sure that people who need it get the support.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that fuel is one area that was identified as being heavily monitored, it's good to see that the Competition Bureau of Canada is looking into it as it has become a national issue. We also have the consumer investigations unit

monitoring Alberta communities for potential gouging. However, despite the suspension of the fuel tax, gas in Edmonton is still \$1.20, Airdrie is still \$1.30, and Grande Cache is as high as \$1.40. To the same minister: has the government identified if there's any gouging whatsoever?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question as it appears the NDP doesn't have a critic for Service Alberta. I'm glad somebody is asking the important questions because right now we know that Albertans are struggling with high costs. Yes, the member is correct: the consumer protection unit has been monitoring prices at the gas pumps in Alberta. I'm happy to report that there have not been any incidents of price gouging. In fact, prices are in line with market conditions, and the best part is that Albertans continue to enjoy the lowest prices in the country.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that even though Fort McMurray is a region that provides billions of dollars to our government treasury on an annual basis by mining the hydrocarbons used to make this very fuel – fuel prices are at about \$1.50, around 30 cents higher than in Edmonton. Recently a constituent that used to manage a gas station in Fort McMurray said that the cost of transportation to Fort McMurray only adds about 2 cents per litre. Again to the minister: why are prices in Fort McMurray 30 cents higher than in Edmonton, and is there anything that the government can do about this?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. There are a number of factors that go into the price that we see at the pumps. One of them, of course, is the price of crude oil. Another one is supply and demand. We also know that prices will vary by retailer. We know that the path forward for lower prices is through increased competition and more choice for the consumer and, of course, a healthy economy, and that will continue to be our priority. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-South has a question.

2:20

Economic Indicators

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last month 15,000 Alberta workers lost their jobs. Despite this, the national unemployment rate continues to drop. It's clear that the UCP government is more focused on separating with Canada than even bothering to keep up. Families aren't asking for American-style private schools, they're not asking for American-style private surgeries, and they certainly aren't asking for American-style tax cuts for corporations. My question to the minister of jobs and economy is simple: will the minister stand in this place and apologize to those families who are struggling to afford Christmas presents this year?

Mr. Schow: Will you apologize?

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, I would like to apologize for the four years that the NDP put us in the decade of darkness, starting the situation where our economy retracted. What we will see is that – as the minister just mentioned previously, we've seen record amounts of investment in venture capital here in Alberta, and we've seen record amounts of that investment, 75 per cent, in Calgary, in fact, where right now we need to fill up some office buildings. We're seeing people flock to Alberta because it's the place to invest and it's leading the country in growth. I'm not going to take any lessons from the NDP where they closed our economy down.

Mr. Dang: Given that venture capital doesn't pay for Christmas dinner and given that Alberta's growth in average weekly wages since 2019 is one of the lowest of all provinces in Canada and given that the government has been extolling Alberta's job growth and wages for years and given that we know this UCP government likes to brag about how closely they work with these big wealthy corporations, will the minister today take accountability and apologize to the working families who have to stop at the food bank on the way home while he rubs elbows in boardrooms?

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, our sympathies are with any family right now that is having troubles in Alberta. That's why we're so excited to tell Albertans and the member opposite that, you know, housing starts in Alberta are up 22 per cent, the value of building permits up 9.6 per cent. All experts agree that Alberta will lead the nation in GDP growth in '23-24. We're not going to apologize for something that's actually working out well for Albertans. Albertans have the jobs. They're going to see significant savings and significant money from our minister of affordability.

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

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that building permits and housing starts are about as useful to little Timmy as a lump of coal and given that according to the Alberta Living Wage Network the living wage needed to achieve a standard of living in Alberta is higher than our current minimum wage and given that Alberta is the only province to not raise its minimum wage this year – so that gap is only getting larger – and given that everything the minister has said is going to be too little, too late, will the minister commit today to raising the minimum wage so that next year families won't have to choose between their heating bills and Christmas presents?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While we don't have an affordability measure of \$7,200 for politicians who break the law, we do have significant financial relief coming to Albertans at a time when they need it the most. We have \$500 in electricity rebates. We have fuel tax relief every time you fill up your car with gas or diesel. We have natural gas price protection so you can heat your home with confidence. While I'm open to suggestions from the member opposite, we are busy. We're not at a computer. We are helping Albertans at a time when they need it.

South Edmonton Hospital and School Construction

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, the south Edmonton hospital is critical to so many people living in Edmonton and nearby municipalities. It would provide additional capacity that my constituents desperately need. Our NDP government was proud to approve this project in 2017 and pledged to have it open by 2026. This government abandoned those timelines. They said that they intended to start construction by 2023 and open it by 2030, but then another change: the government's own

website for the project pulled it down, and the '23 start date is now blank. For the record can the minister state clearly when the south Edmonton hospital will be open?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Neudorf: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. It is true. The NDP started this process with an announcement of money but no plan. Now we are working through a business plan with Alberta Health Services to find out exactly how we're going to serve the people of Edmonton, what facilities will meet that need, and then, moving forward, when we can start the project, how long it will take, and what it will cost.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Member Loyola: Given that Edmonton hospitals are overrun with multiple respiratory viruses like RSV, influenza, and COVID-19 and wait times are getting as long as 18 hours in some instances and given that we are facing a massive capacity issue in our health care system, which the south Edmonton hospital would help address, but given that this government has slowed down this project for years, potentially adding millions in costs to the construction, will the minister finally do the right thing and commit today to the full funding of the south Edmonton hospital and guarantee that it will be built, staffed, and open before 2030?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are proceeding with a good plan to find the best way forward to meet the needs of those people in Edmonton. Yes, there is a capacity, but this is what happens when you go forward with a political announcement with no plans to back it up. We are having to go back and do that work to show the people of Edmonton how we can best meet their needs. There are many needs. Whether it's the Stollery children's hospital or other hospitals, they all need help. They all need support. We are building that plan so we can serve them better. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Member Loyola: Given that the UCP can't be trusted to deliver the health care Albertans need and given that the same is true for education and given that parents in the south Edmonton community of Edgemont have long been seeking a school closer to their homes and given that thousands of new students have enrolled in Edmonton public schools but not a single new project was announced last year and given that the Leader of the Official Opposition has committed that she will build the Edgemont school when she is elected Premier again, can this government explain why it has ignored desperately needed south Edmonton schools and hospitals?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the question. I draw the member opposite's attention back to the fact that the Edmonton public school division actually did not prioritize that particular school in their previous capital budget. Thankfully, we've had conversations. They understand that if they want schools in growing areas, they need to make them a top priority, and that's exactly what they're doing. I look forward to bringing my capital budget up in the months to come.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-East has a question.

Emergency Medical Services

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the MLA for Airdrie-East I've heard just how much our health care system is struggling in the rural areas of our province. EMS response times have gone up drastically, and these delays could be tragic for Albertans if we don't do something. Can the Minister of Health answer this: how will the government specifically improve EMS response times in rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I want to thank the hon. member for the question and her passionate representation of Airdrie. As stated in this House before, this is a priority, and we're making some progress through the AHS metro response plan. They've cut the number of trips into the major cities, including Calgary, and out of areas such as Airdrie and other surrounding communities, and we're seeing some improvements in these response times. In Airdrie in October the median response time was around eight to nine minutes compared to the target of eight minutes. Now, the longer responses were still above target, so we have more work to do, but we're going to stick at it until we get those response times down.

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

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Minister, for the update. Given that our government has provided funding for many new ambulances this year, including one in my own constituency, and given that Alberta Health Services struggles to find paramedics to actually staff them – hundreds of shifts are being left unfilled every week – and given that over 9,000 shifts in Alberta, including 463 shifts in Airdrie, have been left unfilled this year, can the minister please tell us what the plans are to improve these staffing shortages?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Copping: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again to the hon. member for the question. As you know, EMS has seen an unprecedented 30 per cent call increase since 2021, the summer. Similar pressures exist across the entire country. We increased, as noted by the hon. member, EMS's budget by \$64 million this year, and the main purpose for that is to add staff. EMS has hired 364 new staff members since January 1, including 264 paramedics, and since June '19 they've added more than 450 paramedics, an 18 per cent increase. Now, they'll keep hiring until we can actually get all those shifts filled, and we're working with Dr. Cowell to be able to roll out a plan on that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and Minister. Given that our rural ambulances are being dispatched to the urban centres to fill gaps in their own city and rural residents are left waiting for help by the paramedics who are too busy attending city calls and given that those rural residents aren't getting the critical help that they rightfully deserve, Minister, what do you plan to do to keep paramedics and ambulances working in Airdrie and other rural communities?

2:30

Mr. Copping: Thanks again to the hon. member for the question. Mr. Speaker, we are moving swiftly to improve response times and continue to make this a priority so emergency care is available when and where it's needed. Again, our goal is to have more ambulances

available for emergency calls and fewer ambulances needlessly tied up in transfers or waiting at an emergency room. We've made progress. I'm very pleased. That is part of the 10-point plan to be able to reduce the number of calls for ambulances coming from rural areas into the large communities like Calgary. That's been reduced by 40 per cent. We're going to keep working at it till we actually get those response times down.

Education Concerns

Ms Hoffman: Mr. Speaker, teachers across the province continue to endure extremely challenging working conditions because of the UCP's absolute failure to support students, staff, and families. A recent ATA survey showed that class sizes have ballooned to 30, 40, and often even more students in many classrooms across the province. This pressure on teachers is not only causing great harm to their well-being, but it's also negatively impacting students who are forced to try to learn in overcrowded classrooms. Will the Minister of Education admit that this is the UCP's plan? It's clear that they don't value public education.

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, that's absolutely ludicrous. In fact, the member opposite a while ago admitted to the fact that she didn't read the curriculum. Obviously, she also hasn't read our budget. We have increased funding to the highest level ever in this province, \$8.4 billion. That, in fact, has created an opportunity for school divisions to hire 800 more teachers and 800 more educational assistants. The members opposite did nothing to address class sizes.

Ms Hoffman: Well, given that Jason Kenney and the current Education minister cut funding that was dedicated to reducing class sizes, funding that was in place when the NDP was in government and other governments before, and given that the UCP, under the current Education minister, has decided to try to hide the ballooning class sizes from the public by refusing to publish class size data, data that had previously been available to Albertans for generations, will the current Education minister admit that trying to hide the impacts of her cuts was wrong and disclose class sizes in this House today?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, again misinformation. Again, they do not understand the fact that in the previous budget we were funding 730,000 students when 716,000 students actually attended. The previous year prior to that, the 2021 school year, we actually funded 730,000 students; 705,000 students. I'm happy to say that students are coming back. Because of the fact that we have a great province and people are migrating to this province, I'm happy to share that we have more students, and we're funding them.

Ms Hoffman: Mr. Speaker, given that we do have more students and we also have fewer teachers than we had when the NDP was in government and given that Alberta teachers are struggling with overcrowded classrooms and, on top of that, teachers are reporting an increase in complexity and diversity of the students they're supporting and given that the decline in support for students has resulted in a six-month to one-year wait for speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychoeducational assessments, will the Minister of Education commit to emergency funding today to stop that gap, to make sure kids can get assessed this year, while she's still the Education minister, or do we have to wait for the election?

Member LaGrange: Again the member opposite has not done her homework. We are actually doing that: \$10 million to address the backlog of assessments, \$110 million over three years, doubling the

number of mental health and wellness projects and pilots throughout this year, addressing mental health issues, addressing enrolment growth, addressing assessment backlogs, Ukrainian students, and so much more. I could go on and on. I'm happy to go on and on. Mr. Speaker, \$700 million on top of everything. I could keep going.

Legal Aid Funding

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, I was proud to be a part of an NDP government that in 2018 signed a long-term agreement to increase funding for Legal Aid Alberta. We provided \$70 million more over four years. We did this in recognition of increased demand and the right of every Albertan to be fairly represented. Can the Minister of Justice tell this House for the record why this government tore up this critical funding agreement and risked leaving so many Albertans without legal aid in the process?

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

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Of course, as he knows, the government is only one of the funders of legal aid. Legal aid is funded. It has all the funding that it requires to make sure that Albertans have access to justice. We've also throughout '22 received requests from various members of the criminal defence bar on concerns they have with the current tariff rate. We're happy to get that information from those folks. I'd also say this. We had been in the middle throughout '22 of doing a modernization project, reviewing the 40 items in the tariff. Now that that modernization project is complete, I'll speak more to that later.

Mr. Sabir: Given that this minister has a habit of putting down his stakeholders rather than working with them and given that the UCP cuts to legal aid and inaction to properly support legal aid prompted repeated demonstrations by the lawyers' association and given that I attended some of these demonstrations and heard first-hand just how badly cuts imposed by this minister and this government have hurt our justice system, a simple question for the minister: how did he get this so wrong?

Mr. Shandro: Well, none of that is true, Mr. Speaker. Legal aid is funded. It has all the funding it requires to make sure that Albertans have access to justice. We have just finished a modernization project for the 40 items in the tariff, working with legal aid, empowering them to be able to do that review, and now we're happy to continue to work with legal aid, making sure that they have all the funding that they require to make sure that Albertans have access to justice, that they deserve.

Mr. Sabir: Given that legal aid roster lawyers have stopped accepting files for serious offences, including sexual assaults, homicides, and family law matters, and given that we may never know the true extent of the damage caused by this government, will the minister tell this House how he plans to determine how many people were denied justice as a result of the chaos this government created, and will he commit today to restoring the legal aid funding agreement signed under the NDP government and revise legal aid tariffs and eligibility guidelines?

Mr. Shandro: Well, none, Mr. Speaker, because everything he just said is not true. Legal aid has all the funding that it requires. People have access to justice. In fact, we have in the last couple of months increased the tariff amounts for the criminal defence bar by 8 per

cent. Everything the member has said is completely and totally untrue.

Provincial Debt Repayment

Mr. Panda: Mr. Speaker, during the 2021-22 fiscal year Alberta's government debt-servicing costs alone were over \$2.6 billion. This amount exceeds the total operating expenses of the Children's Services, seniors and housing, and Municipal Affairs ministries combined. Can the Minister of Finance please share with this House: what is the plan to repay the debt as soon as possible so we can stop paying the interest to bankers and start focusing on providing the services that Albertans deserve?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that important question. Paying down debt is one of our top priorities. In fact, our goal is to pay off debt as it matures. I'm pleased to say that we're planning on paying off all the debt that's maturing in this fiscal year; that's \$13.4 billion. During a time of inflation and increasing interest rates it's critical that we pay debt off as it matures instead of going to markets to borrow at what might be twice the cost of capital, because that will double our interest costs.

Mr. Panda: Mr. Speaker, given that Albertans also support growing the Alberta heritage trust fund to support future generations but given that the debt governments have racked up over the past 14 years threatens the future, can the minister, who I respect for his long background in ranching and accounting, tell us how best to balance the need to reduce the debt with the opportunity to increase long-term savings in the heritage savings fund?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is a great question. You know, what's really great is to actually be debating the intention between paying down debt and additional investment in the heritage savings trust fund. We can only do that because we have a balanced budget. I've asked for the analysis, and the analysis I've received is this: if from the start of the heritage savings trust fund all of the earnings were reinvested in the fund, we would be sitting at close to \$300 billion in that trust fund today.

2:40

Mr. Panda: Mr. Speaker, given that Premier Ralph Klein famously declared in 2004 that Alberta had paid back all of its debt in full but given that the latest fiscal update forecast showed \$75 billion of taxpayer-supported debt since 2004, what does this minister, who is a proud grandfather and not a career politician, plan to do to ensure that the fiscal discipline of this government's first three years continues into the future so we can pay back our debt?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, running surplus budgets is not only responsible fiscal management; we're being responsible to the next generation. We're not downloading irresponsible fiscal decisions onto our children and grandchildren. I appreciate the question. At the end of this fiscal year we're projecting a net debt-to-GDP ratio under 10 per cent. That will ensure Alberta has by far and away the strongest balance sheet of any province. Continued fiscal discipline will matter into the future along with positioning this province for investment attraction and economic growth. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Hon. members, this does conclude the time allotted for Oral Question Period, but before you go, if I can remind you of two quick things. We had the pleasure of being joined by some former members this afternoon. They are here primarily because of the reception that is being hosted between the former members' association and the current members. If you are able this evening: 6 p.m. in the Capital View Room. Also, members would have received a memo from the Speaker's office earlier today indicating that the packages for your constituency offices are available for pickup at my office.

In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the daily Routine.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have quite a bit this afternoon, so I rise to move a number of motions. First, I rise to give oral notice of Government Motion 16, sponsored by myself.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly rescind its approval of the motion moved pursuant to Standing Order 8(8), agreed to on December 5, 2022.

I also give oral notice of Government Motion 17, sponsored by myself.

Be it resolved that pursuant to section 3 of the Statutes Repeal Act, SA 2013, cS-19.3, the following statutes appearing on the list of statutes to be repealed, which was tabled in the Assembly by the Clerk of the Assembly on behalf of the then Minister of Justice and Solicitor General on March 14, 2022, Sessional Paper 24/2022, not be repealed:

- (1) An Act to End Predatory Lending (2016 cE-9.5) s5(2);
- (2) Vital Statistics and Life Events Modernization Act (2016 c26) ss2(b), 11(a), 31, 41.

I also give oral notice of Government Motion 18, sponsored by myself.

Be it resolved that

- (a) the 2021-2022 annual report of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate be referred to the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices for review;
- (b) the committee may, without leave of the Assembly, sit during a period when the Assembly is adjourned or prorogued;
- (c) in accordance with section 21(4) of the Child and Youth Advocate Act the committee shall report back to the Assembly within 90 days of the report being referred to it if the Assembly is then sitting or, if it is not then sitting, within 15 days after the commencement of the next sitting.

Finally, I give oral notice of Government Motion 19, sponsored by myself.

Be it resolved that

- (a) the 2019-2021 annual report of the Alberta Property Rights Advocate office be referred to the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future for review;
- (b) the committee may, without leave of the Assembly, sit during a period when the Assembly is adjourned or prorogued;
- (c) in accordance with section 5(5) of the Property Rights Advocate Act the committee shall report back to the Assembly within 60 days of the report being referred to it if the Assembly is then sitting or, if it is not sitting, within 15 days after the commencement of the next sitting.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies of the Social Health Equity Network of Lethbridge and Area 2022 Lethbridge Child and Family Poverty Report, and I'd like to acknowledge the authors: Echo Nowak, Ronda Reach, Janelle Marietta, Dr. Sharon Yanicki, Stasha Donahue, Germain Wells, Mila Luchak, Erin Mason, Lori Harasem, and Heather Loewen.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of hon. Mr. Madu, Deputy Premier, Minister of Skilled Trades and Professions, pursuant to the Land Surveyors Act the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association report of the proceedings of the 113th annual general meeting, April 21 to 23, 2022.

On behalf of hon. Mr. Horner, Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation, pursuant to the Marketing of Agricultural Products Act the Alberta Agricultural Products Marketing Council annual report 2021-2022; pursuant to the Farm Implement and Dealership Act the Farmers' Advocate office annual report 2021-22; pursuant to the Livestock Identification and Commerce Act the Livestock Identification Services Ltd. report to the minister and summary of activities April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022; pursuant to the Agriculture Financial Services Act the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation 2021-22 annual report.

The Speaker: Hon. members, now we are at points of order. At 2:16 the hon. Deputy Opposition House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under 23(h), (i), and (j). At that time, 2:16, the Minister of Technology and Innovation rose to answer a question from the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and said twice – I don't have the benefit of the Blues – that that member is misrepresenting facts, and "shame on him."

If we look at (h), (i), and (j), certainly, the member was stating facts. If he disagrees with it, the minister has every right to correct those, but telling the other member that he's misrepresenting: that's making false allegations against another member. That would be covered by (h). Imputing false motives to another member: why would the member misrepresent anything? And the language he used was certainly abusive and insulting. So under (h), (i), and (j) the minister's comments were offside these rules, and I think the minister should retract and apologize.

The Speaker: The Government House Leader has the call.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe you have given caution to the Chamber in the past about doing things indirectly that you cannot do directly. Suggesting a specific member misrepresented the facts: whether I agree with it or not is irrelevant. I do withdraw the comment.

The Speaker: I consider this matter dealt with and concluded.
Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 2

Inflation Relief Statutes Amendment Act, 2022

[Adjourned debate December 8: Mr. Turton]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West has the call.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide some comments on Bill 2, a bill that does provide some inflation relief to families, to working people, to people with children.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I've just received some news, Madam Speaker, that I will share with the House, and I'll tie it into this bill. My friend Curtis Noble, who is a firefighter in Medicine Hat, who has been active in the Alberta association of professional firefighters and paramedics for some time, a friend to me, a father to his three children, committed to his community, to his family, to his friends, in particular our mutual friends Megan and Andrew Hilgendorf. He worked very hard and has worked very hard for presumptive coverage for his brothers and sisters in the firefighters, for better health care, for a better education system.

2:50

He's in the ICU this afternoon. The prognosis is not positive, Madam Speaker, and he's on my mind as I deliver these remarks. Last time I saw him, we had a pretty good Alberta moment. He came into town and he and Andrew stayed at my place to go see the Corb Lund show. They refused to let me pay for the ticket. They drank too much of my expensive Scotch, I think as an exchange, and we all stayed up really late after having a good time at the Corb show.

Families all across this province work hard to contribute to their communities. Curtis is one of those people. He has worked hard for a well-functioning public health care system, and now he is using it. I'm glad that he can receive the care that he needs in the Medicine Hat hospital, and I thank those medical professionals for all of the care that they are giving to him. His three girls – Leah, Julie, and Keelin – are also on my mind. We will make sure that we update the House as to his progress and to recognize his service as a professional firefighter in the city of Medicine Hat.

On Bill 2, we are considering this piece of legislation because Albertans are hurting from 40-year-high inflation. There is no question that this bill is needed to provide some relief for working people and for people living in poverty. At a glance, you know, people living in low income – for example, in Lethbridge 11.2 per cent of residents at last count. I just tabled this report, Madam Speaker, written with funding by the city of Lethbridge, from the Social Health Equity Network of Lethbridge and Area, and I want to commend the folks that worked on this report, many of whom have been doing such work in Lethbridge on antipoverty work for many years. Certainly, a couple of the report's authors – Dr. Sharon Yanicki, Stasha Donahue, Lori Harasem – have been hard at work for as long as I've known them, which is probably 15 years, maybe more.

Using the 2019 census family low-income measure after tax for Lethbridge, 15 per cent of children and youth aged zero to 17 are low income, and children living in lone-parent families have a greater likelihood of experiencing conditions of poverty than those in two-adult families. Almost half of children in Lethbridge of lone parents live in poverty. Children live in deeper poverty than adults, with children aged zero to five experiencing the highest rates of low income across age groups.

This is compounded by racialization in the city of Lethbridge. Madam Speaker, for Lethbridge CMA the low-income rate across all ages for those who identify as Indigenous is 27 per cent for children ages zero to 17. The low-income rate is greatest for First Nations children, at 42 per cent. Wow. Access to housing, food security, and education and early childhood development are all

affected by living with low income, and of course we talk about this in terms of the social determinants of health. Nowhere do we see this more than in the city of Lethbridge.

The recent survey for the greatest degree of poverty is, of course, folks who experience homelessness. The point-in-time survey: Lethbridge is one of the seven participating cities in Alberta that participates in the point-in-time homeless count. It's conducted in 65 municipalities across the country. This is the third time it was conducted. According to the survey 454 people in Lethbridge are experiencing homelessness. That's more than double the 223 people recorded in 2018. Those numbers, collected over a six-hour period on September 27, were released last week. Indigenous people make up 6.6 per cent of the city's population but were overrepresented in the results, making up 72 per cent of unsheltered people and 36 per cent of sheltered homeless people. [interjection] Oh, yes. Yes, I will accept this intervention.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you. Thank you very much. Well, I really appreciated hearing about some of the issues in the Lethbridge area, the area you represent, and certainly we know that homelessness has exploded here in Edmonton, too, since 2019, and I guess that's when the UCP was first elected. It has doubled here in Edmonton, and a lot of that, I know, is due to the lack of investment in affordable housing, in permanent supportive housing, in so many significant areas that support people to be able to be well housed.

Another thing that we know is that Alberta has much lower than the national average of other provinces in terms of housing availability, in terms of affordable housing. You know, 4.3 per cent is about what the national average is in the other provinces, and Alberta has about 2.9 per cent. Really, I just wanted to go ahead and talk about that.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, hon. member. I also want to thank her, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, for her advocacy both in housing and affordability for seniors as well, both in her time as a minister and as an opposition critic.

When we learn about these specific numbers and instances of deep poverty with respect to housing and homelessness and instances of living in low income for children, particularly Indigenous children in the city of Lethbridge, that I have just raised with the House, this bill leaves out the past years of allowing income support and assured income for the severely handicapped, the AISH program, and the seniors' benefit to lose ground to inflation. There was really no need for this over time. It was not a question of fiscal rectitude or whatever the government might claim. It was a question, at the time, when inflation was a smaller amount, in 2019, in 2020, of simply trying to find operational savings in areas where they essentially thought they could get away with it. That took advantage of folks, the folks at the lowest end of the income scale, folks who were at risk of experiencing homelessness. We've seen that double over this government's tenure in the city of Lethbridge. Certainly, when one's basic assistance programs, whether it's AISH or income support, are not keeping pace with inflation over time, that adds up, and especially it starts to add up when we're in a year where now we are looking at a compounding 40-year-high inflation.

This bill goes some way to fix that – that is to say, it indexes these programs to inflation going forward – but it does not fix what was lost in 2019 to now. For example, someone receiving assured income for the severely handicapped would be \$3,000 better off if we had just continued with the legislation that all UCP MLAs voted in favour of in the fall of 2018 and then cynically ripped away from people at their first available opportunity in the budget of 2019. That could be fixed in this bill, and I think it should be, a good-faith

attempt to ensure that we're doing the work that we need to do in the context of commodity prices going up as much as they have.

There was one additional deposit in the heritage fund – sadly, not two – because, of course, that money gets saved in order to fund future program expenditures in health care, education, and social services. But this legislation could be amended to fix these, essentially, what amounted to sneaky income tax increases on the personal income tax side with a failure to index brackets to inflation and, on the other side, a clawing back of benefits around income support and seniors' benefits.

3:00

I will say here that these housing and homelessness numbers, shocking as they are, and these child poverty numbers that are astonishing, in particular incidence of poverty among Indigenous children in Lethbridge: many of these issues can be and are addressed through income support programs. One of the income support programs that we still have not seen a restoration of is around that housing supplement for income support recipients, which has been cut. I think that is part of what has led to so many people living in unsheltered homelessness in Lethbridge, which is a massive issue in our city and one that remains not even grappled with, let alone having a strategic plan to address it from the UCP government.

I'll begin with that piece of the legislation, which I think has, in many ways, my most effusive praise for Bill 2 in that indexing those programs going forward rights a wrong. It was wrong to pause that indexation on the backs of people who can least afford it, and it was wrong to delay and delay and delay. It remains wrong not to do it retroactively.

Secondly we have this other matter of the \$100-a-month payments to people with children. You know, I'm thinking here of my friend Curtis Noble, who is in the ICU currently in Medicine Hat and has three kids, because I know he was off work for a little while and I know he was getting treatment for PTSD. I was really proud of him for that when we last talked about it, I think, in June, and I said: you're going to rock this; you can do this; there's a life beyond PTSD; the "post" is the first word in that acronym for a reason.

I think of families like his. You know, that \$100 a month per child for six months probably helps quite a bit when you're off work and you've got three kids. The cost of living, we all know, has gone pretty bananas, maybe not when you're buying bananas in the grocery store – those have remained fairly stable – but I don't know if anybody has had a look at the price of eggs lately, depending on where you go. I've noticed that one's moderated a little bit, but certainly there have been many, many things when I'm going through my usual – I try to do it online still because of time – grocery order where I just go: whoa; some things have really gone up. Even potatoes, curiously, have gone up quite a bit.

So I can imagine that, you know, families are really going to be looking forward to these cash payments, but this is a program that leaves out nearly 2 million Albertans. A single-income earner, someone working full-time on minimum wage, does not get anything from this. You know, there was a significant lag of time between the Premier's announcement a few weeks back – it'll be almost three to four weeks now – and the introduction of this bill. During that time they could have gone back to the drawing board, given, as we know, that within the documents, within the mid-year fiscal update, within some of the costing for these programs and for this bill, which has been a little bit confused – it's been a bit tough to untangle whether the government actually knows how much they're spending on these initiatives – they've got a sort of line item in there and keep sort of saying: oh, yeah; future provisions, future provisions. Albertans know that that means closer to the election.

Certainly, there was a Leger survey that indicated that, in particular, people in Calgary saw this program as a bit of a cynical ploy. Be that as it may, a lot of families do need it, even though I think people recognize it for what it is. It says that they're provisioned for more initiatives, and I think it sums to about \$1.3 billion if I'm not wrong. Like I said, it . . . [Ms Phillips' speaking time expired] I'll provide more at a different time.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm honoured to be able to rise today to be able to speak to Bill 2, the Inflation Relief Statutes Amendment Act, 2022. I do so with great excitement because of the relief that I know this is going to create for Albertans. Specifically, this act will have an impact especially on low-income seniors, those living with disabilities, and others that rely on social benefit programs like AISH, seniors' benefits, and income support.

I can tell you, after spending almost the entire summer door-knocking and connecting with many of my constituents at the door, it became increasingly apparent, the challenges that many in our community are facing, especially folks on fixed incomes. Life has slowly but surely become unaffordable, forcing folks into situations where they have to choose between food and rent or paying utilities. So this is timely, and it's necessary. When the Premier first won her leadership race, she gave each of us MLAs 30 minutes just to get to know us, to find out what the issues are that we're concerned about. We then spent the next 45 minutes discussing the challenges that we had seen and that I had been seeing at the doors in Calgary-Klein. I was just so excited to see that she shared my heart and concern, especially for the disability community and those who work in that sector as well.

For me, this is personal. You know, for my whole career I've worked in the not-for-profit sector. My own family has experienced challenges over the years. My own grandmother fled domestic violence and ended up in a situation where she was trying to raise her two sons alone and with the challenges that came with that. My father was homeless, of course, as a teenager. It took a full community coming around him to help him overcome that, with the opportunity, then, for him to be able to go pay that forward. As all six of us boys have worked in the social sector, this is close to our hearts.

I believe that this is no different for the disability community, that relies on programs like AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped, as well as PDD. What we've seen is the cost of living just slowly rising and making things more and more difficult for people as affordability gets less and less for folks in our community. This is why for a long time I have been an advocate for indexing of these supports. As the members across mentioned, this shouldn't be something that we have to revisit every eight years to come back and beg the government for a bump up but something that keeps up with inflation as we move forward.

I am struck by the level of cynicism from the other side – and I've heard a few comments not just today but in debate on a different day – about how we're doing this six months before an election and that this is somehow some sort of ploy to get re-elected. I just need to remind members across that they didn't index AISH and other supports until five months before the election. So I'd like to throw it right back at them and maybe have them answer for that. Was that just a ploy to win votes, or was it doing what was necessary to make sure that we were helping people in the community? I would suggest and hope that it was doing what was necessary to help people in our community, for them and for us. Should we wait six months until the next election to help Albertans

through this crisis? The answer is definitely not. That's why this government is acting and it's acting now.

The difference, however, Madam Speaker, between that party when they were in government and this party when we're in government is that we are indexing AISH, income support, and seniors' benefits, and we have a balanced budget. Our economy is working. It's roaring. We're seeing growth in sectors right across the board. We've been able to put ourselves over the last three and a half years into a financial position so that the long-term viability of these programs is not at risk.

3:10

Under that government they were at risk. They were at risk. Honestly, I think we have an important question as we approach an election. If we want to make sure that these programs can continue to be indexed and that we continue to have the financial wealth to be able to help support Albertans that are vulnerable in our communities, we need to make sure that we keep this government in charge so we can continue to grow our economy and we can continue to have strong balance sheets. Again, a hundred billion dollars in debt put these programs at risk not only for today but into the future, and we need to make sure that the viability of these programs is protected.

It was clearly outlined in my mandate letter just how much of a priority this was for our government, to make life more affordable for Albertans, especially for low-income and vulnerable Albertans. That is why we were very quick to increase benefit rates, which thousands of Albertans will see before Christmas. Bill 2 has a long list of measures that will bring help with affordability. The electricity rebate has already been in place for quite a few months now, providing money relief for millions of Albertans. With Bill 2 that is being extended for another four months.

If you remember back for a moment when the electricity rebate was being put in place, the NDP, of course, criticized this as a fake rebate. Five hundred dollars does not sound like a fake rebate to me, Madam Speaker. That's very real. Absolutely. Five hundred dollars is going to make a significant impact, I know, for my constituents, again, as they have to make those difficult decisions. Five hundred dollars is a lot of food on the table for people. For some families that's weeks' or even months' worth of groceries. That is enough money to cover an average person's groceries for two or more months.

Now we're hearing very similar rhetoric from the members opposite in regard to our targeted relief payments for seniors, families, and low-income and disabled Albertans. Madam Speaker, what I'm getting at is that the NDP enjoys creating a lot of fear. It's what they know best at the end of the day. When the government makes an announcement that we are providing \$600 in relief, people are happy because that is something that is going to make real change for them and their families.

I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to shift gears and talk a little bit about Alberta's relationship with Ottawa. Obviously, Alberta is not the only place in Canada that's facing an affordability crisis. Fuel, utilities, groceries: they are all more expensive across this entire country. Here in Alberta it is unrealistic to think that anything the provincial government is able to do can fix the nationwide inflation crisis. However, we are able to provide support for those that have been impacted, and we're doing that. Additionally, we can call on the federal government to fix the problems that they've created. We have been doing that since before we were even elected back in 2019. Our government's first bill of this Legislature was to repeal the carbon tax that the previous NDP government, of course, had put in place.

Talking about the 13 cents a litre off the gas tax, maybe we'll flip that and have a conversation about if this government was putting forward a bill in this Legislature right now to actually increase the gas tax. Could you imagine if we were doing that right now, having a discussion about increasing the gas tax? I am 90 per cent sure that the members opposite would be losing their minds, and rightly so, because right now we should not. That's the last thing that we should be doing, increasing taxes on Albertans, especially on gas taxes. We know that the higher cost of the gas tax has a significant impact on the cost of everything.

Of course, it would be utterly absurd if we were sitting here right now talking about increasing the gas tax, but the reality is that the federal government has just done that with the carbon tax. By doing that, they have increased the cost of everything. But now if we were increasing the gas tax, I'm 90 per cent sure we would be hearing a lot of noise from the other side. The federal government increases the gas tax: not a peep. Not a peep. [interjections] Actually, Madam Speaker, I'm hearing the members opposite defending their good friend and ally Justin Trudeau and his carbon tax policy and their federal leader, Jagmeet Singh. When are these guys going to stick up for and defend Albertans and push back on this carbon tax? This government is taking real action by the elimination of the gas tax to help Albertans during an affordability crisis.

Madam Speaker, Bill 2 is an example of our government taking an approach that will ensure that those who need it are going to get the support that they need. We see the need. We are addressing it. In addition to this bill, our government has also put \$20 million in support for food banks over the next two years. During the pandemic we were the first government in recent history to financially support food banks in Alberta. We provided \$6 million to help restock shelves during the pandemic and make sure that Albertans didn't go hungry. That is \$26 million more than the previous government ever spent on food banks, so I do not believe they have credibility to be able to criticize this action.

There are thousands of Albertans that are eager to contribute to food banks, which is why we chose to run a donation-matching campaign. Our food banks are very talented at involving the broader community in the solution, and that's what we need. We can't just rely on government alone to be able to get through this crisis. We all have a role. We all need to take part, and this matching program allows these food banks to be able to leverage these dollars to engage the broader community and make sure that all Albertans are part of the solution.

Madam Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to simply re-emphasize my support for Bill 2. These measures have made and will continue to make a huge difference for every Albertan as they navigate this inflation crisis. This is not a crisis that will be solved by simply cancelling your monthly subscription to Disney+. That is why we are providing legitimate relief that will have a real impact for Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. My pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 2 and comment on some of the previous speaker's comments on this bill. It's interesting – and I will always find debate in this Chamber interesting – that there are so many differences of opinion of what's said in this Chamber. I'll lay out at the outset that there are some measures in this bill that I can get behind, that I can support. There are a couple of specific issues that I have with the bill, and I'll speak at length to those.

But before I launch into the bill specifically, I just want to talk about the affordability crisis that currently exists in Alberta and the approach that this current government took three and a half years ago when they first formed government. There are a number of measures that actually increased costs on everyday Albertans because of programs that the government brought in. You know, one of the first things this government did was to deindex AISH in 2019. Now, I appreciate that it's being reindexed; however, the challenge from constituents that I'm hearing from is that for the three years where it didn't grow or increase because of cost-of-living increases, they've fallen further and further behind. I appreciate that AISH is being reindexed, and my hope and my request for all members in this Chamber is that any future government does not deindex AISH, that we leave AISH indexed in perpetuity. [interjection] I see my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. I will give way.

Ms Goehring: Thank you to the hon. member. I hear you speak about recipients of AISH falling further and further behind. These are people that you talk to on a regular basis. Can you just expand a little bit on what that actually looks like, what that means to fall behind? We know that so many are struggling, and it's not a simple thing such as not being able to do luxurious things. It's quite devastating to hear the stories of those people that are being impacted. We're hearing stories about people not being able to afford rent and groceries and those types of things. I would love for the hon. member to be able to share a little bit about those details and those personal stories that he's hearing from his constituents.

Thank you.

Mr. Bilous: Yeah. Thank you to my colleague the hon. member. You know, I've heard a number of stories of folks that have – again, people that are on AISH receive a very modest amount that covers off all of their necessities. The challenge when this government deindexed it is that we were starting to see inflation grow at quite a rapid pace. Now, I don't have the number in front of me of the actual dollars that were lost by it not being indexed over three years, but to the minister who spoke before me – I mean, he talked about some of the comments that our side has made around the electricity rebates and how little the amount was, where the minister was claiming: well, no; \$500 over five months is substantial.

For a person on AISH that is probably even more impactful. We know that every dollar, especially for low-income Albertans, that they can either keep in their pockets or that, you know, through supports from the government, it can increase makes a significant difference, Madam Speaker, in their lives. That's one of the things.

3:20

I mean, I appreciate the member saying that one of our criticisms is that this is coming in six months before the election. I just think that's an interesting coincidence. We'll leave it to Albertans to decide. I appreciate the fact that our indexing came in in a similar type of window. What I will say on that, and part of the reason that I support this element of the bill, is that I'm glad it's being brought in. Regardless of when it's being brought in, it's a positive step.

It doesn't eliminate a frustration that I have that this government deindexed AISH in 2019. You know, I can appreciate how cabinet and Executive Council works. My hope is that some of the members opposite, including the minister because of his background and his experience, would have spoken out against the former Premier saying: we're going to deindex AISH. Now, I'm not privy to those caucus meetings, but it's frustrating to hear that three years later the same group of people who were the government that deindexed AISH are now saying: yes, we're behind this; it's great. Well, where

was that vigour, where was that persuasive standing up for the people on AISH three and a half years ago? But, I mean, I'll leave this.

As far as the bill goes, I've laid out my concerns over the past three years. I appreciate the fact that it's in this bill, that it's being indexed. I wish the government would consider some type of measure to help support AISH recipients for that loss of indexation over the past three years. I can tell you that if it was possible for the government to bring in some kind of amendment – the opposition cannot because that would require dollars – then that would be greatly appreciated, and I think the government would have the opposition's support in doing that. I think it would be fairly nominal, quite frankly – not nominal, but a smaller amount – because we're talking about inflation over three years. I put that on the record. You know, I appreciate this debate.

I think some of the other challenges – and it's interesting, Madam Speaker, that, you know, being in this place you really learn how people's brains work. On this side of the House we had raised the alarm bells around bracket creep when the current government increased personal income taxes. We're talking semantics now. On this side of the House we say that the government increased personal income taxes. On that side of the House they say: no, we didn't; we're just not indexing people's wages anymore.

Now, the irony in that was that the former Premier railed against bracket creep when he was the head of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. So there's a little bit of doublespeak going on when it was not okay for governments 15 years ago, 20 years ago to do that, yet for this government that was not seen as an increase in personal income taxes. I mean, at the end of the day call it what you want. It is an increase in income taxes. Now, again, I appreciate that the government is reversing that now; a different bill. That does mean that it will leave more money in the pockets of Albertans, which is a positive thing.

I mean, I'm sure all members in this Chamber hear about the affordability crisis everywhere they go. You know, quite frankly, Madam Speaker, I too am surprised when I go to look at the prices of certain items. I know that Albertans are making choices of changing their diet because they simply can't afford to eat the way they used to. Action is needed.

Again, I'll finish my comments about earlier decisions the government made which actually increased costs on Albertans. I mean, in addition to raising personal income taxes, there was a significant spike in the increase in cost of utilities, insurance, tuition, park fees. The fact that the government removed the drug coverage for seniors: I think that's a shot below the belt, quite personally.

The fact of the matter is that Albertans do see that, you know, the number one outstanding reason of why there is a surplus is because the price of oil has been much higher than the government forecasted. Of course, Alberta has zero influence, zero control over the price of oil. It's not because the government are these phenomenal financial stewards of our dollars. It's because the revenue coming into the provincial coffers has more than doubled what was coming in under the tenure of the NDP.

I'll jump back to the bill because I know my time is running short. One of the biggest concerns I have with this – and I'd love to hear the minister or ministers get up and speak on this – is the whole payday lending scheme. I appreciate that the concept is to defer payments so that Albertans can pay later, which would save them money. The problem is that the people that are still paying the rate regulation option are going to be shouldering a larger cost of those loans in six months' time, and that will likely lead to higher and higher utility costs. There is a U of C economist who called this idea a death spiral. You're just deferring costs to down the road.

The problem is: for the people that are going to vie for this option or choose this option, how are they going to afford those increased payments down the road? It's dangerous in the sense that it could be setting them up to fail. I appreciate that the government was looking for a way to help Albertans in the immediate future for higher utility costs. I'm just not convinced that this is the best mechanism to do that. There's a significant potential downside and significant risk that Albertans are going to be bearing.

Another point that my colleagues have touched on is the fact that the affordability measure, or the \$100 a month payments, leaves out nearly 2 million Albertans. We're not talking about Albertans who are earning hundreds of thousands of dollars a year and don't necessarily need that – I'm not saying it wouldn't help; I'm saying, “need that” – in order to continue to live month to month. The challenge, Madam Speaker, is for somebody who is working full-time. A full-time minimum wage job does not see any of this relief.

We know that if you're working full-time at minimum wage, you're not making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. You're not even making \$100,000 a year. Those are the people that are really being squeezed right now when you've got the increase of the cost of gas for driving. You've got costs at the grocery store, increased costs in utilities. For people that do own their homes, we've seen significant increases in mortgage rates. Again, I appreciate that's outside of the purview of the provincial government, but it's still an increased cost. All of this results in newer costs. [interjection] I see my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Manning rise. I'll give way.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Member. You know, as you were speaking about mortgage rates going up and costs that are going up for Albertans, I think one of the other things that we're hearing about is the increase in municipal taxes. I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts around what the government could have done in relation to ensuring that local municipalities aren't forced to have to increase municipal taxes on Albertans.

Mr. Bilous: Yes. Thank you, through you, Madam Speaker, to the member for a great question. We are seeing in some jurisdictions, like some municipalities and regions and communities in Alberta, not just double-digit tax increases on their municipal property taxes; we're seeing tax increases close to 20 per cent. You know what? I get that the government will blame the municipal councillors and leaders for the fact that their – whatever they're going to say – pet projects are raising taxes through the roof. Municipalities deliver 90 per cent of the services that Albertans rely on and receive 10 per cent of the funding. The inversion on that is very flawed.

3:30

When you have municipal leaders calling on the government not to cut their funding, which the current government has done over the past three and a half years – they need more support to be able to deliver services for their community members. We know that municipalities have very few tools in their tool box to be able to increase the revenues that they have to provide services. Councils across this province right now are having very, very difficult conversations on: what are the priorities that they need to fund?

The problem is that if you look at the rate of inflation this last year, it was over 7 per cent. So when a municipality says, “We're going to raise taxes by 3 per cent” and this government criticizes them for doing it, that's still far from the increased costs of operations, of the day-to-day. Now, I'm not advocating for higher property taxes, but I can sympathize with municipal leaders in this conundrum that they're in where citizens expect the delivery of services. They're expecting cities that are growing to be increasing

their amenities. We have increasing costs, and the government is not sharing their revenue surplus with municipalities, who are desperate to just continue providing the same base level of services. This is a problem, Madam Speaker, because the result is that the municipal leaders are increasing taxes on Albertans or on their constituents municipally, which means more costs.

Once again, the provincial government is directly responsible for the funds that go to municipalities. I mean, the Premier and the Finance minister recently spoke about how municipalities are governed by the province, they exist because of the province. So it is the province's responsibility to be able to share some of its revenues with municipalities, who deliver 90 per cent of the services that Albertans rely on. This is another way that the current government is actually increasing costs on Albertans.

Now, you know, I appreciate that in this bill, Madam Speaker, there is, again, the provincial portion of the gasoline tax Albertans will not have to pay for six months. That does help Albertans. We had concerns when they first introduced this measure, but we have seen some savings for Albertans. As my colleague often points out, the challenge with that measure is that it's only benefiting those who drive, so if you're not driving, I don't think – and I could be wrong – that municipalities are taking that savings themselves and passing it on to their ridership. Having said that, I wish the current government would have kept that break on the provincial portion of the gas tax going as opposed to it ending for several months.

I see my colleague has risen.

Mr. Feehan: I just am interested in your conversation about the municipalities. I know that you've had a significant amount of experience with the municipalities, and I also know that you're quite aware of the variety of ways in which this government has increased costs on municipalities. I wonder if you can remind the House a little bit about some of the changes that were made with regard to linear assessments, for example, about giving tax holidays to wealthy corporations, about increasing the cost on municipalities for having RCMP officers and actually diminishing the ability of municipalities to make decisions regarding their own budgets and budget increases, you know, all of these kinds of things that have made life in the small towns of this province much more difficult to administer and have resulted in increased costs as well.

Mr. Bilous: Yeah. Thank you to the hon. member, through you, Madam Speaker.

I'm just curious how much time I have remaining.

The Deputy Speaker: Less than 30 seconds.

Mr. Bilous: Less than 30 seconds. Well, that's always a problem.

What I will say to answer the member's question is that costs for policing have gone up significantly as the province has pulled some funding for that. There have been challenges as well with municipalities collecting money that is owed to them.

Madam Speaker, there are elements of this bill I absolutely support. There are elements that are challenges, and my hope is that we will see some progress to improve the bill.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I stand today to voice my support for Bill 2, the Inflation Relief Statutes Amendment Act, 2022. Bill 2 is here to ensure that Albertans who are finding it difficult to make ends meet will be supported by our government. Just recently the Premier and the minister of affordability announced \$2.4 billion in inflation relief measures that will make life more affordable for Alberta families.

Before going further, I would like to applaud the Premier, ministers, MLAs, and our leaders for making difficult decisions during these unprecedented times here. At this time we need to ensure and let Albertans know that they're supported and protected by their government. As well, I extend my appreciation to all working Albertans, families, children, seniors, and our most vulnerable populations that have been under pressure from the increasing prices of utilities, food, and rent. There is no doubt that Albertans are facing price hikes, and I am pleased that Bill 2 will help Albertans during these difficult times.

Every choice we make in this crisis must strike a balance between Albertans' financial needs and the requirement for an ongoing balanced budget and fiscal prudence. We can assist Albertans during a crisis like this one when our financial house is in order. Madam Speaker, over the past couple of years our government has worked tremendously hard to balance the budget and ensure that we acted with speed to address the economic consequences of the pandemic. We created a system of supports for job creators and freed up cash for families and businesses to help relieve the pressure and keep their doors open. We passed numerous legislations, revised many policies to ensure we attract investments which boost our economic growth and, most importantly, improve the lives of all Albertans.

Madam Speaker, Calgary-East is a community that is facing a lot of hardship from the current inflation. I have spoken to many constituents these recent months and heard time and again that life is becoming financially challenging. In recent years I was delighted to see Alberta's government fund and complete infrastructure projects in Calgary-East, including the revitalization of Forest Lawn high school and Clifton Manor to ensure that our children and seniors in long-term are supported, construction of a new playground in St. Kateri, and the completion of Journey to Freedom park. As well, Calgary-East is a growing community with new families, new businesses, like Calgary East Hills. Neighbourhoods like Belvedere would enhance the presence of the city.

As Alberta remains one of the most affordable places in Canada to live and work, Alberta's lower cost of living combined with relatively high average earnings and the lowest overall taxes mean Albertans keep more money in their pockets. Madam Speaker, let's not forget that Alberta's recovery plan's aim was to take a bold action to create jobs that got people back to work, assisted in building infrastructure, and, most importantly, helped us diversify our economy to ensure that our resources are well utilized.

3:40

The focus in the past was to eliminate red tape that was holding back the economy since these changes have brought more investments and good jobs into our urban, rural communities and ensured more jobs for Albertans. This was a promised platform that will always be a commitment, a way to protect workers and restore balance and strengthen democracy. As we work together to build our economic strength, to attract investment, and position our province for prosperity, at the end it's all to support Albertans and to provide hope for the future.

Through many provincial government initiatives we were experiencing broad-based investment and economic diversification in our province. Amazon Web Services announced its plan to establish its second cloud computing hub in Calgary, amounting to \$4.3 billion, while Mphasis has recently opened its digital centre in Calgary and committed to create 1,000 jobs. Mphasis also opened their Canadian headquarters this year in Calgary with 200 jobs and will expand to create thousands of tech jobs. RBC has also opened a tech hub in Calgary which will create about 300 jobs while EY, impressed with the talented offers, opened in September this year. A new finance hub will create about 200 jobs in Calgary. Northern

Petrochemical also announced a \$2.5 billion project in the municipal district of Greenview, and Dow Chemical plans to open a project that will be the world's first net-zero carbon emission petrochemical plant, which is predicted to cost about \$10 billion. Another huge investment that has landed in Alberta is Lynx Air, Madam Speaker, Canada's newest low-cost airline. It joins Flair and WestJet as Alberta-based airlines.

These are just some of the many investments creating jobs in Alberta and boosting our economy, Madam Speaker, as we saw the unemployment rate dip down to 5.2 per cent in October. We are also seeing the continuous entry of job creators in our province. Whether new businesses or business expansions, Alberta's government is helping employees, employers create exciting futures for Albertans.

Madam Speaker, although Alberta's economy has made a solid comeback, many residents are still finding it difficult to pay for food and heating due to the rising prices and record inflation. We as a government are unable to address the inflation challenges on our own, but because of our solid financial standing and balanced budget, we're able to provide significant assistance to Albertans and their families in the challenging times ahead. Our current focus is to provide urgent cost-of-living supports and inflation relief and work with our ministries to improve long-term affordability. Since our vulnerable populations are most affected by rising prices and soaring inflation and require greater support, I'm pleased that we are directing our attention to providing supports to our elders, families, and vulnerable groups that are severely affected.

Madam Speaker, Alberta's inflation increased to 6.8 per cent in October from 6.2 per cent in September. The rise is brought by growing gas, electricity, food prices. Families with children often spend a greater percentage of their income on food, energy, and transportation. The average income of seniors and disadvantaged Albertans is lower. All Albertans are receiving broad-based relief from the expense of living while receiving additional assistance for those who most need it, and I'm proud that we are doing this while maintaining budgetary responsibility.

The government of Alberta has already taken a number of measures to make life more affordable, including the electricity rebate, which has already given up to \$250 in relief to 1.9 million families, small businesses, and farms, and the fuel tax relief program, which will be saving Albertans money on gasoline and diesel every time they fill up their cars. Families may be secure in their own ability to heat their homes this winter thanks to the natural gas rebate, which offers natural gas price protection while focusing on providing extra aid to families, elders, and our most vulnerable citizens. I am pleased our administration will expand broad-based services. Our government is aware that the main issue Albertans are now facing is affordability and that they are looking to us to act swiftly to address Alberta's accelerating cost of living.

We aim to concentrate on areas where the government can move quickly and effectively to lower expenses for Albertans while also laying out a better, more affordable future for coming generations. AISH, PDD, income support, the seniors' benefit, the Alberta child and family benefit, extended fuel tax relief, action on utilities, including increasing the electricity rebate, targeted payments for families for each child, seniors, and vulnerable Albertans will all benefit during these upcoming months.

To assist Albertans in heating their homes and paying their energy bills this winter, our government is committed in giving an additional power rebate, better price protection. We will increase the power reinvestment by \$200 this winter, providing a total of \$500 in rebates throughout the life of the program. Madam Speaker, more steps to safeguard families from price increases in electricity, while maintaining the natural gas price protection program, are taken to help all Albertans.

Madam Speaker, it is wonderful that Alberta's government has decided to postpone the entire provincial gasoline tax for at least the next six months. We have seen this fuel tax relief program from June up to September this year, where the provincial government suspended the collection of fuel tax in that prior year. As we saw the downward trend from oil prices, the reimposition of the fuel tax started in October, which is the lowest among Canada's provinces. Currently we are just collecting a fuel tax of 4.5 cents per litre of gasoline and diesel. Following that, the province will alter the provincial gas tax based on the price of oil as it does under the current relief plan. As a result, beginning January 1st, Albertans will save 13.6 cents, including GST, per litre of petrol and fuel. This initiative will give significant help to Albertans who are dealing with high inflationary prices.

In addition to the roughly 1.3 million tax filers who now do not pay provincial personal income tax, an additional 80,000 to 95,000 Albertans will now do so by 2023. As a result, many Albertans will either receive larger tax refunds or pay less in taxes as a result of 2022 indexation. Provincial tax rates will be updated to reflect inflation by the government. With these changes, it is less probable that an employee who receives a small wage increase may face tax consequences. We will keep our commitment to retroactively adjust personal income taxes to inflation beginning with the 2022 tax year.

Alberta's government provides more than \$8.9 billion in services and supports to Alberta seniors each year. This includes financial support and health benefits as well as housing and health supports for seniors with low income. These supports are most of the reasons Alberta has the lowest senior poverty rate in Canada.

Madam Speaker, beginning January, the government will reindex AISH, PDD, income assistance, the seniors' benefit, and the Alberta child and family benefit for inflation, making it even more affordable for Albertans. This will make it possible to adjust payments for inflation and provide benefits to assist vulnerable groups in paying their bills in the face of growing living expenses.

3:50

Changes to the Alberta child and family benefit, AISH, the persons with developmental disabilities program, the income support program as well as the Alberta seniors' benefit: Madam Speaker, this increased financial support will have an immediate impact on more than a quarter million vulnerable Albertans, including 43,000 children who are dependent on AISH and income support benefit recipients.

Madam Speaker, I am happy to draw attention to the supporting advantages that seniors and families with . . . [Mr. Singh's speaking time expired]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to join debate on Bill 2, the Inflation Relief Statutes Amendment Act, 2022. Certainly, as the title of the bill indicates, there is some relief regarding, you know, this inflationary crisis that we are in currently. We know that we're witnessing the greatest crisis we've had in decades, and certainly it's important that the government take some responsibility to support its citizens regarding this time, so I'm pleased that the government is bringing forward this bill.

It's just that there are some contradictory policies of this government. As they indicate in this bill that they want to move forward, for example, on indexing the Alberta seniors' benefit, they themselves were the government that deindexed that benefit three and a half years ago. You know, it concerns me that the government is sort of patting themselves on the back a bit by bringing forward this legislation, but some of this legislation would not have even

had to come forward if the government hadn't done previous legislation that really did hurt Albertans. I must say that it is like they're doing one thing that's contradictory of something that they did earlier in their mandate.

I do want to just talk about the responsibility of government. Absolutely, when there are events that happen in our world that are beyond sort of individual responsibility – you know, we can't control the price of groceries, which is an example of some of the very high inflationary issues Albertans are facing. We know that the costs of utilities have gone up significantly. An individual cannot control those things. Governments can influence those things. They can't completely control them, but they can make them more reasonable so citizens can cope, can live with dignity. This is an extremely important role of government. Certainly, one of the main reasons, probably, that I got involved in politics is because there are so many significant issues that citizens just can't manage by themselves, so we need just, fair, compassionate government to stand up and provide policies that support our citizens.

One of the things that I, you know, disagree with some of the UCP about – and the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services just mentioned it – is that we can't pay for social programs if we don't have a balanced budget. I completely disagree with that. Actually, governments can do that. They have access to many economic levers, that individual citizens don't, that can support people. Certainly, that was something that we significantly did when we were government.

We know that the oil and gas industry is very important to Albertans and to our economy, to our citizens. Certainly, we've had booms and busts over many, many years in this province. We're all familiar with them. Certainly, when we were government, the price of oil was \$26 a barrel at its lowest, and you know it's been over a hundred during this government's mandate. So there is a significant difference in revenue, especially because previous Conservative governments had repeatedly just relied on the oil and gas industry to get us through. They hadn't diversified the economy, and that was something that we, an NDP government, aggressively moved forward in doing.

But did we slash public programs that citizens needed, especially citizens who worked in the oil and gas industry? They lost their jobs oftentimes, and they didn't have that income to provide for their families. Did we slash public programs? No. We did the opposite. We buffered citizens. We supported citizens because that's what good government does. It doesn't have to be a balanced budget to do that. Governments can do many things with their financial resources that an individual can't. I'm very proud that our government did that, and I'm dismayed that this government doesn't see that that's their role also.

People have been absolutely suffering under this government because of the cuts they made when they first came in that they didn't have to make. The example that I used earlier about the deindexation of seniors' benefits – we know of AISH also. We know that they didn't increase the tax brackets. Property taxes went up, school fees, tuition: there are so many things that this government has done, so they've kind of created their own difficulties. But now with this Bill 2 they're saying: oh, well, we're going to give Albertans – some Albertans, not everyone – some money to help them because, yeah, we agree that there is an affordability crisis. But all along they could have been doing so much more, and people could have been supported quite well.

I speak every day to Albertans who are not making ends meet, who are losing their housing. One fellow told me – and he was a senior. He said: "I haven't had meat in months. I can't afford meat." He relied on the Alberta seniors' benefit and he relied on it keeping

pace with inflation, but he couldn't have a lifestyle where he ate meat because it was too expensive for him.

So the UCP certainly does have a choice, and I think good government, a compassionate government, would actually buffer citizens when times are tough and not focus only on balancing the budget, because governments don't have to balance their budgets. They have a lot of financial levers so that they have much more latitude to provide those public programs.

We know, Madam Speaker, that oftentimes when those programs are provided, when people can live in dignity, people are well housed, people can access health care, people can, you know, go to postsecondary and improve themselves, those actually save governments money because then they're not accessing those more expensive services like emergency medical services. We know that providing a person who is homeless affordable housing with the proper supports costs less for a government than it does them living homeless. So besides just the human rights argument for providing public programs, there is an economic argument. A wise government would not cut these programs in the first place and would provide Albertans with this buffer, this support. Certainly, I feel like that's the main responsibility of a government, to care for its citizens. Certainly, I differ greatly with some of the views of UCP members in this regard.

You know, I'm reminded of way back when Premier Klein was in office. I was a social worker in child welfare, and he cut public programs by 50 per cent. He didn't have to do that. He did it because he wanted a balanced budget. So he said that he had slayed this dragon and it was so great for everyone. It wasn't good for my clients. It wasn't good for the professionals I worked with. It was a select amount of people who could benefit from that kind of thing. So I really question this premise of the UCP that you have to balance your budget. You can actually do many things as a government.

With that, Madam Speaker, I will take my seat.

4:00

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate on Bill 2? Seeing none, I will call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a second time]

Bill 6 Police Amendment Act, 2022

[Adjourned debate December 12: Ms Ganley]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this afternoon to speak to Bill 6, the Police Amendment Act, 2022. You know, we've heard from this government for quite some years now about their intention of moving on a costly provincial police force despite opposition, significant opposition, from the majority of Albertans and municipalities, and they have now introduced a piece of legislation that really gives a lot more control from the government into community policing.

We have a piece of legislation that comes on the heels of millions of dollars being downloaded onto municipalities in policing costs in the last three years. On top of that, they made a significant cut to the Justice budget. We have a piece of legislation that's coming forward from a government that, we know, wants to go against the direction of Albertans and look at a costly provincial police force.

While there are pieces of this legislation that we can one hundred per cent support such as civilian oversight into law enforcement, there are so many things glaringly missing from this piece of

legislation, Madam Speaker. I think that when we look at the cuts that this government has put towards municipalities and the impact that it's had on policing and the justice system, it is detrimental to communities.

We're hearing that, you know, municipalities' services need support. We saw a government that cut funding for victims' services in a time when crime has increased, when supports have become more and more necessary, cuts to nonprofits. It's just a piece of legislation where some of it is good, Madam Speaker, but there's so much left unknown in this legislation.

We're seeing a government that wants to create a lot of things that are left to regulation, which is quite concerning knowing the history that this government has with interference in some criminal matters and policing matters. I don't know that Albertans trust this government to come up with regulations that aren't part of this legislation. There are things that should be in this legislation that just simply aren't available.

When I've looked through this, you know, our government, the NDP, started the Police Act review, and we were doing things like consulting with Albertans. That was a priority for our government, to be able to listen to those that are involved in policing and have feedback from those. Yet we've heard that some significant legislation has gone through and, with this piece of legislation, is intended to go through without consultation. We heard from Treaty 6 that there was no consultation on Bill 1, the sovereignty act. That went through. Now we've heard that there's been no consultation on this bill.

Now, when it comes to Indigenous communities, I would argue that they have some significant input and voice that needs to be at the table when it comes to policing in this province. We have an overrepresented community of Indigenous people that are in our court systems, that are in our jails, that are being charged unfairly, and the fact that this government has left them out of the conversation for the consultation for this piece of legislation is quite concerning. I would be curious to know what the reason for that is. We heard the Premier over the last few days state that she has in fact met with Indigenous communities regarding legislation, and then, immediately following, we heard Indigenous leaders come out and say that that is not true. So what are Albertans to do, Madam Speaker? We have a piece of legislation that's come forward where they're saying, "Just trust us; we're going to make up these things in the regulations," yet we know that no consultation happened with Indigenous communities.

I'm curious if consultation happened with municipalities. This legislation is going to have some significant impact on municipalities all across this province. When they're looking at putting a committee forward that is 50 per cent supported – not supported. I would like to retract that word. There's no support indicated in here, whether that comes financially or what. They are going to be appointing 50 per cent of those boards, and I find that significantly concerning without adding the piece that there is going to be financial support along with that. We have a government that's saying: "We want things to happen in the province. We have a direction that we want to see policing take, and we're going to appoint" – I've been corrected – "49 per cent of the boards. But how we're going to do that is going to be left in regulations." So knowing that there wasn't consultation that happened to create this piece of legislation, I'm very fearful that consultation may not happen when they're appointing the individuals that are going to be on these committees.

I know that there are some significant concerns and questions when it comes to the relationship that this government has with the RCMP. Now, in the province of Alberta we have some wonderful working relationships with the RCMP. Right here in Edmonton we have K Division. Now, what is going to happen when this piece of legislation comes forward? Will there be any sort of agreement that

needs to change or anything required formally with the RCMP K Division?

I can speak from direct experience, Madam Speaker, when it comes to working with K Division. I had the privilege of working with Alberta ICE. For those of you that don't know what that is, it's the Alberta Internet child exploitation unit. It is a provincial strategy, an integrated unit that works with the RCMP, the Calgary police, the Edmonton police, the Lethbridge police, and the Medicine Hat police. What they do is that they directly work with child luring over the Internet; the child sex trade and tourism; voyeurism involving victims under the age of 18; accessing, possession, distribution, importation, manufacturing of child pornography; and any other child-related sexual abuse. I would say that this unit, that represents all Albertans, is essential, and I'm concerned that these well-established relationships and partnerships could be at risk because of the government's plan to come in and start dictating their priorities to local policing.

4:10

Now, as a child welfare worker that worked as an investigator, I didn't have the expertise to work on Internet exploitation. I relied heavily on the expertise of the ICE unit. The Edmonton police that I worked with also relied on the information that the RCMP and the specialists in this unit had. We were working with criminals out of Florida that were impacting individuals in Edmonton. Now, as a worker, knowing that I could pick up the phone and contact our federal partners through the RCMP K Division meant that I knew I was doing the best thing that I could for the families and children that I worked for.

There are so many relationships within the police service in communities all across the province that exist because the community came forward and said: "We need this. This is an area of concern in our community, and we as a community, a municipality have decided that this is a strategy that we would like to have involved with the police." I fear, Madam Speaker, that with this piece of legislation, Bill 6, the government is going to come in and start dictating what community policing looks like.

I can think that in Edmonton-Castle Downs at one point we had a NET team, a neighbourhood empowerment team. That came about because our community leaders, through the Edmonton Castle Downs Rec Society and multiple different organizations, came together and said: "We have a need. We need some community policing. We had a high break-and-enter space within Edmonton-Castle Downs. We had a lot of car thefts." And what the community asked for was a neighbourhood empowerment team, and that was provided because the community came forward and said, "This is what we see in our community." It wasn't the provincial government that came in and said, "This needs to happen." It was a community initiative that came forward and created a wonderful relationship with EPS and the community leaders that were naturally there.

I can think of some other wonderful relationships that have happened in Castle Downs, Madam Speaker. We have some beautiful community facilities in Castle Downs. We have the Edmonton Islamic Academy, that is right next door. We have the Al Rashid mosque, that is right next door, and we have the Castle Downs YMCA. They were seeing that some of the kids in the community were a little bit restless and that there were some struggles with community policing in the area. So what the community did was that they came together and had a conversation with EPS, with the hate crimes unit, and with the natural community leaders.

With the support of EPS and the relationship building that took place, they were able to create a wonderful space where youth could get involved with EPS. They were doing basketball games. They were playing hockey. They were doing things where the police in

the community said: this is something that's needed to enhance and build relationships in this community. That happened organically because the community came forward and said: this is what we see; these are possible solutions. EPS was incredible at coming forward and offering their feedback and insight and listening to community. There wasn't an additional layer of having to have the minister come in and provide direction on what the community should be doing. EPS and the community leaders believed that they knew what was best for the community, and they were successful in that because they live there, they work there, and they see what's going on.

We have a policing system in north Edmonton that many feel is supportive, but we also have a policing system that many feel is not working. I've held town halls, Madam Speaker, to talk about the racism that's happening within the community and how the community feels that police are contributing to that. Rather than shying away from it and having to go through a provincial whatever to direct some sort of plan, we had the hate crimes unit come and directly talk to the community and share and listen about what was happening on both sides. The community naturally did this.

I fear that when we're looking at a provincial government and a minister that want to get directly involved and have their hands on every component of municipalities and communities across Alberta, we're going to get further and further away from what communities actually need. They need to feel heard; they need to feel involved. The best way to get buy-in is having all parties at the table that are directly involved coming up with solutions. It's a simple mediation format. When you have both sides represented equally, sharing concerns, you can come up with a beautiful solution.

When you have a minister and a government that are coming down saying, "This is what we need; we need to appoint 49 per cent of those involved in the communities," we are getting further and further away from grassroots community engagement, community enhancement, community safety, and that's concerning. These are things that the government shouldn't be so... [Ms Goehring's speaking time expired]

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak this afternoon to Bill 6, a bill which, you know, I have mixed feelings about, a little bit of disappointment. I certainly have said in the past that I have some concern that too often when the UCP government has a bill with some good points in it, they put something in it that becomes a poison pill and makes it impossible to support. I'm a bit conflicted over this particular bill because I think it fits into that area. I do think there are some things that are important here that I'd like to support, and I really want to encourage the government to find a way to pursue them. Even if I vote against this bill, I want them to pursue some aspects. I'd like to address those pieces first.

[Mr. Turton in the chair]

I guess that the pieces that I think are important and good for this government to proceed with are the shift toward having increased citizen oversight of police forces in the province, the idea that there will be people who sit on commissions who make decisions on the local basis about the nature of the police. I think it's something that's a good thing. I think, you know, all societies should have control over their police forces by the people that are being served by the police forces because it just makes sense that we need to have civilians making decisions as to the length and the breadth to which

police can act to control citizens. We don't want to be in a situation where the power rests solely with the police forces over citizens. As such, a movement toward some kind of citizen oversight is a good decision. I have some concerns about the mechanism that the government has put in, but perhaps I'll speak to my second part that I do really wish to support in this bill before I go on to some of my concerns.

The second thing that I like is the decision to actually move ASIRT away from its present circumstance to under the control of the citizen board because, you know, I never think it's a good idea to have police policing police. The way that ASIRT is set up right now, it's essentially current and retired police officers who are making the decisions about the police's behaviour, and I just always think that's problematic. There certainly should be a role of police officers in ASIRT, describing appropriate police procedures and the reasoning for them and so on, so I certainly want a presence of police in helping to review the behaviour. The police said it also helps them to understand where things have gone wrong, where there are problems, and hopefully they bring that information back to the police forces and change behaviour where it's required to change, but there should also be a very strong external review of that kind of behaviour.

I know that, you know, when I was a member of the Alberta College of Social Workers, we had a committee that reviewed social worker behaviours. It certainly had social workers on it but also had civilians on that review committee to ensure that the review that was done by the committee over the social workers' behaviour was done with an eye to making sure that the profession wasn't simply protecting itself but was actually protecting the public. I think that's exactly the same concern that I have with ASIRT if it's too much of the police being in a position of being able to protect themselves rather than assess themselves and evaluate themselves and change themselves when necessary.

4:20

I guess I wanted to say that those things are pieces of the bill that I hope will continue to move forward and find some life in the future, but there are other parts of the bill which I am very, very concerned about. I'm going to divide that into two pieces. One of them is the issue of control and ministerial control over the bill, and the second piece is a First Nations concern that I learned in my meeting with the Treaty 6 First Nations this morning, who, by the way, tell me they do not support Bill 6.

Let me go through the first piece about my own concerns about Bill 6 and talk about why it is that I am concerned about the mechanism of control that is being put in here. Now, as I've said, I'm certainly happy to support a citizen-based overview of police activities, but I am very concerned that in this bill all of the decision-making about who sits on the board goes back to the minister again. You know, many times over the last three years I've stood up and said, "Why is this government always trying to take power out of everybody else's hands and bring the power back into the minister's office all the time?" whether it be about pensions I was concerned about or whether it be about health care or, in this particular case, about policing services.

You know, the section of the bill which says that this should be about citizen oversight suddenly becomes null and void when we realize that it's actually the minister that's making the decisions about things, and that starts with the decision about who sits on the boards and the fact that the municipalities are directed to create these boards but the minister gets to review who the municipalities put on the boards. These kind of things are just unnecessary overreach and a distrust of the public by this government, and I just don't think that they're necessary to do that.

It appears that even when a municipality is setting up a board, my understanding in reading the act is that the government will actually

be appointing 50 per cent of the members to the board, so it really isn't a municipal board that's being set up. It's not local. The control of this goes to the provincial government, and then if there's any problem with the local board, it goes to the provincial board, which is a hundred per cent appointed by the provincial government. So really what we have is a board which, you know, undermines municipalities' efforts yet again.

We certainly have seen this government make multiple decisions to undermine municipalities over the last number of years, everything from adding provincial government votes onto municipal elections, which they absolutely opposed but this government did anyways; to giving tax holidays to, you know, highly profitable corporations, which caused grief for the municipalities; to changing rules around linear assessment, which caused problems for the municipalities; to promising to increase the number of RCMP officers and then charging it all back to the municipalities; and then decreasing the municipalities' abilities to make decisions around taxation. So it seems to be that this government really dislikes municipalities. We seem to be moving in the direction of essentially making municipalities redundant.

This government is clearly moving to a place where they want the provincial government to control all aspects of life in this province, don't want a check and balance with local authorities, and I think that that's very problematic. You always have to question why a government is slowly drawing in all the lines and bringing them together and creating significant power in the provincial government that used to be more diversified and more spread out around the province. We've seen them also do the same thing with school boards, taking power away from school boards and making decisions about who's in the union and who's out, about where their pension plans will be, decisions about making mandates for health care in the classes. We've seen the government pull all that away.

We go to the ballot box, we vote in school board elections, we go to the ballot box and we vote in municipal elections, and it turns out that it doesn't really matter what you vote in either of those sets of elections because the power has been taken away from those entities and shifted to the provincial government. That's got to be a concern for all Albertans because it's, first of all, unnecessary. We certainly have seen this province be quite successful with having school boards actually have the power to make decisions over schools, and we've seen municipalities be quite successful in making decisions over the municipalities. I think this is, you know, exactly opposed to the direction we were going in when we were starting to talk to Calgary and Edmonton about having supercity initiatives in this province.

I think that people in this province should be very concerned at the number of times I've had to stand up and say: this is an undermining of democracy on some level or another. One by one you might argue with me, "Well, that wasn't so much really a challenge to democracy," but when you start to look at the trend over four years of the number of times we've had to say that this in some way diminishes the democracy – in this case it happens to diminish the democracy in municipal governments, but we've said the same thing with health care, we've said the same thing with school boards, and now we're saying this with police forces. I think that the citizens of Alberta need to be very concerned about where this is going.

I'd also like to take some time to talk a little bit about why it is that the First Nations are concerned about this. The number one reason that the First Nations are concerned is the fact that it is a shifting of power away from First Nations back into the provincial government's hands yet again. The same complaint that I have from a democracy point of view, the First Nations have from their democracy point of view. What they're saying are a number of things.

First of all, they know that the government is essentially using this bill as an incremental achievement of a provincial police force. They're setting this up so that they can then say: we have provincial oversight of the police, so we might as well have a provincial police force that is reviewed by the same committee. We know that this is a step towards something that has absolutely no support in this province – no, I guess that no one can ever say that; that has very little support in this province by the citizens. People don't want a provincial police force. The polls have been very clear about that time and time again, yet this government is pursuing this over and over and over again no matter what they've been told, and now the First Nations are saying: we have said that we do not want a provincial police force; we want to remain with the RCMP.

Certainly, there are some things that they'd like to change, and they talk to me about that on a fairly regular basis, but they want to remain with the RCMP because of their relationship with the federal government. In speaking to some of the people at the meeting this morning with Treaty 6, I was approached by the CEO of one of the corporations within Treaty 6 who said to me: you know, we've reviewed this; we looked at this, and we can see that having a provincial police force is going to cost this province a lot of money, a billion dollars' worth of money, over just staying with the RCMP. But then he said to me: but you also have to understand it's going to cost every single First Nation because right now there's a sharing agreement, a 52 to 48 per cent sharing agreement, for costs of RCMP officers between the federal government and the First Nations. So if this government undermines the relationship with the federal RCMP, they're going to cost that cost-sharing arrangement with every First Nation across the province. They said: and they're doing all this without any consultation even though they know it's clearly going to affect the arrangements between First Nations and the RCMP.

So here we are yet again on a day where we challenge this government many, many times for their failure to consult with First Nations, saying again: you're bringing in a bill that they have serious concerns about, and you haven't done any consultation with them at all.

The other part that they're very concerned about is that this bill allows the provincial board to actually review the behaviour of First Nations police forces. It's very clear in there. They're saying: again you're actually taking the power away from the governments of the First Nations and bringing it into provincial jurisdiction. This is federal land with an independent First Nations government making decisions to have a localized police force, and now you're saying that that police force is subject to Alberta laws.

4:30

You know, the irony here is absolutely incredible. This is a government that brought in Bill 1 to say: we don't want another jurisdiction coming in and telling us what to do in our jurisdiction. Now they immediately turn around and introduce another bill that does exactly the same thing to a different government, just like they have with municipalities, just like they have with school boards.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

This government is constantly taking power away from other democratically elected organizations and bringing it into themselves, yet somehow they want us to support a bill that . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to speak to the bill? The hon. government whip.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to weigh in on the Police Act amendments. Having listened to Edmonton-Rutherford for a bit, I'd like to just add that if a council is appointing

members to a commission, if it's one to three members, then one can be appointed by the minister; if it's four to six, two can be appointed by the minister; if it's seven to nine, three can be appointed by the minister. That does not sound like the province trying to take power away from local councils.

Three First Nation police services: those nations with those police services were consulted on this. The nations that are looking to develop their own police services as well were consulted on this. The other thing is that if you're policed by the RCMP, this is increasing civilian oversight to be able to review the policing priorities and the complaint process involved in that, and I don't see why that is an issue.

I'd also like to start by just simply saying thank you to our police service community. I was a police officer for 10 years. It is a very difficult job. I think that a lot of those years in working with the community have prepared me well for this job and the different personalities that you can come across. It's a high-volume, high-stress job. There is a lot of scrutiny to it. Similar to politics, you are probably being filmed and recorded at any given time that you are working with somebody, so your professionalism always has to remain high. It is always tested, and I think that police services across this province and our policing community do a tremendous job, frankly, in providing policing services to the community.

There are probably a countless number of interactions between the police and the community, and a small percentage of those lead to complaints. I am not making excuses for every police officer in this province. If they've done something wrong, they deserve to be held accountable for that, but there are also a lot of police officers who are going to their job each and every day, doing the absolute best they can to fairly and unbiasedly police the communities that they're in because, frankly, they live in those communities as well. They want those communities to be safe. Their families are there, their kids are there, so they are just as interested in a well-policed, safe community that has a low amount of crime as anybody else is.

I think that this act, in updating the Police Act, is a good step forward. I think the objections so far – I think I can easily disregard them. Yesterday I think it came from one of the NDP members that this was the politicization of policing, which I think is a ridiculous comment, frankly, given that – at the Coutts border crossing, yes, there was an illegal blockade, but the members opposite would have had the RCMP charging into a dangerous situation, a situation that they knew was quite dangerous, putting both civilians and the police service at risk and not giving them the time that they needed to properly deal with that, which they clearly showed that they could without the Emergencies Act as well. They just needed a little bit more time, frankly.

But what I'm enjoying that I can see here is that increased oversight is important, having that independent body taking in complaints against the police and making sure that it's a central agency. That people across the province understand what that looks like and what it is, how to file a complaint, what the expectations are, I think, is important. I don't equate that with a provincial police service. I think it's just important that wherever you live in this province, you have an understanding of what the expectations of police are and, if you have a complaint, you know how to do that. Instead of trying to figure out a dozen different processes across this province, you'd be able to just have one central intake. It's easier to hold that agency accountable as well.

More civilian involvement: I've touched on that. I think that that's important, setting the process and oversight. Civilian involvement is necessary because, frankly, if you don't have the support of the community, you're not going to be successful in policing. Police agencies know this, and they know that without the support, they are

not going to have the same success in investigations that they would like, so that's always important.

This bill also touches on diversity, which is also extremely important. Our communities are becoming more and more diverse. I can tell you that I on numerous occasions relied on other members' language ability, cultural knowledge as well to help defuse situations and to communicate with people where English was maybe their second, third language or further down the list. I had my eyes opened to maybe something cultural that I didn't know so I could better understand the community and work with other members. That is growing, I think, quite a bit. I think police services have realized for a while that they need to have more diversity in their hiring, and that is occurring as well.

As far as I understand, too, this review, yes, started under the NDP in 2018. It's been years in the making as well, so a lot of stakeholder involvement has occurred. A lot of feedback from the community has gone into this. I'm happy with the minister's changes and what they've brought forward.

As well, the expanded role of ASIRT in investigating any serious complaints brought forward about peace officers I think is an important step. I think ASIRT is an excellent organization. I don't have the same objection to them investigating complaints. I think ASIRT is an organization, frankly, where if you're in trouble and they are looking into you, they will find out what happened. They're a very skilled group of people who are very dedicated to finding the truth. Also, using independent prosecutors from other jurisdictions to review their work and to recommend charges as well is another added step in that process.

I'm just trying to see what else I have in my notes here as to what I can cover off. I think I've gone through most of the . . . [interjection] Oh, is there an intervention?

Mr. Getson: There is, Member, if you'll accept.

Mr. Rutherford: Absolutely.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Getson: Yeah. Member for Leduc-Beaumont, you know, again, I think you've quite well articulated what the intent of the act is. We've listened to a ton of rhetoric from the other side, so thanks for dispelling that. On a personal note, since you and another member of our team here were members before, can you expand a little bit, if you would, on that personal element of how it makes the front-line police services feel when you've got a group that's touting the bandwagon to defund the police? If you could give us some insight into that as well.

Mr. Rutherford: Absolutely. When the rhetoric of "defund the police" carries over from the United States to here, it's demoralizing. I mean, there's no way around that. You know, even comments where I don't – however they were phrased, frankly, it sounds like police were unfairly charging specific communities. That's what I think I just heard; I won't expand more on that or that somehow police are targeting specific communities. I think that these are inflammatory comments which really go against what the vast, vast majority of police officers are trying to do every day, which is just make their communities safer.

Who phones 911 and the non-emergency line and who they're filing a complaint against is not up to the officers, right? They're responding to calls based on what citizens have brought forward. Police officers aren't responsible for who is incarcerated either. If you think there's a particular group overrepresented in jails, I would go talk to the judges. They sentence. They remand. It is not up to police officers to do that.

I think it's important to remember that in all professions there are people who cause problems. No profession is spared from that. It includes doctors and nurses and teachers, politicians even. We all know that from question period a little bit earlier. It exists in every profession, and the mechanisms should exist for people to be able to file complaints, to have their complaints taken seriously and investigated in an unbiased way, and to make sure that public trust is maintained. It is of the utmost importance. As I said before, if the public does not trust you, they're not going to go to you, and that is true of any profession.

Let's remember that when we talk about policing and we talk about the reforms or the complaint processes or individual circumstances that you've come across or heard, these are not representative of the broader interactions that are occurring every day, because if they were, then this problem would not just be something that comes up every once in a while. It would be all day, every day that we would hear about it, and we don't. There are lots of interactions that occur between police and citizens all day. There have probably been a couple of hundred, since I started talking, across this province. They are not all going to result in complaints against the police, and not all those complaints are serious in nature either.

4:40

I just want to remind everybody that police officers are more and more coming from more diverse backgrounds, that the police are trying to evolve. They are trying to work better with communities, as Edmonton-Castle Downs touched on: a number of points where EPS has taken a lot of effort to work with the community, to build that level of trust, which I think is great. I don't think that the changes to the Police Act would inhibit that from carrying forward.

We need to talk more about those examples where police are being successful, because the more we talk about it and the more it gets into mainstream media or social media, I think the more that people are going to respond positively to policing. That interaction will just continue to build off itself. If we always talk about it from the stance of it being negative, then of course, you know, people's perception publicly will be negative.

I think we just need to make sure that we're cognizant of how many officers are out there every day doing the best they can, who would probably do absolutely the best job without the Police Act, frankly. They're just ethical. They're moral people who are trying their best. We do need rules. I'm not saying that we don't need it. We do need to set expectations, but we also need to recognize just how hard they all work.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Bill 6, Police Amendment Act, 2022: are there others wishing to join in the debate?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the minister to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a second time]

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader is rising.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to seek unanimous consent to waive Standing Order 39(1) in order to move immediately to Government Motion 16.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Government Motions

16. Mr. Schow moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly rescind its

approval of the motion moved pursuant to Standing Order 8(8), agreed to on December 5, 2022.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Government Motion 16 is a debatable motion. Does anyone choose to join in that debate?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the hon. the Government House Leader to close debate.

Mr. Schow: Waived.

[Government Motion 16 carried]

Mr. Schow: Mr. Speaker, I now rise to ask for unanimous consent to waive Standing Order 8(2) in order to allow the Assembly to move immediately to consideration of Bill 201, the Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 201

Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is Bill 201, and I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has risen to join in the debate.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak in favour of Bill 201, the Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act, brought forward by the Leader of the Official Opposition. I thank the government members for the opportunity to hold this debate. This is an important bill, and it's not just me that says so. Folks are speaking out who have been involved in the tracking and quality of our health care. Health care professionals who are out on the front lines are speaking out in favour of this act.

Now, interestingly, the Minister of Health did not speak in favour of this act before he moved a motion to delay debate. I'm glad that the government has reversed on that and is giving us the opportunity to actually hold this debate now. But what the minister said was – the minister suggested that this wasn't necessary. Now, what this bill does is that it proposes a set of specific service standards to be set, working with patients, communities, health providers, that the government would be accountable to meet. They'd relate to access to health care services and would be publicly reported. Now, the minister rose and said: "You know what? We don't need that because the government already reports on standards." The fact is that the government reports on some data, and it is not always clear, and it does not always pertain to all of the areas that have greatest concern. What this bill is proposing is a very clear and specific set of standards that provides that public accountability and transparency.

Now, what we have seen repeatedly with this government, Mr. Speaker, is that they are very fond of cherry-picking very specific statistics. We saw that in the MacKinnon report. We saw that again as they talked about the Ernst & Young review of Alberta Health Services. We have heard that repeatedly in minister after minister's talking points about the health care system as they endeavour to try to paint the picture that they need to dismantle our public health care system and force more privatization, more private profit in our public health care system to cure the problem that they claim exists. But the fact is, again, that they are choosing very particular data, and they are handling it themselves.

Indeed, we hear that from the minister when he stands and talks about the number of doctors and nurses in Alberta and doesn't go into the actual things that lie behind that, the fact that he's talking about the numbers of doctors registered, not the numbers of doctors that are actually necessarily practising and billing. Of course, the minister has the information on the number of doctors that are billing in the province of Alberta, and he could certainly choose to make that public and tell us exactly how many family physicians are billing on behalf of Albertans, but he does not do that because it does not serve the government's purpose.

What we have here is an opportunity in this bill to establish, independent of government, some very clear standards on our health care system. I would think that any government that truly believes in transparency and accountability would want to see that. That power would be placed in the hands of the Health Quality Council of Alberta. I think that's a very important opportunity for us, to empower the HQCA to handle that, and they are well equipped to do so.

To be honest, Mr. Speaker, they used to have much more independent power to do so before this government passed Bill 30. Now, Bill 30 was passed by the previous Minister of Health, and that essentially took away the independence of the HQCA. That bill stopped the HQCA from being able to report directly to individual members of the Legislature and forced them to report directly to the Health minister, who will then decide whether or not the information he receives from the HQCA will be allowed to go public.

This was noted by Dr. Trevor Theman, the former chair of the HQCA, himself an accomplished physician here in the province of Alberta, in his recent editorial in support of Bill 201. He notes that for the \$20 billion or so that we spend on health care in Alberta, we have precious little easily accessed reporting on how well our health care system and the entities that comprise it perform, and setting and reporting on standards makes good sense. No one would run a \$20 billion business without measurement and reporting as to how well it meets its goals. Now, again, the Minister of Health is maintaining that he thinks he reports enough to Albertans, that there is no need to provide further data, that the carefully cherry-picked statistics and numbers on the very particular things that they like to talk about should be enough for Albertans.

4:50

What Bill 201 says is: let's work together. Let's work with community, let's work with physicians, let's work with the folks who are involved and who have a stake in this to determine what the regular reporting should be to Albertans, on which standards, and the standards specifically on access to care, Mr. Speaker, because that is the crisis we have in front of us, where Albertans cannot access a family physician. Albertans have trouble accessing an emergency room. They're having a real crisis right now accessing pediatric care, and certainly we are all aware of the challenges Albertans have accessing an ambulance when they need one. So having clear, public reporting on those standards and what the expectations should be and a requirement, then, that when we'd failed to meet it, whatever government that might be, the minister is required to put forward an action plan to address that concern: that is a simple and straightforward thing.

This bill would give the HQCA back some of the independence that was taken away from them by this government to perform that service on behalf of Albertans, providing an independent oversight of the standards and how they need to be addressed. As Dr. Theman says, the HQCA is underused. It is underfunded and burdened by its current reporting relationship to the Minister of Health. Indeed, he speaks about, during his time as chair, how many times they were stymied by the bureaucracy within the office of the Minister of Health, the first Minister of Health under this government, that made it more difficult for them to actually be able to report and do

their work on behalf of Albertans. So I believe this is incredibly important.

Now, the Minister of Health and the Premier have also made claims that putting forward Bill 201 would forbid, would stop the province from being able to make use of chartered surgical facilities. That is patently untrue, Mr. Speaker. What the bill does say is that if a minister puts forward an action plan, that action plan needs to look at investing in the public health care system to address the issue. It does not affect any current funding for a chartered surgical facility. Certainly, we have a number of them that are operating today, and nobody is proposing that we stop making use of them. We recognize that we have real challenges in our public health care system with meeting surgical wait times, and we must use every resource that we have at our disposal.

However, Mr. Speaker, this government has yet to provide any evidence that the kinds of efficiencies that can be realized in a stand-alone surgical facility not attached to a hospital cannot be achieved within the public health care system just as well if not better than by a private provider, who also then has to find a way to make a profit. Multiple folks have stood up and pointed this out. In fact, we have an example of just such a stand-alone surgical facility attached to the Royal Alex hospital here in my constituency. If this government has any evidence that they are unable to provide surgeries as efficiently at that site and as cost-effectively as any of these private chartered surgical facilities that this government is intent on proliferating across the province of Alberta, I would invite them to present it, because that is what we're asking here in Bill 201. Let's just simply put the evidence on the table.

This government has a good deal of ideology around health care, Mr. Speaker. Again, they like to pick and choose their numbers to justify it. What we are seeing right now is the result of a lot of that ideology, unfortunately, with the pressures and the impacts on our health care system, their war on doctors, their war with so many other health care workers. Again, the minister would stand and say, "Well, every jurisdiction is having these problems because of the pandemic, because of other issues," and indeed this government didn't light the fire, but they certainly liberally doused it with fuel.

The fact is that there is nothing in Bill 201 that should be of concern to a government that is indeed dedicated to more transparency and accountability, that indeed in its work to improve our public health care system – they're willing to take such radical changes as firing the entire board of Alberta Health Services, firing the chief medical officer of health, putting it all in the hands of a single administrator. If they truly believed that they are effective in these actions, Mr. Speaker, they should not be afraid to measure it and report on it publicly and clearly.

Bill 201 provides the opportunity precisely for that. It is simple accountability. It is simple clarity at a time when Albertans are desperately looking for action to improve our health care system, not just these sort of short-term, lurching, radical actions that this government is choosing to take out of desperation but actual, thoughtful, long-term reform. We do not achieve that without clear data, without clear standards. That is what Bill 201 is offering here. This is a constructive work. Certainly, I'm going to, as a member of the opposition, take my shots at government. We do that. But this is not part of it.

The Speaker: Are there others? Bill 201. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to address Bill 201 and talk about the very important need to have public health standards in order to ensure that our public services are available. I want to start by thanking the government for their

agreement to return this bill to the House for a debate. I appreciate that you would do that. It certainly is an improvement over the previous situation where a hundred per cent of the private members' bills brought in by the opposition were thwarted outside of the House and weren't even allowed to be brought in, a very, very undemocratic move by this government. I'm glad to see that their shame has brought them to a place of changing this behaviour.

Well, I just wish their shame would help them get to a place of fixing all the other problems. I'm glad to see we also have Bill 4 in the house, which is fixing another one of their problems. If we work long enough, eventually we'll fix all of their problems, but that will all be done, of course, in May of 2023.

I'd like to say that it's important that we establish in this province the ability to review health care as it's provided in this province and to support some very fundamental principles of health care in protecting the services that are available to the people in the province. It is sort of somewhat ironic that in the last bill that we were talking about, the government was arguing that it was important to have a civilian oversight body reviewing the police force, and now when we suggest that it's also true, therefore, in health care, they somehow have a different opinion 30 minutes later. We'll try to point out why this government should at least try to be consistent on a single day within this Legislature.

We in this country have enjoyed some of the best health care in the world. Nobody is saying that there aren't some difficulties, some problems, but that is the function of government, to take some time, to assess, and to figure out what's going right, what's not going right, and how do you fix that?

Instead, this government has mostly created a situation of great turmoil in this province around health care. They have been fighting with doctors and nurses and other health professionals, like respiratory therapists and social workers and so on, on a regular basis in the middle of a pandemic. They have cancelled the doctors' contract. They've gone into wage negotiations with nurses asking for a diminishment of their salaries. They've done the same for groups such as respiratory technicians and other hospital workers. They've been in the paper on a regular basis saying egregiously nasty things about the medical service providers in this province while we're in the middle of a pandemic.

And then they don't follow scientific advice around how to resolve that pandemic. They won't even share with us the advice given to cabinet by the chief medical officer of health, so we can only assume that the reason why is because they were not following medical advice in the decisions they made with regard to the pandemic, which is still with us and is still affecting the citizens of this province greatly. We have significant numbers of people in hospital right now with COVID, and unfortunately now we're also dealing with other diseases that are flus and childhood diseases, that are sort of giving us the triple whammy right now.

Then this government changes their leader, but they don't change their belief system around the public health system. They still go back in to attack it. They remove the public oversight body for the health care system and institute a single person who is running our health care system off the side of his desk because he has other employment, and he's doing so on a voluntary basis. I mean, this is hardly a commitment to public health care in this province. Now, of course, we see that the two deputy chief medical officers are resigning because the situation is chaotic.

5:00

What we have seen consistently from this government is the introduction of chaos into the health care system, and it's time that we go back to the fact that we have enjoyed incredibly good health care in this country because we started with a series of principles

about the health care that we wanted. Those principles under the Canada Health Act are quite well known, and they start off with a principle of universality, a belief that this health care is for all Albertans, not just people with deep pockets, and that you should be able to access that health care regardless of whether you are someone who is wealthy or has a health care plan through your employment, that just simply by being a citizen within this country you have access to that health care.

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

We know that there was a principle also of portability with regard to health care in this province, and that meant that the health care that we have in the province of Alberta is the same or similar, as much as we can possibly make it, to anywhere else in the country so that when we have family members who decide to leave the province of Alberta and move to other provinces, we can be assured that they will be receiving significantly the same level of support in terms of health care. And now this government is, you know, threatening to move it in a different direction away from that so that you actually have to start considering your move to seek employment also based on: well, if I do move to this other province to get a better job or to earn some more money, I might also not get the health care I deserve. This government is threatening the notion of portability in this country.

We know that the third principle of health care that we have established in this country is one of accessibility, and that is that health care must be available where people are and that it can't be impossible for people to get that health care because they happen to live in the north and there's no health care available. We have to then say that as a government we will bring the resources into the north or at the very least ensure that people from the north are given the resources to come south. And that's a very difficult one. We understand that. We know that that can be expensive for both the citizens and for the government. Yet, you know, a government that really cared about health care would be constantly examining that and coming back and saying: how do we ensure that accessibility is there?

We know as well that one of the original principles of health care was comprehensiveness, the fourth one. That principle is that we should have all the things related to your health be covered by this plan. Over time, over the history of Canada, we've come to define the notion of comprehensiveness more broadly than was originally done when the bill came in, in the 1960s, and we understand that there are many aspects to health care that we should be including. We've been supporting that growth here in the province of Alberta, certainly on this side of the House, to look at the comprehensive needs of people in their health, not just simply catastrophic events such as heart attacks and so on but all the things that contribute to that such as drug coverage and so on. I know that the Conservatives have consistently been resistant to that particular principle, but it's one that we should be protecting if we really care about the ultimate health of our citizens.

We know, finally, that the fifth principle of the federal health act was one of public administration; that is, that you should be able to depend on your government to actually establish the entities that are necessary to provide health care in this country. That is, that you can depend on your government to build the hospitals, you can depend on your government to pay the doctors through government mechanisms, and that you should be able to depend on the availability of services such as ambulances to get there. Now, unfortunately we've seen over the last little while . . . [Mr. Feehan's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Other members looking to join in the debate? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill 201, Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act, brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and the Leader of the Official Opposition. I also want to begin by thanking the Government House Leader for agreeing to bring back this important piece of legislation for debate.

I think our system has been under stress for the last three years. The pandemic certainly has been one reason, but, more importantly, the UCP policies have been driving our system into chaos. We can all agree that Albertans must be able to access health care when they need it and where they need it, but on the ground that's not happening. We know that.

They should be able to get an ambulance in a matter of minutes, access an emergency room in a reasonable time frame, and be able to have a family doctor and be able to see that doctor in a reasonable time. But for far too many Albertans that's not happening. In many places in this province emergency rooms are getting shut down. In many parts of this province people are unable to access family doctors. For instance, in Lethbridge half of the Lethbridge population doesn't have access to family doctors. In Bow Valley there are many Albertans who don't have access to family doctors. These are facts.

I was door-knocking and I came across a constituent whose child fell down and there was some bleeding. The parents took that child to emergency. They waited there for 13 hours to see a doctor, and that's before this new surge in respiratory illness cases. That's before this surge. That's the state of our health care system.

Albertans, rightfully so, want their government to make health care a priority. Every Albertan I have talked to, things like cost of living, health care, kids' education: that's top of mind for them, not this government's job-killing Bill 1.

In the last little while we are seeing longer ambulance response times everywhere across this province. In Calgary AHS has to pull ambulances from neighbouring communities. That is the case for Edmonton as well. Albertans expect this government to prioritize addressing that, and we have not seen a plan from this government. Those who are on the front lines asked for three things, but still we didn't hear anything from this government.

5:10

Alberta Health Services released some aggregate data on ambulance response times, and that data shows that the slowest 10 per cent of calls have gone from 12 minutes or more to 17 minutes or more. Albertans call an ambulance when they think their health and well-being is in danger, when they think their loved one's health and well-being is in danger. They deserve a system that responds to their needs, responds to that urgency. The median response time, according to AHS, in urban areas began to miss targets in the first quarter of 2022, but again there is no transparent, accessible data that Albertans can look at in this piece of legislation. We will do exactly that.

This will require this government to create standards and have an arm's-length body, Alberta Health Quality Council, to report on that so that Albertans can see where their health system is at, what needs to be improved. Earlier, when the Premier was asked whether she will be supporting this piece of legislation, the answer was that they're more concerned that this bill messed up their privatization efforts, their private surgical initiative. [interjection] That's what the Premier said.

Health care is not a business. It is not a business. The delivery of health care is not a business. Getting health care should be Albertans' right; it is Canadians' right. No one should be allowed to make money off sick Albertans. It's a responsibility of this government, us as a society that we should provide health care to those who are sick regardless of their ability to pay. The fundamental principle of universal

health care is that when one of us gets sick, all of us come together to care for that person, look after that fellow Albertan.

That's the fundamental principle. There are no business opportunities. There should be no profiteering off sick Albertans. Government should be delivering health care whenever Albertans need it, where they need it. That's what Albertans expect from this government, and I'm sure that Albertans will have a lot more to say about this government's record when it comes to health care when they go into election. They became government, they tore the doctors' contract, put our health care in chaos.

Throughout this pandemic, where governments around the globe were cheering on front-line workers, this government was engaged in bullying health professionals, even on their driveways. That's what this government was doing. Those who work in our health care system doing important services, keeping our hospitals clean, keeping hospital kitchens going the Member for Calgary-Falconridge, I remember, went on a radio station and he said that they are not front-line workers.

Mr. Toor: Who?

Mr. Sabir: That's on the record. The Member for Calgary-Falconridge said that.

Those are important people. Those are the people, together with other professionals, that make our hospital system work.

Mr. Toor: Oh, come on.

Mr. Sabir: They are front-line people. They are front-line people.

This government has shown disrespect for health professionals from day one.

The Acting Speaker: Other members wishing to add to debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Those aren't my words; those are the words of Peter Drucker, who is a business consultant, a business management professional. In other words, if you don't measure, then you don't know how you're doing.

I rise to speak in favour of Bill 201 because it establishes service standards that will be set in working with patients, communities, health care providers, Indigenous communities to ensure that the government is accountable to certain standards. I think that this is very timely, Mr. Speaker. This is not political theatre. This is addressing the fact that we have seen a crisis in health care that's continuing to this day.

Mr. Speaker, you're well aware of this as a rural MLA, the fact that we have a shortage of doctors. There is a shortage of access to doctors. We've had rotating blackouts for ambulances, where they're simply unavailable. We've had certain facilities that have to temporarily close or limit the surgeries or services that they're providing for their community members. Honestly, I'm sure you've heard from many constituents, as have I, that in a province such as Alberta this should not be the case.

I think it's important to provide the government with some tools to be able to address these issues but also to identify where these issues are coming from so that we can provide solutions. Having those metrics available and those specifics will help the government, whoever the government is, to provide targeted relief or additional targeted supports to strengthen our health care system.

You know, Mr. Speaker, when I go and talk to grade 6 classes, I ask them if they know who Tommy Douglas is and the fact that he was voted the greatest Canadian a few years back. In fact, he got more votes than even, you know, folks like Wayne Gretzky, and

I'm a huge fan of Gretzky. He's my favourite hockey player. I ask the students if they know why he was voted the greatest Canadian, and they're always very fascinated to learn that it was Tommy Douglas who introduced public health care, the first public medicare, in the province of Saskatchewan, in Canada's history, which then spread across the country. That's something that is very unique to Canada and very precious. We talk about many other jurisdictions globally where there isn't that universal access to health care, where if you cannot pay, then you cannot get the care you need.

My colleague, the member who was speaking previously, was talking about a public health care system, public delivery of health care. Now, we all recognize that doctors are small businesses, essentially, and incorporated and negotiate with the province for their salaries. But the point I believe my colleague was trying to make is that we should be investing in public health care, not looking at emulating other systems that have gone down the path of privatizing health care, which has inevitably led to higher costs.

5:20

You know, Mr. Speaker, I've got to tell you that I have friends that live in the U.S., and I have a friend who used to be a fan of private health care and who said: "You know what? It should be privatized. It's lower cost. Why am I subsidizing all these other people?" When a family member of his got super sick, actually developed cancer, they ended up having to mortgage their home and went in debt to pay for the care they needed. His tune changed completely, and he has since been a fan of public health care and recognizes what we have here in Canada.

As members in this Chamber know, because I've said it inside and outside of the Chamber, can AHS be improved? Yes. Absolutely. The answer is that it can be improved. We need to do better. We need to do better enhancing the care that Albertans are getting. We also need to get better value for the money that we're investing in our health care system. A hundred per cent. I don't disagree with that, Mr. Speaker. I think part of what we've discovered in this Chamber is that the two different parties have two different approaches to it. But my hope is that the members from the government can recognize the importance of a bill, this bill, 201, and how measuring and having those specifics can help us to drive outcomes that will benefit everyone.

Now, I just want to clarify a point the Premier made today in question period, where she talked about a new chartered facility that's going to be doing surgeries to help with the backlog. Her comment was that this bill would essentially shut that facility down. The answer is that, no, it wouldn't, Mr. Speaker. I've been chatting with folks to try and find out, "Is that true?" and the answer is: no, it wouldn't. It would require that new dollars, future dollars, be invested in our public health care system.

I know that the majority of my constituents and the majority of Albertans that I've talked to are proud of our public health care system, publicly funded, publicly delivered. We want to see that continue, but we also want to see it improved. You know, it's interesting that when we talk about ER wait times, there is some data that AHS releases, but it's interesting to me that they can't go backwards to look at previous wait times in previous years. So there need to be mechanisms for us to be able to enhance the system. Again, Peter Drucker's line: if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. If we don't know what's causing these wait times, then we don't know how to improve them. I appreciate the idea that, yes, we need to fund our health care system, but we also need to fund it to deliver those outcomes that Albertans rely on.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, we continue to hear horror stories about the state the system is currently in. I appreciate, you know, that the Premier will say, "Well, that's why I got rid of the board

and brought in the administrator" and that they're making changes. I mean, the reality is that we need to make some changes, but this bill will hold the government accountable because these standards will be public.

I think that in an era of transparency, where our citizens, Albertans, want to see processes, want to see clear lines, this will provide that. This will give Albertans a perspective and a view into our health care system that they haven't had previously. Again, if the standards aren't met, then the government has to come up with a plan on how to meet those standards. I mean, that just sounds like good planning to me as far as, if we see that there's a deficit, we address these issues, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Nally: Never in four years did you do it.

Mr. Bilous: I always find it fascinating that when good points are being deliberated, members of the government have to scream – whatever – insults over to this side or "why didn't you do that?"

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that there are a number of things that we did address, and I can tell you that there are a number of things that we will fix when we form government next spring. The member on that side can be patient for that to happen. This will be addressed. Here is an example . . . [interjection] Am I allowed to give way on a motion? I don't think I am.

The Acting Speaker: No interventions, hon. member.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, I know my time is limited on this, but this is an example of a reasonable bill that I encourage members to support.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this afternoon to speak to Bill 201, Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act, that was introduced by the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition. I'm proud that this piece of legislation has come forward. We've been listening to Albertans, and we know that health care – public health care, good, reliable public health care – is top of mind for Albertans.

We watched this government bring in their Bill 1, which did not address anything that Albertans are worried about right now. They're not worried about anything that was related to that bill. The fact that we are here this afternoon being able to debate this is very much appreciated, and I thank the Government House Leader for bringing this back so that we could debate this piece of legislation this afternoon.

I and my colleagues in the Alberta NDP firmly believe that Albertans must be able to access public health care, full stop. We know that Albertans are in a place right now where many do not have a family doctor. Many, if they need a doctor, are turning to emergency rooms because they don't have access. In the worst case scenario, if you need to be seen by a doctor in an emergency scenario, we've watched numbers and times increase across the province for wait times for an ambulance. We have an expectation that when you call for an ambulance in an emergent situation, one shows up in a timely manner, in minutes, not hours, Mr. Speaker.

What this piece of legislation would do is that it would ensure that expectations are set up in collaboration with patients, with health care professionals, to make sure that the expectations that Albertans have for their health care system are being met. It would then turn around and make sure that the government is required to act to ensure that these services are being met. I don't think that it's too much to ask that patients and health care professionals have input into what the

health standard expectations are, and then to have the government be accountable for that is a reasonable expectation.

We've been hearing heartbreaking stories all across the province of families waiting 15 hours for access to the emergency room at children's hospitals, trailers being set up so that families can wait inside before they see a medical professional. Just today, Mr. Speaker, in question period we heard the Premier say that wait times are fixed, that EMS response times are fixed. That is simply not true.

I had a very dear friend reach out to me yesterday with an absolutely heartbreaking – heartbreaking – story. Their sibling has been struggling with mental health and addiction and been homeless for years. It's a frequent rotation of living on the streets, living rough, being assaulted, overdosing, interactions with police, interactions with health care professionals, to being turned around back on the streets. This cycle has been going on for this family for years.

5:30

Unfortunately, the situation has gotten incredibly worse. November 22 was the last point of contact that my friend's family had with their sibling, and they decided to reach out to the Edmonton police to file a missing persons report. They had been in contact with all of the hospitals, they'd been in contact with numerous organizations that work with those that are living rough, those that come in contact with people that are using, and those that struggle with mental health. The list of people that she's attempted to reach out to is endless. There were numerous individuals within the policing system that had contact with them, and the police were incredibly informative and helpful and supportive to my friend. However, they weren't able to find him.

Yesterday morning my friend was on her way to work and received a phone call that EPS had located him. They didn't know what the options were. He clearly needed medical help, but the officer told my friend: "We could call an ambulance; we have no idea how long it's going to take for an ambulance to respond. Your brother needs medical attention. What would you like us to do?" She clearly dropped everything and went to him and was so grateful that the police had called her. She's not a medical professional, Mr. Speaker. The police left it up to her as to whether or not to call EMS or to have them respond.

When they responded and met up with her sibling and the police, the police said that their previous call had been a stabbing. The person was actively bleeding out, and it took over one hour for EMS to respond. This happened yesterday morning. Today when our Premier stands in this Chamber and says, "It's fixed; it's good," that is absolutely not acceptable. When Albertans call police and when they call an ambulance, they expect help. I can't imagine what it would be like for that officer to be waiting and have no response. One hour for a stabbing victim.

My friend picked up her brother and went online, looked at the emergency room wait times. The police had suggested that – they're reported – these are the options in and around Edmonton; you can go there. They got there at 5:35 yesterday afternoon. At 10:40 p.m. he saw a nurse. That's six hours of waiting in the waiting room before a nurse was able to come and see him. At 10:53 a nurse came in and said: a doctor should be with you at any moment. Now, this human being was sick, going through withdrawals, had been severely beaten up, in pain, in agony, and still that was the wait time. It wasn't until 3 a.m. that a doctor came in to see him. So when we have a Premier that's saying, "Wait times are good; EMS response times are good," I don't know where that information is coming from, but it is not coming from Albertans that are sitting in waiting rooms, sitting at home waiting for EMS to respond.

When you talk to the nurses and the doctors that are in these ERs and the paramedics that are responding, they are pleading for support. They are pleading for resources. People are burning out.

Bill 201 is exactly the piece of legislation that's needed. We need to really critically look at what's happening in health care, listen to those patients and their stories, listen to the health care professionals that are providing these services. People get involved in this field because they care and want to make a difference. Mr. Speaker, it's absolutely heartbreaking to hear health care professionals breaking down, desperate for support, feeling that there's been an attack from this government on them while they're trying to simply take care of people. There aren't enough resources available, and this government hasn't provided any... [Ms Goehring's speaking time expired]

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to join the debate on Bill 201, Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act. I mean, certainly, this is a very important bill, especially right now, currently, in Alberta. It is something that could improve our health care system significantly. We are in crisis, as we see every day on the news where there are long lineups to get into the emergencies, EMS, access to ambulances takes a long time. I and my colleagues have spoken about this.

I really encourage all of my colleagues here in the Assembly to seriously consider supporting this bill. It really lays out three purposes, and I'll just go through them. It ensures Albertans have reliable and timely access to public health care, it has standards that are established by independent experts, and, thirdly, it ensures Albertans' lives and quality of life are not put at risk due to lack of transparency regarding health data. These are three fundamental aspects of this bill, and it is very important that we, I think, pass this legislation, because it can make a huge difference for Albertans.

We have had certainly a lot of support in the community regarding this. One of the leading experts – he's a former CEO of the physicians and surgeons and a former chair of the Health Quality Council of Alberta, Dr. Trevor Theman. He is obviously very aware of what's happening in our health system, has worked in that system for a very long time, has been a leader in that system, and he has spoken out in support of Bill 201 very much, saying this is exactly what Albertans need to ensure that we have a health system that is working.

Right now it's not working, and we can see that so, so, so clearly. Frankly, there are many things that the UCP are doing to make it not work. I know that one of the things that was in the Health minister's mandate letter was just about the fundamental importance of primary care. This is what the UCP was talking about, but then on the other hand just recently, actually before the mandate letters were put out, they changed policies to erode the relationship between the patient and the primary care provider. What I'm talking about specifically is the opioid transition program. This is a program where safe pharmaceutical alternatives are prescribed by your primary care provider. The UCP now say that, no, they have to go to an Alberta Health Services clinic. So they're eroding that. There are so many things the UCP are doing to hurt our health system right now, despite what they're saying on the one hand supporting.

I speak in support of 201, and with that I'll conclude my remarks.

The Acting Speaker: Other members wishing to debate second reading of Bill 201, the Public Health Care Delivery Standards Act?

Seeing none, I'd like to call on the Leader of the Official Opposition to close debate.

5:40

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise in order to close debate on this important bill. You know, we've been

talking to Albertans on their doorsteps, in their communities for years now and particularly in the last 12 to 18 months. Before then, too, but in the last 12 to 18 months in particular folks have been raising their very, very deeply held concerns about the deteriorating state of our health care system across this province, whether it was emergency rooms and operating rooms starting to shut down, at first in rural communities across the province, followed ultimately by major cessations of service in huge urban communities, whether it was the fact that we were hearing increasingly concerning reports about delays with respect to ambulance times and their arrival time, or whether it was about the fact that an increasingly large number of Albertans simply cannot find a family doctor and cannot secure primary health care, which, of course, we know means that there is a cascade effect on those previous two things that I talked about, not to mention, of course, the ongoing wait times with respect to surgery.

All of these things have engendered a growing level of uncertainty and worry on the part of Albertans. Whether they're worrying about their own health or whether they're worried about the health of their children or whether they're worried about the health of their parents or friends and loved ones, they are wondering whether they can actually count on our health care system to be there for them when they need it.

In order to fix this, then, you know, we've been attempting to have a wide-ranging debate in this House. Now, we haven't been able to have a wide-ranging debate, but we have been able to spend the last 45 minutes or so talking about the solutions proposed in this bill. The reason this bill is important is because what it does is that it sets out clear standards and it sets out, then, an obligation to report on those standards, and it sets out an obligation to report on what kind of actions will or will not be done to meet those standards if they are not being met.

This is so important, because it is very frustrating for Albertans to be in a position where they feel like their government is sort of gaslighting them, telling them: no, no, there's not a problem here; oh, no, that closure over there is normal; oh, no, there's not a shortage of health care workers; oh, no, the doctors are fine with their contract being ripped up; oh, no, it's totally reasonable to wait 45 minutes for an ambulance. Like, those kinds of answers frustrate people.

The fact of the matter is that the simple act of transparency breeds accountability. What's really good is that the bill actually compels accountability, and beyond that the bill compels resources to be dedicated to meeting those standards. It's time that we start, all of us, no matter who's in government, holding ourselves accountable to fixing our public health care system and doing better.

You know, firing the AHS board of directors, putting someone in there as a temporary head who's been in there before for short periods of time in very temporary roles, and then saying, "Oh, he's been there three weeks, and he tells us, now that he's been there, that actually everything is working well": well, that's just so frustrating, and in fact it worries Albertans because it sounds like they're really not holding themselves accountable or taking real action or preparing to open up the doors to Albertans so that they

can see what's happening and what's not happening and keep the government accountable.

We know that this government, outside of COVID funding, has essentially taken well over a billion dollars out of our health care system at a time when it's facing more pressure than it ever, ever has before, so it's not surprising that there are systemic problems. The fact that there's been such a hostile relationship with front-line health care providers of every type: it's not surprising that there are difficulties with respect to delivering health care. The fact that COVID was the most poorly managed in Alberta relative to the rest of the country: it's not surprising that we're experiencing systemic problems in our health care system.

For those reasons, all of us have an obligation to be open with Albertans about what the problems are and what we're going to do to fix them, and that's what passing this bill would do. Because it is the most important issue for Albertans, that's what folks should agree to vote in favour of.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:45 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Reid in the chair]

For the motion:

Bilous	Irwin	Sabir
Feehan	Nielsen	Sigurdson, L.
Goehring	Notley	Sweet
Gray		

6:00

Against the motion:

Aheer	Madu	Schulz
Fir	McIver	Singh
Getson	Milliken	Smith, Mark
Glubish	Nally	Stephan
Hanson	Neudorf	Toews
Horner	Nicolaides	Toor
Hunter	Nixon, Jeremy	Turton
Issik	Panda	van Dijken
Jean	Pitt	Williams
Long	Rutherford	Yao
Lovely	Schow	

Totals:	For – 10	Against – 32
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[Motion for second reading of Bill 201 lost]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the time is now 6 o'clock. The House stands adjourned until 7:30 tonight.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:02 p.m.]

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