Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, April 10, 2024

Day 36

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session

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van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
Brar, Gurinder, Calgary-North East (NDP)
Calahoo Stonehouse, Jodi, Edmonton-Rutherford (NDP)
Ceci, Hon. Joe, ECA, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)
Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP)
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Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC), Deputy Government Whip
Yaseen, Hon. Muhammad, ECA, Calgary-North (UC)

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Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 10, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our King and to 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 interests and prejudices, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all. Amen.

Please be seated.

Statement by the Speaker

John Allen Fraser

The Speaker: Hon. members, I wish to acknowledge the passing of a former Speaker of the House of Commons, John Allen Fraser, who passed away on April 7 at the age of 92. Speaker Fraser was elected to Parliament in 1972 for the constituency of Vancouver South, and he served as the minister of the environment in 1979 and the minister of fisheries and oceans from 1984 to 1985.

In 1986, following the resignation of Speaker John Bosley, Mr. Fraser was elected Speaker. His election was the first time in the House of Commons that they had conducted the Speaker election by secret ballot. The 1986 Speaker election was a hotly contested event, and Mr. Fraser was elected Speaker on the 11th ballot. His Speakership is noted for establishing the Commons public information office and expanding opportunities for disabled Canadians working on Parliament Hill. Mr. Fraser went on to serve as Speaker of the House of Commons until his retirement in 1993.

All Speakers across Canada owe Speaker Fraser a debt of gratitude, and to him we say thanks.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, joining us in the Speaker's gallery today is someone that many of you may recognize. I feel like perhaps I should be singing his introduction, as he had a tendency to sing from his chair. He is the former Member for Lesser Slave Lake, Mr. Pat Rehn.

Mr. Sinclair: Yeah.

The Speaker: He is in Edmonton today, visiting former colleagues as well as the minister of transportation and apparently the Member for Lesser Slave Lake as well.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health has a school group to introduce.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to introduce to you and through you the wonderful students and teachers from Gateway Christian in Red Deer. I want them to stand up and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader has an introduction.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are in the presence of champions and true greatness. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas, U Sports national champions for volleyball, four by 400 metre relay, curling, wrestling, and the Canadian university championship winning team for tennis. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to all members of this Assembly I'd like to introduce two constituents from Calgary-Shaw, Ray and Lois Strom. They are dedicated volunteers standing up to meet community needs. They are ardent supporters of choice in education and our energy industry. Ray is also the director of policy for the United Conservative Party. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you my guests from Bhartiya Cultural Society and the Council of India Societies of Edmonton, the Sarb Akal Music Society and the Guru Ravidass Society of Calgary. I ask them to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Kuldeep Kalia. Kuldeep is an account specialist at Rogers Communications and the vice-president of the UCP Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood constituency board. I would like him to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my dear friends from Chestermere – Kiran, Aman, Jyoti, Narinder, Rajpal, Avneet, Tia – and their friends from Edmonton, Manvir and Ramneet. Please all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Lunty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you a couple of constituents from Beaumont: community leaders and business owners Al and Karan Luthra. I ask that you stand and receive the warm welcome from the House.

Members' Statements

Rural Medical Education

Mr. Long: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to address a critical issue facing our rural communities across Canada: access to primary care. As a result of this, Albertans in rural communities often have no option but to drive long distances to receive the care they need. Last week Alberta's government announced targeted funding to solve this problem. I'm proud to share that we are investing almost $225 million through Budget 2024 to establish two rural medical education program training centres and see more physicians trained in rural Alberta. Through this initiative the University of Calgary will partner with the University of Lethbridge to develop the new training centre in Lethbridge. The University of Alberta will partner

with Northwestern Polytechnic to develop the new training centre in Grande Prairie.

These centres will serve as hubs of medical education excellence, fostering hands-on learning experiences in the heart of rural communities. By training alongside other health care professionals, students will gain invaluable experience while serving the medical needs of rural patients. The impact of these training centres cannot be overstated. Together they will contribute over 100 practising physicians annually, further addressing access to health care in rural Alberta. Additionally, these centres will provide primary care services, each attending to approximately 1,200 patients, helping to reduce congestion in local emergency departments.

This investment, Mr. Speaker, represents a commitment to the health and well-being of all Albertans. It builds upon our government's ongoing efforts to expand medical education pathways and improve access to health care in rural and remote communities. Our government is proud to represent every rural community in our province. The concerns of rural Albertans are the concerns of our neighbours, friends, and families. Through collaborative partnerships and strategic investments we are laying the foundation for a stronger, more resilient health care system that serves their needs and improves outcomes for all Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Support for Family Physicians

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, meet the new boss; same as the old boss. For family doctors in Alberta the new Minister of Health is starting to sound a lot like the old: combative, condescending, and completely out of touch. We all remember the heady days of 2020 when the UCP were bent on gutting Alberta's prized system of primary care, destroying the work done over a decade to give Albertans a medical home and replace them instead with corporatized clinics. Minister Shandro led that attack, calling doctors entitled and overpaid, accusing them of engaging in fraud. His excuse for bullying: Alberta doctors are the best paid in Canada. On the eve of a pandemic he tore up their contract, forced through cuts, and decimated Albertans' access to care as their family doctors were forced to close clinics and lay off staff. He targeted the Alberta Medical Association, stripping programs and trying to pit doctors against each other. He had to be replaced. It took two years for the next minister to even begin to repair the damage.

Well, fast-forward to 2023, when the new Minister of Health promised an era of collaboration as she embarked on a province-wide listening tour, but less than a year after the election her talk of sunny ways and better days are clouding over. Family doctors are still desperate for real action and actual help. As the minister finally starts to drip out a trickle of funds, she's picking winners and losers, leaving out many doctors doing the hardest work while rewarding high turnover walk-in care, and if you dare to question her, well, her rhetoric starts sounding awfully familiar: "It's the AMA's fault. They should have negotiated better with a government known for tearing up contracts. You should be grateful that I'm even offering help at all."

Well, the mask is off, and the minister is making it clear that, for all her posing and posturing, she's not here to support better care for Albertans and the people who make it possible; she's here to push the Premier's agenda of cuts, chaos, and top-down control. Well, as the new Health boss demonstrates that she's the same as the old Health boss, doctors and the Albertans they serve have a message this government would be wise to listen to: they won't be fooled again.

1:40

Federal Carbon Tax

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, last week the federal NDP-Liberal chaos coalition implemented a 23 per cent increase in the carbon tax against the wishes of the majority of Canadians, disregarding the affordability and economic challenges already faced by Albertans. Let us be clear: carbon taxes increase prices. The sole purpose of a carbon tax is to increase the price of goods and services that emit CO_2 when consumed or in their production value chain; in essence, everything.

In theory, these higher prices will reduce demand or incentivize the substitution to other lower emitting alternatives. The problem is that the theoretical promises are different than the practical outcomes. In the real world most substitutes, assuming they exist without technological developments, are inevitably more expensive or inadequate. The frequent result: higher prices and no corresponding reductions in CO_2.

Important conditions for the carbon tax theory is that it must be implemented as an exclusive, stand-alone policy without additional measures like production caps or regulatory restrictions and without exceptions or favouritism. The federal government policy fails on all counts. Its decision to grant exceptions for fuel oil heating or provide special exemptions for Quebec undermines the equitable application of the tax, eroding public trust in the fairness of this policy.

The unconstitutional No More Pipelines Act and a myriad of other intrusive federal policies reveal more about a radical ideological hostility to economic development, including Alberta's oil and gas industry, than a sincere effort to reduce global CO_2 emissions. The world's fastest growing and largest CO_2 emitters and other major oil and gas supporting nations have not adopted a carbon tax. Our competitors are free riders, and the carbon tax only places Canadian industries at a significant competitive disadvantage and hinders economic growth.

Home-care Services

Ms Sigurdson: Home-care services are essential to Albertans. They enable those with disabilities or issues relating to aging to remain in their communities. Far and away, Albertans prefer to age in their communities, close to their family and friends. Not only do Albertans benefit from aging in their communities; our society benefits as well. Currently we do not have enough beds in continuing care facilities for the demand, and we know that this demand is expected to grow to 80 per cent by 2032. It costs more to support Albertans in the continuing care system than supporting them to age in communities. Thus, funding home-care services makes sense so Albertans live in their communities, which is what they want to do and decreases the cost for government.

Tragically, there are significant challenges for Albertans who need home care. Inadequate hours of allocation is a key issue. Recently I met with Daniel Ennett, a four-limb amputee and an emerging filmmaker. He is only allocated 6.6 hours daily, which is insufficient for him to live in a dignified manner. Daniel's mom has filled in the gaps, but her health has deteriorated as she ages and thus has limitations on the care she can provide for her son. Due to Daniel's care demands that home care does not provide, Daniel's mom has had to restrict her employment, forcing her to take lower wage, part-time work. The consequence is poverty.

Other challenges in our home-care system are the administrative burden and the out-of-pocket expenses families experience. Sadly, these challenges make it impossible for some families to access home care. They must institutionalize their loved ones even though they do not wish to do so. Home-care challenges demonstrate that universal access to home care is not available. Only Albertans that invest personal resources are able to use home care. Due to the inadequate allocation of

hours many families don't have the resources to home care. It's time for the UCP to properly fund home care so Albertans can age in their communities.

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

Vaisakhi and Eid al-Fitr

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to express my heartfelt greetings to all Albertans celebrating Vaisakhi. This special event marks the beginning of the spring harvest season as well as commemorates the proclamation of equality for all by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It is a wonderful celebration and gathering, with dances, parades, and special processions on the streets, called nagar kirtan. During this event children and youth perform their skills in martial arts with matching traditional musical bands, which adds more vibrancy to the event. It is a chance to socialize and connect with anyone who joins the celebration. Sikh and Hindu communities in Bharat, India, Fiji, and in different countries and jurisdictions hold Vaisakhi celebrations, including here in Alberta and Calgary with an annual nagar kirtan.

May the celebration of Vaisakhi bring you and your family happiness and good fortune. Happy Vaisakhi.

Today, as well, Mr. Speaker, the Muslim community is celebrating a significant event called Eid al-Fitr, which marks the conclusion of Ramadan and a festival to break the fast. It is a time of rejoicing with family and friends with special food prepared. Muslim communities around the world celebrate this significant event. Recently I had a chance to join the Abu Bakr Islamic Centre, located in Calgary-East, during one of their prayers, and I was so delighted to see and meet the friends and members of the community.

To the Muslim community in Alberta: happy Eid al-Fitr. Eid Mubarak. I encourage all Albertans to reflect on the many contributions that Canadian Muslims have made to our province and extend best wishes for a peaceful Eid al-Fitr.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Eid al-Fitr

Ms Hayter: Salaam. I feel so grateful and honoured to stand here today to greet the Assembly and Muslims around the world by saying Eid Mubarak, which is Arabic for Blessed Eid. Today is a celebration as it marks the end of a month of fasting from dawn to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.

Calgary-Edgemont is a constituency that is culturally rich, and I appreciate the opportunity to represent three mosques in my riding as well as many constituents who are celebrating Eid. As the month of fasting ends, I imagine the sweet dishes and foods that are being consumed while the communities of Al-Salam Centre, northwest Islamic centre, and the Al Makkah Calgary Islamic centre gather. Ramadan is such a sacred time of reflection and renewal, and to be able to gather as a community and share in that together is so meaningful.

This past month has been much more than fasting and praying. It's about growth, community, generosity, and gratitude. I believe that regardless of your religion or your cultural background Ramadan has an important message for all of us, a message of compassion and empathy that should resonate in times like these. However, for some 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza this Eid this will be the first Muslim religious holiday after the devastating loss of more than 33,000 family, friends, and community members. With little food aid and very limited water Gaza's Eid al-Fitr will be mired in destruction amid the catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

The world is hurting, and this pain is being felt especially by the Muslim communities across the globe. We need to be kind to one another, we need to remember those in need, and we need to offer our help and our solidarity. We also need each other. So with utmost sincerity I wish all Muslims and their loved ones spiritual growth, compassion, gratitude, and generosity, and may the peace and the enrichment that comes from all of you this month . . . [Ms Hayter's speaking time expired] Sorry. Eid Mubarak.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier and the President of Executive Council.

Bill 18
Provincial Priorities Act

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act.

This legislation closes a loophole to ensure that federal tax dollars are spent in partnership with provincial tax dollars on actual provincial priorities. Mr. Speaker, this legislation will ensure that the federal government respects section 92 of the Constitution, which states that municipalities fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the province. Through this legislation cities and other provincially funded and regulated entities must have provincial government approval to receive federal funding. Albertans are entitled to their fair share of federal tax dollars and to have those dollars spent on Albertans' priorities. We will ensure that happens.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I hereby move first reading of Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a first time]

1:50 Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition has question 1.

Federal-municipal Agreements

Ms Notley: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, every now and then just about every Albertan likes a good old-fashioned fight with Ottawa. But these days the Premier has become so lost in her own rhetoric that she's declaring war against federal dollars being spent here in Alberta. That's right. The federal government wants to give money to municipalities, but the Premier is saying no way. To the Premier: this is money that is collected in taxes from Albertans that is supposed to be spent here, so why does she think she needs to protect Albertans from their own tax dollars? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I feel that question could have been asked by their federal leader, Jagmeet Singh, because it's pretty obvious why it is. We want to make sure that Alberta municipalities get their fair share of tax dollars because we haven't seen that. We had an announcement by the Prime Minister to give $175 million to Edmonton council – great for Edmonton – but then the very next day he went and announced $2 billion in British Columbia. The only other municipalities that have been able to get their fair share of funding is the city of Calgary and six rural municipalities. That's just not fair. We're going to make sure we get our fair share.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, there is nothing about the Premier's strategy that will achieve what she's claiming it will.

Now, meanwhile she's likened this investment in our communities to a punch in the nose, and she says, and I'll quote: I'm just going to punch back and keep on punching back. At the same time she's refused to consult with municipalities as she's downloading costs on them. To the Premier: how about this government stops punching municipalities, taking their lunch money, making them do their homework, and instead gets out there and gets every penny they can from Ottawa for Albertans? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Smith: That is the kind of defeatist attitude on the part of the members of the opposition, which is why they are not sitting on this side, they're sitting on that side. What this bill will do is that rather than lay down and just accept instruction from their federal leader, as the NDP does, we are going to stand up and push back against the Liberal-NDP coalition and make sure that we get our fair share of funding. It's worked for British Columbia. It has worked for Quebec. If we aren't as defeatist as they want us to be, then it will work for Alberta, too. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Notley: After five years, Mr. Speaker, these guys have nothing to show for these ongoing little political temper tantrums. Nothing.

Meanwhile the president of Alberta Municipalities says that the Premier's legislation is, quote, going to hurt our communities more than it's going to benefit anybody. To the Premier. There's only one taxpayer, and without this federal funding municipal taxes will inevitably have to go up. Why is she making Albertans pay the price for her failed partisan, political, petulant temper tantrum?

Ms Smith: Well, let me maybe educate the members opposite about how co-operative federalism is supposed to work because that's what happened when we signed our 10-year deal with the federal government. All of the provinces got together . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Smith: . . . and we agreed as a strategy that we wouldn't sell one off against the other. We would all make sure to ask for an equal per capita share. When we signed our agreement, we had a clause in there that if anyone was able to get an additional sweetener, it would apply to all of us. That's what co-operative federalism looks like. That's the way that you achieve results, and that's what we're going to do on behalf of our municipalities. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

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

Education Funding

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the last five years under the UCP have been the worst and the most damaging to the education of Alberta's children in decades. Thanks to the UCP's cruel cuts, Alberta's children receive the lowest per capita funding in the country. The latest casualty of the UCP's cruelty are the 40 children who were hoping to be part of the LEAD program in Calgary Catholic starting in September. To the Premier: how does she sleep at night . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. It's reasonable for me to be able to hear the Leader of the Official Opposition's question, and I would expect to be able to do so.

Ms Notley: The latest casualty of the UCP's cuts are the 40 children who were counting on the LEAD program in Calgary Catholic. To the Premier: how does she sleep at night knowing that more and more of Alberta's children are falling through the cracks under her watch?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I sleep at night by looking at the NDP Education operating budget in 2018-19, which was $8.3 billion, and our Education operating budget this year, which is $9.3 billion. Look at the math on that. It's a billion dollars higher. I also look at the fact that we've got 98 different schools that are in various stages of construction, so we are going to be keeping up with growth in our communities. We, in fact, have an all-time high in Education funding. It was a 4.4 per cent increase over last year, $393 million. Look, we are going to keep on growing, and we're going to keep on spending money on education. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Notley: The lowest per capita funding in the country now. Not under us; now.

The LEAD program offers a range of supports for students with learning disabilities, including small class sizes, educational assistants, and a family support worker. The skills they develop in that program give them independence. It gives them a chance to succeed, not only as kids but as adults as well. To the Premier: why doesn't she think these young Albertans are worthy of the investment that they would get in the rest of the country?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Look, we believe in local control and local decision-making by local school boards. To address enrolment growth over the next three years, we're providing more than $1.2 billion. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. On this occasion I heard the question. It's reasonable for me to be able to hear the answer.

Ms Smith: We are providing . . .

Member Ceci: Is that what this is about?

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. If the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo wants to ask a question, I encourage him to rise to his feet and do so. Until then the Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're providing more than $1.2 billion to hire additional teachers and classroom support staff. The funding is expected to support the hiring of an additional 3,100 teachers, EAs, and other educational staff. We've also committed $1.5 billion to support specialized learning needs for students that require additional support for complex needs, including classroom complexity and PUF funding. Of course, we'll always be prepared to do more.

Ms Notley: And all that leads to the lowest per capita funding in the country.

The UCP has been on this heartbreaking and cruel path for five years now. They cut PUF, a lifeline for kids with specialized learning needs, by over a third; they cut regional service delivery, which offered physio, speech, and occupational therapy; and across the board funding for English language learning has been frozen even as demand skyrockets. In short, they have targeted

Alberta's most vulnerable children. To the Premier: what kind of government does that?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The NDP program was to chase people out of the province; 13 consecutive quarters of people leaving. We had to bring in a funding formula, they may recall, that prevented school boards from losing funding because of declining enrolment because their policies meant that people were leaving this province. Now that we have, fortunately, more people wanting to move to Alberta, we've got more tax dollars coming in. We've got more people coming in. We've got more families coming in, which is why we have to make sure that we have the highest per capita funding that we have. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, the Official Opposition deputy House leader.

Wildfire Season Preparation

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildfire season is here, and Albertans are living it. Just yesterday we've already seen evacuations and new alerts to prepare for fire. We know that with drought and dry conditions Alberta is set for another record-setting season of wildfires. Alberta agriculture producers, fire chiefs, rural municipalities, Indigenous communities, and Albertans alike are all worried about the coming months and what it will look like, so why is it that the Premier has chosen to ignore the impending threat of wildfires instead of taking proactive steps and preparing communities for the devastation?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry, but that's just totally incorrect, that we're not prepared for this season. We've done more for this season, preparing our communities, preparing our wildfire people. We're in the process now of training wildfire fighters at our Hinton Training Centre. We'll have more boots on the ground this year with over a hundred more firefighters on the ground, we'll have more air tankers to fight wildfire, and as we go into this season, we're working with our communities to make sure that they have fireguards in place. They are working with FRIAA right now, developing fireguards as we go forward to protect our communities.

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

2:00

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta wildland firefighters do amazing work, but only half of Alberta wildland firefighters returned for this season. We need to ensure that our best wildland firefighter staff are retained and properly equipped and trained. Last year over 2,000 firefighters had to come from across the world to help Alberta, and we had to rely on military support. Again to the Premier: what conversations has she had with other provinces, international partners to ensure that we have the support we need to help rural communities and ensure that they're safe?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. We have agreements with different organizations around the world to bring in firefighters as we need them. Every jurisdiction in the world that fights fire like we do brings in recruitments from other parts of the world when needed. Our firefighters that we have here: a lot of them are university students, and those university students go back to school, of course, in the fall and come back to work for us in the spring. We've had record recruitment this year. The people of Alberta know and are concerned about wildfire in Alberta, and we know we have a record number of people that want to come help fight fire in Alberta. This member shouldn't be discrediting that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Record-setting wildfires are inevitable this year. However, there are countless science-based, proactive measures the government could have been taking over the winter season. They could have, but they didn't. Thirty-eight thousand Albertans were evacuated last year. They lived through the trauma of leaving their homes, their belongings under clouds of ash over crowded highways. This is not normal, and this is not okay. Why has the Premier abandoned the rural communities, and why are they not protecting them over the winter seasons? Fires have already started, and this government has done nothing.

Mr. Loewen: Mr. Speaker, that's not true at all. Our wildfire firefighters have been preparing all winter. We've been actually fighting fire all winter because the fires have been continuing on. This is the most prepared the firefighters have been. We've hired more. We've prepared more with the budget. We'll be having extended contracts for our firetack crews. We'll have additional air tankers. We'll have two additional night-vision helicopters. We have increased training. We have increased incident management teams. We're going to have our firefighters prepared for April 15, which is two weeks earlier than last year. We are prepared. We're not playing politics; we're playing with safety here. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Health System Reform

Ms Wright: Mr. Speaker, a lack of front-line staff in about one-third of Alberta's health care facilities has meant Albertans haven't had access to the health care they need. Nurses, doctors, and other health care workers are burned out because they've laid it all on the line to care for Albertans. But what does the UCP do? They unilaterally shred doctors' contracts and tell nurses to go work in other provinces, and to make matters worse, the UCP is dismantling Alberta Health Services without the input of front-line workers. Will the Premier admit leaving front-line workers out of the conversation does nothing but add stress to already stressful jobs?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing in what was just said was accurate. In fact, we are seeing more doctors coming to the province; we are seeing more nurses coming to the province. We've had over 330 doctors come to the province, of which over 170 were family physicians. We've had over 4,700 nurses employed, up and above the numbers that we currently have. We are on the right path to making sure that we can retain the great physicians and health care workers that we have but also add to them as well.

Ms Wright: Mr. Speaker, I think it's clear that the more this government does to make health care jobs stressful, the more likely we are to lose front-line workers to competing provinces. The UCP claimed they collaborate with front-line workers while dismantling AHS, but their newest action was done without the input and

engagement of Alberta's health care unions. Will the Premier admit that the UCP's mishandling of health care is hurting Alberta's ability to recruit and retain the health care workers we need and that it will lead to even longer wait times for patients?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, the announcement that we were going to be moving forward with moving on from AHS to break into refocusing to these important bodies like recovery Alberta was made before Christmas, and importantly we left a three-month consultation window. I'm very happy to work with front-line health professionals and their respective unions to make sure we work collaboratively to get this right. On a daily basis I'm talking to front-line workers in mental health and addiction, hearing their concerns, their valuable input on the path forward, and these three months before July 1 to make sure we get this transition phase right, with a partnership with the unions and those front-line workers.

Ms Wright: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has not tabled a single shred of evidence that the chaotic restructuring will lead to a better health care system. Earlier this week the United Nurses of Alberta filed a bad-faith bargaining complaint against AHS because this government can't seem to ever look out for the best interests of front-line health care workers. Will the Premier stand and apologize to Alberta's front-line health care workers for the chaotic dismantling of public health care, and will she commit to stabilizing the system so Albertans get the health care they deserve?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I am going to guarantee the United Nurses of Alberta that we will not implement NDP policy like we're seeing in British Columbia. Do you want to know what's happening there under their harm reduction policies? Nurses at the hospital are expected to provide a multitude of harm reduction services, including pouring alcohol for patients and preparing their meth and . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Smith: Let me continue. We have been told . . .

Ms Notley: This has nothing to do with the . . .

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. Hon. Leader of the Opposition, immediately after providing a caution to members, it doesn't provide you an opportunity right after to continue to heckle. The goal is that I bring the House to order. It then allows the Speaker to continue to do so, and we get to move on with question period.

Ms Smith: Let me continue. Nurses at her hospital are expected to provide a multitude of harm reduction services, including pouring alcohol for patients, preparing their meth and crack pipes. We've been told to give them whatever they want, so they'll come back asking for 20 pipes. That's what NDP health care looks like in B.C.; we won't . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Deaths and Injuries of Children in Care

Member Batten: Mr. Speaker, this week the Child and Youth Advocate released reviews of 47 deaths and one serious injury in this last year. These reports are heartbreaking and painful to read, and they send a message that more needs to be done to protect these vulnerable children in the care of the government. There were 83 notifications of death or serious injury in '23-24; 68 children and youth died and 15 were seriously injured. What specifically is the minister doing to ensure that these horrific events stop?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. My heart grieves alongside all of those families affected by a child that's lost. I'm a parent, and I understand the love that many families have and the pain of these deaths and the effects that they have on those families. That's why as the Minister of Children and Family Services I've increased funding for family resource networks, so that 40,000 children last year have been able to access them. We've increased our youth suicide prevention grants, and over 927 children have been able to utilize this program and over 1,100 youth and individuals have been able to access information to keep them safe. As well, we have our virtual opioid dependency program. We're making . . .

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

Member Batten: Given that these children and those who are mourning their tragic loss deserve more than sympathetic words and given that under the UCP we have seen the number of children dying in care rise year after year and given that in the cases released by the Child and Youth Advocate, there were instances of 12-year-olds – 12-year-olds – dealing with addictions without wraparound supports and given that based on these devastating reports, it is clear that immediate action is needed, what immediate action has the minister taken?

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, it's true that the government needs to take steps to help those who are suffering from the deadly disease of addiction, and it's even more pertinent when it's our children in our communities. So this government has taken steps. First of all, when it comes to opioid addiction, we expanded the virtual opioid dependency program for those who are in care to get access to that life-saving care as well. Of course, we're building 11 recovery communities, which many of these individuals can access when they graduate to 18, and in partnership with Indigenous communities, five of them, because we know they are disproportionately affected by this deadly disease. The tragedy is that often it's multiple generations with parents involved in addiction. We need to break that tragic cycle. [interjections]

2:10

The Speaker: Order.

Member Batten: Given that the government is failing these children and youth and no amount of rhetoric from the other side will in fact hide this and given that 47 cases reviewed by the Child and Youth Advocate, almost 75 per cent, identified themselves as Indigenous – 75 – given that it is clear that this is a crisis and a crisis that requires us all to come together and develop a real plan and given that this government has rejected the ideas and offers from this side of the House to help and provide guidance, will the Premier agree that for an all-party committee . . .

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

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, rhetoric is the last thing this government is putting forward. We're putting instead dollars in our budget. We're spending $99 million in this budget alone to build recovery communities in partnership with First Nations. We know, especially when it comes to the Indigenous community, which has been disproportionately affected and ravaged by this deadly disease of addiction, it needs to be culturally sensitive and appropriate training and support for those who work in addiction and for those who need the care, which is why we're working on-reserve and have filled the void left by the federal government when it comes to support for those who are Indigenous suffering from the addiction. Of course, we're

going to continue to partner with Indigenous across this province to make sure they get the support they need in recovery.

Rural Medical Education

Mr. Hunter: Mr. Speaker, across Canada rural communities are having problems accessing health care. For some residents in my riding of Taber-Warner this means not having enough doctors to keep their ER open. Rural Albertans play a critical role in our province. They grow our food, produce our energy, and support numerous sectors across our economy. They deserve timely access to health care in the communities they call home. To the Minister of Advanced Education: what is the government doing to get more rural physicians trained for their communities?

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you to the hon. member for that question. Mr. Speaker, last week I was proud to announce an investment of almost $225 million to develop two rural medical training centres in Lethbridge and Grande Prairie. This funding will create an additional 60 undergraduate medical school seats, 72 additional residency seats to support additional graduating medical students, and 30 additional international medical graduate residency seats to support opportunities for newcomers with high-demand skills.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the Minister of Advanced Education for this welcome news. Given that Alberta's government is making a target of $225 million in expanding rural physician training and given that this funding represents a major collaborative effort between the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, and the Northwestern Polytechnic, again to the Minister of Advanced Education: how will the rural medical education program training centres provide Albertans with better access to primary care?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, the training centres will provide hands-on training in rural communities by providing both academic and clinical components of learning. Students will have the opportunity to train alongside health professionals, gaining practical medical experience while serving rural patients. Over time the training centres will contribute to more than 100 practising physicians every year. We know that physicians who learn in rural communities are more likely to live and practise in those same rural communities, and that's exactly what this investment will accomplish.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again thank you to the minister for supporting rural communities. Given that rural Alberta is a key driver of economic growth in Alberta and given that our vibrant and growing communities are supported by our dedicated rural physicians and health care teams and given that family doctors trained in rural Alberta are more likely to stay in rural Alberta, to the Minister of Health: what else is our government doing to support rural physicians?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Our government understands the important role family and rural generalist physicians play in helping Albertans manage their health, and we are dedicated and committed to supporting Alberta's current and future physician workforce. Through initiatives such as our new health workforce strategy, which focuses on attracting, retaining, and training health care workers, or through developing a new compensation model for family physicians, we are determined to provide the necessary support to our physicians in growing rural communities.

Homeless Supports

Ms Renaud: Merci, M. le Président. Housing is a human right. More people than ever are experiencing homelessness for a multitude of reasons and are losing their lives all over Alberta. Since the UCP took office, the number of people that have died has increased 716 per cent in Edmonton and 476 per cent in Calgary. Whatever strategy this government claims it's implementing is insufficient. Too many people are dying. What actions is this government taking to reflect the urgency of the problem?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me start with what we aren't doing. We aren't doing the NDP's plan of putting people inside dangerous encampments, where they're freezing to death . . .

Ms Gray: Point of order.

Mr. Nixon: . . . being burned to death, and also dying of overdoses at record rates, where nobody can help them. So that's why in Edmonton – and we will be doing this across the province – we built our navigation centre, which as of this morning has almost had 900 individuals go through it, well over 3,000 services, and almost 700 of them housed. That is the work that we're doing, and that is the work we're going to continue to do. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

A point of order is noted at 2:16.

The hon. Member for St. Albert has a question.

Sorry, hon. member. Would you do me a favour and just pull your laptop back and make sure that there's nothing around the earpiece or the microphone? Sorry. My apologies.

Ms Renaud: Putting the political propaganda aside, given that in 2019 37 Edmontonians experiencing homelessness lost their lives – in 2023 that number grew to over 300 Edmontonians being lost – and given that this should not be a political issue but one that requires action, not propaganda and not rhetoric, what action will the minister take today? What will you do differently today to change this trend and improve the problem? People are dying. Too many people are dying.

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, one of the challenges that the NDP has is that they can only ask questions with notes. They're not able to pivot, and then you see that type of language come from the hon. member saying that this is "propaganda" and "what are we doing?" when I lay out the numbers, so I'll say it again. Almost 900 people on the streets went to the navigation centre; over 700 of them have been housed. That is what we are doing. That's not partisan. That's not propaganda. Here is the difference: the NDP are upset because they want – and that's fine; that's their belief – homeless people to live in tents . . .

Ms Gray: Point of order.

Mr. Nixon: . . . in dangerous circumstances, and we reject that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

A point of order is noted at 2:18.

Ms Renaud: Given that Boyle Street reported that in the first 78 days of 2024 they received 72 death notices and given that an

Edmonton area doctor told the media that 1 in 7 of his patients lost their lives between 2020 and 2023 and given that Albertans need more outreach teams, which is a form of harm reduction – they need it all – will the minister commit to providing whatever resources are needed to save these lives? We're not talking about whatever centre they set up. We're talking about the hundreds of people that are dying. They're dying.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, the truth is that the deadly disease of addiction is ravaging our streets, and if members opposite want harm reduction, I'm all for it if they mean naloxone kits to the tune of 3 million a year that we provide, and I'm all for it if they're talking about the virtual opioid dependency program, which has over 8,000 Albertans in the world-pioneering opioid agonist delivery service system. But if what they want – and I translate this for those at home – is safe supply with government, taxpayer dollars going into 65 million opioid pills dumped onto our streets, if that's the so-called harm reduction, I'll be honest: it's harm production, and we won't have it in our province. We care too much for the recovery of the Albertans who are vulnerable. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Suncor Fort Hills Mine Expansion

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The McClelland wetland complex in northern Alberta is a unique haven of biodiversity. Its patterned fen provides critical breeding habitat for thousands of migratory birds. It also holds vast amounts of water and sequesters carbon for free every moment of every day, and it happens to sit over a whole lot of bitumen. Suncor plans to expand their Fort Hills mine into this incredibly important wetland complex. To the minister of environment: what steps are being taken to ensure this natural carbon sink isn't destroyed through Suncor's operational plan?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

2:20

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I do want to thank the member for the important question. We here in Alberta, of course, are proud of our energy industry, but we're also proud of our high environmental standards. The Alberta Energy Regulator ensures that all projects that are happening in this industry across our province, including the oil sands, go through rigorous review and, obviously, meet the environmental standards that we have in place to protect Albertans and, of course, our biodiversity in our province.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that there are several issues with the AER, I'll just set that aside.

Given that the McClelland wetlands continually filter and clean water and recharge surface and groundwater supplies, given that in Alberta we're in a multiyear drought and that preserving, expanding, and enhancing wetlands is a critical component of natural solutions to mitigate drought, given that Suncor's mitigation plan is to build a wall through the middle of the wetland to protect half of it, which won't work, and given that the environmental impact assessment concluded irreversible damage would occur and it's been set aside so mining can proceed, what assurances can the minister provide that this wetland will be protected?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, these projects do go through rigorous environmental oversight. We do have extensive water monitoring in the area, and the AER has expectations in place that these companies are in fact meeting all of their regulatory requirements to keep our environment, aquatic species, and people safe. Of course, making sure that water is safe, especially in and around the oil sands, is absolutely a priority for us. It's something that we won't politicize. But, again, we require experts in this area to ensure that those standards are upheld.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that Suncor's operational plan must guarantee protection of the unmined portion of the wetland complex and given that an independent review found major deficiencies in this operational plan and found that Suncor's mitigation strategy "poses a significant risk of irreversible damage" to the unmined portion of the McClelland Lake wetland complex and given that Albertans are tired of a government who keeps prioritizing industrial development over clean water and healthy communities, can the minister say what steps will be taken to stop this mine from being developed and permanently protect this complex wetland?

The Speaker: The minister of environment.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will say that our expectation is that Suncor and any other company uphold the environmental regulations that we have in place to keep people and our environment safe. When it comes to oil sands mine water, this is also something that we take very seriously. This is something that the Premier has asked me to address. We are pulling together an advisory committee to bring forward any and all ideas that will help us address this issue of oil sands mine water. More to come in the weeks ahead. But thank you to the member for that question.

Highway 14 Capital Plan

Mr. Rowswell: Mr. Speaker, highway 14 is a critical transportation and economic corridor in my constituency of Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright. It runs from the southeast of Edmonton through Tofield, Ryley, Holden, Viking, and Wainwright before intersecting highway 17 to enter Saskatchewan. This important roadway in recent years has needed some significant maintenance and improvements. My first question is for the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors. Where does highway 14 stand in the province's priority list for proposed infrastructure improvements?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright. He's been a fierce advocate for highway 14. I'm happy to say that there are actually two construction projects for highway 14 in this year's budget. There's a 55-kilometre repaving from highway 17 to highway 41, and 12 kilometres of repaving from highway 883 to highway 41. It's just another great example of the work that we're doing with our prairie MOU, that we signed with Saskatchewan and Manitoba, to make sure that our capital plan here in Alberta matches up with Saskatchewan and also with other provinces across the country and to make sure that we can get projects built here that actually benefit all Albertans.

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

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that one thing my constituents are interested in is the process involved in these projects from start to finish and further given that highway maintenance and construction is a priority for many rural MLAs, including myself, could the same minister please walk this Chamber through the process and typical timelines as well as the steps involved in these major highway projects, from planning, engineering, to construction?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of transportation.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Design, planning, and engineering all need to happen before we publicly tender projects and allocate construction dollars, but we are committed to repair over 64,000 lane kilometres here in the province.

But do you know, Mr. Speaker, what's beyond repair? The rift that will happen when Nenshi and his Liberals take over the Alberta NDP. He's been out selling memberships for weeks while the NDP have been in here, stuck in this Chamber, not being able to go out and sell their memberships. But the rift that will happen between the Liberals and the NDP is going to be quite something to watch this summer.

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

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that a contract for repaving a 55-kilometre stretch of highway 14 between highway 41 and highway 17 is currently out for tender and further given that the RFP has been issued to hire an engineering consultant for repaving a 12-kilometre stretch on highway 14 between highways 883 and 41, could the same minister please share with us when we should expect to see both of these projects completed?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, Mr. Speaker, engineering for highway 883 and highway 41 will start this year, and construction will begin next year. The 55 kilometres of repaving between highway 41 and highway 17 are currently out for tender. We'll see steamrollers out this summer.

But, Mr. Speaker, do you know what else is getting steamrolled this summer? The Alberta NDP by Nenshi and his Liberals. It just goes to show that the NDP-Liberal alliance is alive and well, not just in Ottawa but here in Alberta. They're propping up Trudeau and the Liberals in Ottawa. It's something where we are going to do everything that we can to stand up for Albertans every day in this province. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Provincial Pension Plan Proposal

Ms Phillips: Mr. Speaker, Albertans have been loud and clear: they want the Premier to keep her hands off their CPP. Albertans spoke out at dozens of NDP town halls, at the sham UCP consultations, in letters they sent to the Premier's office. Folks do not trust this government with their pension, especially after the UCP broke its election promise to keep their hands off the CPP. Will the Finance minister put an end to the UCP's own misery on this unpopular issue, let alone that of all Albertans, who have had to endure this nonsense, and end his pension gamble?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, there's no gamble here. What we've done is that we've proposed an idea to Albertans. We've released the report that we had commissioned from LifeWorks. We've asked the federal government to become involved. We're pleased that they have gotten the office of the Chief Actuary involved. As I've said in this House many times, we're awaiting a legislative interpretation from the three actuarial firms that the office of the Chief Actuary is using, and we expect to get a number by the fall. That's something that we did hear loud and clear from Albertans, that they wanted clarity around this idea, and that's what we're going to give them.

Ms Phillips: Given that the Finance minister wasted millions to convince people to let the UCP team behind the DynaLife disaster and the fake Tylenol brouhaha manage their pension and given that – surprise – Albertans were not sold and given that the Finance minister could agree with the vast majority of Albertans and just take this silly APP idea out of the window today, why won't he do that? Is he scared of what his boss might say?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, my boss is the people of Alberta, and they've said that they want clarity around this, and that's what we're going to give them. We can't wait to see the opinion of the office of the Chief Actuary. I'd say that it's kind of cute to hear the opposition talk about finances and spending priorities after the budgets that they brought forward but also the budgets that NDP governments continue to bring forward across the country. Two credit downgrades for the NDP government in B.C., on the west side of the rocks. Expect more. They're on negative outlook. We're going to manage the finances of this province responsibly while we look at these ideas that can have a material impact on people's lives.

Ms Phillips: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that Albertans are not waiting for their marching orders from the federal Liberals – they just want to keep the government's hands off their CPP – and given that the only information that Albertans are waiting for is confirmation that the UCP will stop trying to gamble with their retirement, what message do Albertans need to send to this Finance minister for him to start listening and end this? Skywriting? Lawn signs? It can all be arranged.

Mr. Horner: I don't know what they're so angry about, Mr. Speaker. What have we done? There's an idea from a commissioned report. We've asked the federal government to get involved. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Horner: Like I said, we've asked them to get involved. They've agreed and got the office of the Chief Actuary involved. We're awaiting the legislative interpretation, and then we'll hear their opinion, hopefully, in the fall. But to go back to the beginning, Mr. Speaker: why wouldn't a responsible government consider an idea that would have such an impact of leaving $5 billion annually in the pockets of Alberta families, Alberta workers, Alberta businesses?

2:30 Health Care Professionals in Rural Alberta

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, on any given day thousands of Albertans have X-rays taken, get blood tested, and learn more about their health in the process. The staff that operate the X-ray machines, take samples, and complete testing form an essential part of the health care system. In urban centres these roles are typically divided between lab technologists and X-ray technologists; however, in rural communities, many of which are in my constituency, combined lab and X-ray technologists, or CLXTs, do much of the testing work required. Can the Minister of Advanced

Education please share what steps the government has taken to expand the training of combined lab and X-ray technologists in our province?

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you to the member for that excellent question. Mr. Speaker, my department is currently working with postsecondary institutes to examine the feasibility of increasing the number of combined lab and X-ray technologists that are trained in Alberta. Advanced Education has invested roughly $225 million to create over 12,500 seats in high-demand programs at postsecondary institutions across the province. This includes $2.6 million over three years to create 22 seats in the U of A's bachelor of science in medical laboratory science program.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that many patients and physicians in my constituency have come to me with fears that emergency rooms in their community may close without CLXT support and given that one method of getting medical professionals to live and remain in small communities is to have them conduct their training there, can the Minister of Health inform this Chamber of what her ministry has been doing to expand the combined lab and X-ray technologist training and preceptorships in rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member. Currently Alberta and Saskatchewan are the only two provinces in Canada that train combined lab and X-ray technologists. Their unique skill sets are an ideal fit for rural communities, and graduates are in very high demand right across Canada. AHS is working with academic institutions to help increase the number of seats available for students in existing programs. In fact, we successfully increased the seats this year for lab-related programs, opening 15 additional CLXT seats for fall of 2024, and we'll support additional graduates in June of 2026.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that a common concern I hear from my constituents is the need to travel long distances to have medical tests completed or X-rays taken and given that our government has committed to addressing rural health challenges and further given that if patients need to travel into Edmonton or Calgary for care, it increases the strain on facilities in these cities, could the Minister of Health please explain any other steps currently being planned to address the shortage of CLXTs in rural Alberta?

Member LaGrange: I'm happy to, Mr. Speaker. Addressing rural health challenges is a top priority for our government. That's why we're investing $164 million in Budget 2024 towards attracting, retaining, and training health care professionals, especially in rural and underserved communities. Ongoing efforts to secure CLXT positions in rural Alberta include working with AHS to offer combined job postings that feature full-time, part-time, and temporary options. Targeted recruitment and advertisement campaigns are ongoing, and AHS is exploring all options to mitigate this issue in the short term and long term.

Affordable Housing

Member Irwin: Alberta needs all the help it can get when it comes to the housing crisis. I've said all along that housing is an issue that demands all orders of government work together. We need supports for renters, we need policies to incentivize building, and we need far more investments in affordable housing. The federal government is coming to the table with some of the funding required, but instead of getting to work on building the housing we desperately need, this minister is picking fights. Albertans need affordable housing, and they need it now. I urge this minister to put his petty partisanship aside and work with all government partners to address the housing crisis. Will he?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I'm not surprised to see the NDP rising in this House to yet again support Justin Trudeau on bringing forward ideological green policies that will make life more expensive for Albertans. Let me be clear, through you to them, Mr. Speaker: we will not be bribed with our own money by a federal government to bring in green building codes that will make our construction industry more expensive, make things more expensive for everyday Albertans. If the feds and the NDP really want to make life more affordable when it comes to construction, stand with us and get rid of the consumer carbon tax.

Member Irwin: Given that this is alarming and given that Alberta's population grew by actually 200,000 people last year . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Member Irwin: . . . yet the UCP aren't building homes for any of those folks and given that vacancy rates are at record lows while rents are at record highs, with Calgary rents projected to reach Toronto's unaffordable levels by next year, yet the UCP have missed their housing starts targets, they've missed their rent supplements targets, and they refuse to support a temporary rent cap to keep rents affordable and keep people housed, why is this government okay with doing next to nothing on housing?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member never misses an opportunity to be wrong. Alberta has the highest record of residential construction taking place in the history of our province right now. We're on track to double our residential construction in this year. We have the highest purpose-built rentals ever being built in the history of this province right now. The hon. member continues to want to stand in the House and stand with Justin Trudeau, bring forward green, ideological policies that will slow down that progress. Well, again, through you to her: no; unlike her former government, we will not sell out the people of Alberta to Justin Trudeau.

Member Irwin: Given that this minister refuses to listen to the countless Albertans we know who are absolutely worried about losing their housing and one simple step that this UCP government could take right now to keep people in their homes, while we wait for them to take action to build the affordable homes needed, is to pass Bill 205 and support caps on rent. I've received thousands of e-mails and signatures from people urging this UCP government to support my bill, and I'm urging this minister once again to do the right thing and take action on skyrocketing rents. Will he?

Mr. Nixon: When the hon. member refers to Bill 205, let me be clear on what she's referring to. She's referring to rent control, Mr. Speaker, which will slow down our construction industry, will make more people homeless, and will not be able to accomplish the objectives that our province wants to do. We're going to continue with our plan, which is seeing record construction taking place right here in Alberta. I know the hon. member obviously is going to continue to come to this Chamber and bring forward ideas like Justin Trudeau's green building code, which will slow things down, like Toronto's rent control, which will slow things down, but

Albertans can rest assured that we will take no instruction from the NDP on this issue. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Arts and Culture Funding

Member Ceci: Mr. Speaker, arts and cultural activities from an early age harness essential life skills like self-expression, creativity, confidence, and independence. These skills mirror many of the benefits children receive from sports and fitness activities, but the UCP appears to have unilaterally decided that Alberta's children that love arts and cultural programming shall not receive the same level of support as those who take up a sport. To the minister: does the government believe that Alberta's children who just want to take music lessons or attend theatre school aren't worthy of the same level of support as children who play sports?

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a bit rich, that question coming from the member opposite, because when he was in government and the Finance minister, when he tabled his first budget, he got a pair of workboots and said that it's time to get to work for Albertans. Little did we know that he was part of the demolition crew. We will not be taking lessons from the members opposite because that budget and subsequent budgets added $80 billion to the debt of this province, forcing us to refinance that debt to the tune of $3 billion a year. How many sporting events and arts and culture could we support with $3.5 billion a year?

Member Ceci: Given that last spring the Alberta NDP proposed an activity tax credit that would establish a credit for up to $500 per child each year that could be applied to any extracurricular activity, like sports, music lessons, art programming, and theatre school, and given that the every kid can play program regrettably excludes any grants for children enrolling in the arts while the Alberta NDP plan was far more inclusive, to the minister: why is the government's program so limited in scope? Can the minister of arts and culture not advocate for all of Alberta's children and their various interests?

Mr. Schow: Mr. Speaker, in the province of Alberta we take very seriously kids' recreation and making sure we're getting more kids out playing sports, recreating, and having a great time, because we know the benefits that students get when they get a chance to play and recreate. Today we had national champions in our gallery, many of which are from right here in the province of Alberta, showing their skills off, because they had a chance to play. We're committing $8 million through the every kid can play grant to make sure we have – now over 8,500 children in the province have had a chance to play because it covered their registration fees.

2:40

Member Ceci: Given that the Finance minister is responsible for presenting budgets and working with all ministries to address the needs of Albertans and given that this budget has overlooked arts and cultural access grants for children while providing grants for children who play sports, to the Minister of Finance: is the omission of arts grant funding for Alberta's children simply an oversight, and if it is, can the minister work with his colleagues to ensure that no child is prevented from pursuing their passion? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe the member opposite wasn't paying attention to the budget. Let's talk about some of the arts and culture funding in this budget: $12.8 million over three years to the Winspear Centre, which includes music studios, classrooms, educational spaces; for Arts Commons, the largest cultural infrastructure project in Canadian history; and increased funding to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts to make sure programming is available to all people in all corners of the province.

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

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:42, which we will hear at the end of the Routine.

The hon. the Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies from the Calgary North chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women urging the Finance minister to abandon his plans to withdraw from the CPP.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Member Irwin: I rise to table the requisite number of copies of e-mails again urging the UCP to support my Bill 205, and these are from constituents in Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has a tabling.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I made reference to a column, so I'm rising to table five copies of Adam Zivo's column 'We've Absolutely Lost Control' to Drug Users, Desperate B.C. Hospital Nurses Say: Health-care Workers Report Rampant Open Drug Use, Weapons and Violence in Wake of Drug Decriminalization.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of hon. Mr. Wilson, Minister of Indigenous Relations, pursuant to the Metis Settlements Act Metis Settlements Appeal Tribunal annual report 2023.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that brings us to points of order, and at 2:16 the hon. the Official Opposition House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order
Language Creating Disorder

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At 2:16 I rose because the minister of community and social services was responding to a question around housing as a human right, and specifically the minister at that time said, and I believe I have an accurate quote but I do not have the benefit of the Blues: NDP policy of putting people in dangerous encampments. I rise under 23(j), "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." The language that the minister used has very deliberately been chosen by him and his caucus throughout the sitting that we've been a part of. I submit to you, Mr. Speaker, that we have, all of us, seen it create disorder. Suggesting that any member of my caucus or that our caucus as a policy wants people to live in dangerous

encampments has now risen to a point where I hope that you will find this to be a point of order, because it immediately raises the temperature, it is not effective use of debate in this place on a very serious matter, and it is completely false and not true.

Should those remarks be made against an individual member, I would be able to rise under 23(h) and (i) as well. Obviously, that is not the case, but I do think that continuing to use this torqued, untrue language will continue to create disorder, which will continue to create further points of order. The Member for St. Albert was asking about the fact that we have seen the number of Edmontonians who have died due to homelessness increase by 716 per cent and 476 per cent in Calgary. These are serious issues. They deserve legitimate debate and not that kind of torqued political language that, again, I submit, creates disorder.

That is why I've called this as a point of order. I hope the language will be ruled out of order so that we can get back to an effective use of this Chamber in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Prior to calling on the hon. the Government House Leader, I'd like to ask the hon. Official Opposition House Leader if, substantively, points of order 1 and 2 are the same or if they are different. It's entirely okay if they are different – we can deal with them separately – but if they are the same, it may be beneficial to do them both at the same time. Please let me just say that it is ultimately up to you. I just wanted to provide some clarification prior to calling on the Government House Leader.

Ms Gray: I accept your feedback, Mr. Speaker, because they are substantively the same, so I will include at 2:18 the minister in response to a very similar question, talking about the serious issue of 1 in 7 patients losing their lives under this UCP government. The minister went on to say that "the NDP are upset because they want . . . homeless people to live in tents." Again, extremely torqued language, untrue, unhelpful, and likely to create disorder.

I will tell you that it makes me angry to hear the minister characterize myself and my party as wanting people to live in tents. It makes it harder for us to have reasonable decorum in this place when we are, then, emotionally charged because we have been so slanderously insulted in this place. I will continue to rise under 23(j), because I don't think this is helpful language in this place, Mr. Speaker, and I hope it is ruled out of order.

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think great minds think alike as I was going to ask the hon. Opposition House Leader if she would combine as well, but happy always to debate separately.

In response to this point of order, I do not believe that it is a point of order, and I see what's happening here, where the opposition is hoping that the continual use of this language, which on its own merits would not be a point of order because it's not directed at a specific member – if I was to say, "Member X wants people to live in tent encampments" or such, I suspect that that, Mr. Speaker, would be a point of order.

The issue I have with this is that while it may create disorder among the members opposite in the opposition caucus and the Opposition House Leader has suggested that this is torqued language, we are hearing torqued language and torqued questions coming from the opposition on a daily basis, which ultimately warrants an answer in return that refutes what they are trying to say.

For example, Mr. Speaker, and I suspect this is not what the opposition wants to hear, in response to the tent encampments that we have cleaned up, we have 860 people now housed, 3,000 referrals to direct services – oh; I hope the Member for St. Albert is okay; that sounded like it hurt – 350 on housing programs, 370 in transitional series, 550 ID cards. We've also cleaned up – and it's very important, Mr. Speaker – 129 tonnes of garbage, tore down 800 illegal drug encampments, found over 4,000 needles . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. While the hon. Government House Leader may believe those are very important statistics and the minister can make that case, it almost sounds like he's continuing the debate of the question. I'm happy to hear more from him with respect to the specific point of order and the use of the language and otherwise. I'm not sure that it's salient, the facts, to the point of order.

2:50

Mr. Schow: Sure. Mr. Speaker, I will get to the point, and your point is well taken.

I guess what I'm saying is that actions do speak louder than words. When we see members like the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood taking pictures in front of encampments, demanding that we not take them down – they are havens for human trafficking, drug trafficking; they are finding people who have been burned alive there, Mr. Speaker. These are horrific circumstances, and it's incumbent upon our government to help solve that, which is what we're doing. I understand that the members opposite don't like the answer they're getting, but the actions speak louder than words. I would argue that, going forward, if the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services uses this language, it's not a point of order no matter how many times the opposition gets upset with it. I don't believe it is one now, and it shouldn't be one going forward.

The Speaker: Are there others who wish to provide some additional submissions or information with respect to the point of order called this afternoon?

Seeing none, I am prepared to rule. I have a number of comments with respect to the point of order. I do have the benefit of the Blues. Largely speaking, the account by the Official Opposition House Leader of what was or wasn't said is correct. In the first point of order the hon. minister said, "We aren't doing the NDP's plan of putting people inside dangerous encampments, where they're freezing to death." Then he went on to say, in the second point of order, "Here is the difference: the NDP are upset because they want – and that's fine; that's their belief – homeless people to live in tents."

Hon. members, I do have a couple of previous rulings to draw to the attention of the Assembly. While I agree that the words in isolation that the hon. minister used are not, in fact, a point of order, of course the challenge always becomes for the Speaker: what is the context in which those words have been used, and have those words, in the context in which they were used, created disorder? On a number of occasions inside this Assembly people have used what would be otherwise parliamentary language yet had that parliamentary language ruled out of order.

On the first occasion in particular, with respect to very similar language that was used today, on March 18, 2024, the minister used perhaps even more aggressive language, I might add, because it was directed towards, specifically, the critic. At that time I said:

> As for today, I will provide a strong level of [caution and] encouragement for the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services to not make such direct and personal attacks inside this Chamber. It wasn't initially ruled a point of order previously, it won't be today, and I hope that I don't have to

> because there will be a change at least in the tone and tenure. That doesn't mean that the content of the debate cannot continue, but the way that we debate it, I think, is important. This isn't a point of order today but a strongest caution possible. I consider this matter dealt with and concluded.

It's not just me that holds this position. A previous Speaker in 2012, who I know many of you have a great deal of respect for, spoke specifically about similar language that wasn't in its own right unparliamentary, but because of the use of it, it was. That ruling – and it is quite extensive, so I won't read it into the record today – is on November 1, 2012, on pages 475 and 476, if anyone has the inclination to find it. Then, also, on April 8, 2013, on page 1719, the then Speaker said:

> We've dealt with this before. In fact . . . most recently [with] my Deputy Speaker on March 20, I believe, where [some allegations were] being made and [some] factual . . . points were described, and it's all to do with . . . the term "climate change deniers." Let me say this. Let's put an end to that term in this House. It's had its mileage, and it's been used on this side to some effect. It's been used on this side to their effect, and it's [important that we] move on . . . [with a] choice of new words.

I think that we've come to a point where making these sorts of allegations about members wanting Albertans to live in tents has probably come to the – as the then Speaker said: its mileage has been used. I think that the minister is very creative in the language which he can use, and there are many ways that he can do the same thing without creating such disorder.

I consider this matter dealt with and concluded. Orders of the Day.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: Oh, sorry; you're correct.

At whatever time I called out just a few minutes ago, 2:42 or whatever it was, the hon. the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order
Parliamentary Language

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the time that you gave the 30 seconds or less for members to leave the Chamber to other things that they're going to do today, the Member for Calgary-Buffalo clearly stated very loudly – and I suspect you may have even heard it – at least two or three times to me: you are embarrassing; you are embarrassing; you're an embarrassment. This certainly falls under 23(h), (i), and (j), especially (j), "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder."

Given that I answered the last question in question period and gave an answer that the member likely did not appreciate, that may have precipitated his comments saying that I am embarrassing. That is not something that I think is parliamentary, and I would ask that that member apologize. I have also myself said things that are unparliamentary in this Chamber and apologized even without being solicited to do so. I would hope that that member would do the same thing, but here we are calling a point of order.

The Speaker: The hon. the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think temperatures did get hot today. On behalf of that member I would apologize and withdraw unparliamentary language that was used.

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

Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 10
Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

[Adjourned debate April 9: Mr. Ceci]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, should he choose to do so.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Through you to all the members here, I want to wish you all an Eid Mubarak. It's a special day for us Muslims, as has already been stated in the House. Of course, even though it is a holiday for us, I chose to come to work regardless. Happy to do so, though, because, of course, the work of the House is extremely important, and it is our duty to be here to represent our constituents.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

When it comes to Bill 10, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, I think this is an important matter to debate, of course, and one of the primary concerns that exists with this particular bill is the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus. Now, I completely understand what the government is trying to do. However, in the current situation, the current context that we're living in, and the fact that we need more nurses and health care practitioners more than ever and that it was something the UCP actually campaigned on during the election, which was recruiting more health care workers to the province of Alberta, it's surprising that in the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus – I believe the minister in a news release actually went into all the professions that were being considered under this particular program. The minister did say that it would include crane operators, electricians, heavy-duty mechanics, welders, and pipefitters but no health care practitioners, which is really surprising since that's something that we desperately need here in the province of Alberta.

I will tell you this, Madam Speaker. In consultation with a number of my own constituents, it's a regular practice – I'm sure members on the other side and all the members in my caucus do so – that they meet with stakeholders in their communities. They go in and talk to people. I would like to tell you a little bit about the experiences of a couple of my constituents with the health care system.

3:00

There is a gentleman who did go to the Grey Nuns. He had a broken ankle. This particular constituent, having gone to the emergency room at the Grey Nuns, was there, was being treated for his broken ankle, but then surprisingly, for some odd reason – and I can only assume it's because they wanted to free up a bed at the Grey Nuns – they decide to tell him that he has to go to the hospital in Leduc. He was asked if, actually, a member of his own family could take him to the hospital in Leduc. He was, like, "Well, no. It's not my responsibility. Like, if you need to move me, at least take me in an ambulance, right? Why am I being asked to do this? Like, this is my hospital. It's in my area, my district. This is the hospital that I should be going to." Therefore, he did go to the emergency room at the Grey Nuns, which is close to where my constituent lives, albeit – and I'll just put in parentheses here – the Grey Nuns is completely over capacity.

We get the dire situation. It was the very last hospital built in Edmonton. Again, this government has decided to not just put on the back burner, Madam Speaker, but actually cancel the plans for

the south Edmonton hospital, which is very sad since the last hospital in Edmonton was built in 1988. Of course, the situation was that my constituent was then taken to the hospital in Leduc but then wasn't getting the care that he needed. That's one example.

There's also another situation, of course, where a constituent from my area ended up going to the hospital and, unfortunately, wasn't able to receive the care there at the Grey Nuns hospital as well. This just drastically demonstrates that the people of Edmonton, like many people all over the province of Alberta, are not getting the care that they deserve under this government.

Again, I find it completely strange that under the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus they wouldn't be trying to attract more health care workers and especially nurses to provide that care for the people here in the province of Alberta. Now, I understand that the professions that the minister did highlight – again, those were crane operators, electricians, heavy-duty mechanics, welders, and pipefitters – are all very important so that we can build much-needed infrastructure here in the province of Alberta and also for the private needs, the commercial needs, in order to have business flourish here in the province.

I would beg the members opposite to then also consider that as people are being called into Alberta, it's going to put more and more stress on the actual programs that the province is required to provide for those people that will now be living here in the province of Alberta and will require those services, especially health care. Again, we see what the problem is that we're having here. Instead of getting more health care workers into the province, they're not only not attracting those health care workers, which we desperately need, but then bringing in so many more people that are then going to be putting more additional pressures onto the hospitals.

Then it's not only hospitals, Madam Speaker. It's also the schools. All of these people that are going to be taking advantage of this bonus and coming here to the province of Alberta: of course, they're going to be coming with their families; they're going to be coming with their children. Those children are going to need to go to schools. I know that the members opposite, you know, hoot and holler every time that the minister gets up and says that we're building new schools. But the reality is that those schools that they're announcing are just announcements for plans. There's no actual construction of new schools happening. So I beg the members on the other side, when they get up with their rhetoric and they say, "Oh, we're building; we're building; we're building": let's be honest; let's be truthful. Yes, I get it. The plans are being made, but plans being made aren't going to provide more classrooms for those individuals that are then going to be calling Alberta home that are going to require those services.

The classrooms are going to continue to get bigger, where more and more students – you know, I was just meeting with a few students in my own constituency, where they were telling me that one of their classes is 35 students, which is completely unheard of. Thirty-five students in one class. Perhaps members on the other side don't have the experience of actually having to work with children with special needs. Perhaps they don't have that experience, so they don't know, but luckily I've had the opportunity to meet with a number of constituents in Edmonton-Ellerslie who, since I was elected in 2015, have been bringing to my attention the radical requirements that are needed for children with special needs. The fact that we don't have enough educational support workers inside of our education system to actually help with those children with special needs only puts more and more pressure on the teachers in those circumstances that have classrooms of 35 children or even more.

So here we are. We're putting ourselves or the government is putting the people of Alberta in a situation, in a context where the pressure is growing and growing and growing, yet here we have our beloved Minister of Finance using $4 million to administer a plan to give away $10 million. I would beg the minister that that money could be better used in supplementing the needs of the programs that we actually need them for. I get it. We're trying to attract more people to the province of Alberta. You ask any economists who say that you want to grow the economy: well, you need to bring more people into it so that you get more people working in that economy. Yes, I agree, but at the end of the day those public services that are required by those people are going to put continually more pressure on the system, Madam Speaker. So the quality of the programs that are being offered by this government is continually eroded by the fact that they're not balancing those two aspects.

We want to grow the economy, we want to have more jobs, and we want to have more opportunities for the people that call Alberta home, but what is happening is the exact opposite when we erode the programs, especially when it comes to health care and education for the people of Alberta. I would ask the minister: what is the plan? Through you, obviously, Madam Speaker, to the minister, I get that this is going to attract more people, but we need a better plan to be able to address the much-needed requirements, I would say, of our citizens here in the province of Alberta, especially when it comes to education, because as the minister may know, the primary years of children in our education system are perhaps the most important. We're essentially setting a psychological framework for these children. Are they going to get help from the system, or are they not going to get help from the system?

You know, we know that in the past, under the previous leader of the United Conservative Party, they cut funding to the PUF program by two-thirds if I'm not mistaken. This has had a drastic effect on especially all those families that are requiring those services for their children. If we want to do better for Albertans, then we have to address these issues.

3:10

I get it. Members on the other side: they're really focused on growing the economy. But as we grow the economy, we have to make sure that especially children aren't falling through the cracks and that they are getting the programming that they need, the services that they need, the assessments that they need, so that we can make sure that they get on the proper track for their education within the education system here in the province of Alberta.

As we continue to attract more and more and more people to Alberta and we don't address these issues, like I said, through you, Madam Speaker, to the minister, we are going to create more and more pressure and people are going to start looking for another solution. You know, maybe that solution is going to be an Alberta NDP government in 2027. Who knows? I would happen to think so, right? [interjections] The members on the other side are laughing, but I'm telling them that the pressure is growing and that people are feeling underserved by this government. They're feeling underserved by this government.

You know, I've stressed it in this House so many times that when they underserve these programs, they're failing Albertans. They fail Albertans when it comes to providing programs that their taxpayer dollars are supposed to be going to. I get it, that you want to create incentives so that, you know, big box chain stores come in here and provide part-time jobs to people, but the reality is that people need more than just a part-time job, Madam Speaker. People need good-quality, mortgage-paying, full-time jobs that they can depend on. We need more than just the part-time jobs. What's happening is that I can't tell you the number of people in my own constituency, the majority of them racialized people, that can't find that good-quality,

full-time, mortgage-paying job. They can't find it. So what do they have to resort to?

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate on Bill 10? Seeing none, would the hon. minister like to close?

[Motion carried; Bill 10 read a second time]

Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to call Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 10
Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Chair: Are there members wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to stand and speak against Bill 10. Sort of a few things come to mind as I contemplate this bill. One is missed opportunity, and the other is broken promises. Need I remind this House that the UCP actually campaigned on recruiting more health care workers, on ensuring that there are child care workers. In fact, they talked about it during the election, yet what we see in Bill 10 is wholly inadequate because the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus does not include child care workers and health care professionals, as was promised.

I'd like to appeal to the better angels of our nature, Madam Chair. I'd like to believe that we're all here because we want to serve Albertans, and I truly believe that each one of us in this House does it diligently every day. So I struggle with why Bill 10 is so inadequate, why this government, despite its promises, has not really fulfilled some of its sort of basic, basic things that they said they would.

I also would be remiss if I didn't remind my colleagues of the context that we're in, the state of the province that we're in. Let me just remind everybody that, again, we are in the worst affordability crisis in a generation. I have spoken to constituents as recently as last week who are deciding whether they're going to pay their utility bills this month or be able to afford groceries. Let me just say that Edmonton-South West is not a constituency that has been hit the worst, so I can only imagine for Albertans who are at the margins how they are struggling.

Alberta is also the only province where the rate of inflation is actually going up and wage growth, on the other hand, is not trending in the right direction in the sense that it's actually falling behind the rest of the country. So we're seeing that many families, not just the ones I represent – I'm sure many of my colleagues across the aisle are hearing this as well – are sort of in a bind, in a double squeeze in the sense that their wages aren't going up, yet costs are going up.

The reality is that more Albertans are accessing food banks than ever before. I know that I was shocked at seeing grocery prices recently and how they've actually gone up even further from even a couple of weeks before. Alberta now has the highest unemployment rate in western Canada. That is truly shameful, Madam Chair.

As I turn to our health care system, that really is, you know, for lack of a better comparison, on life support, health care workers really are the foundation of our health care system, and so many of them in Alberta are under increasing strain. They're facing burnout, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. More and more health care workers, in fact, are choosing to leave the profession, which I believe really highlights the urgency in recruiting more workers to Alberta. But if we look at what's being proposed in the Alberta Is Calling plan, first of all, health care workers aren't included, but even if they were, the $5,000 that's offered really just isn't going to attract very many people. More on that later, Madam Chair.

Let me just remind us that 20,000 health care workers left Alberta in 2023 according to Statistics Canada. The fact is that no matter what the government is sort of touting as their record, the reality is that we're losing more health care workers than we're attracting, and the problem is only going to get worse before it gets better. We need decisive, strong action on health care right now. Shortages of health care staff, as we know, limit the amount of care that we're able to provide Albertans, and many Albertans are bearing the brunt of the challenges that we're seeing in health care.

What we need, Madam Speaker, and what Bill 10 simply just does not do a good enough job of is a government that is focused on making life more affordable. We need a government that is committed to investing in quality public services. I see a bit of a pattern here because Bill 10 throws in some things, but it's not enough to actually address the issues that Albertans are facing. Is there some funding? Yes, there is. Are there some supports? Yes. But it isn't enough, and it's not going to be enough to really make much of a difference.

3:20

I'm going to focus my attention a little bit more on the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus because the reality is that it's not going to attract the health care and the child care workers that we need. It's really another example of a broken promise, a bit of a bait and switch. You know, I can't help but feel that this is a missed opportunity. Government plays a really critical role. As I said, we're all here to do our best to serve our constituents, and there are tools at any government's disposal. I can't understand why the current government isn't choosing to use some of these tools, particularly when it comes to attracting skilled workers in Alberta. Not only does there need to be some sort of plan around that; we also need to ensure that we invest in the services that newcomers and other folks that move into the province need.

The reality is that this government touts its Alberta Is Calling campaign. They're very, very proud that Alberta has added tens of thousands of folks into our province over the last year, but – and these are calls I get every day – many are surprised that when they come here, there aren't enough schools, they can't get timely care, there isn't a hospital nearby. In fact, in my riding of Edmonton-South West some of them drive to Leduc to access emergency care. They're worried about emergency response times.

In fact, I was door-knocking a couple of weekends ago, and I was talking to a constituent. I asked her: "What are some of your concerns? What's a message that I can bring forward here in this House?" And she said, "Do something about ambulance times." She said that on that street that very morning they waited an inordinate amount of time to get an ambulance, and she was very concerned about: what if it had been her family? Would they have been able to get their family member to a hospital in time? These are the everyday challenges that Albertans face, that I think this government is turning a blind eye to, that they're simply not doing enough to try to address.

The other thing I wanted to mention is the $5,000 bonus. I'm curious as to why this government came up with $5,000 as sort of the number, because it's not really going to move the needle to attract enough people when, in fact, folks will be quite surprised to learn when they're here that they're facing rapidly rising rents, skyrocketing utility costs. In fact, Edmonton has now some of the highest rent increases in Canada at over

20 per cent year over year, according to Rentals.ca, and Alberta now has the highest unemployment rate in western Canada. According to the government's own fiscal plan the gap between the average wages in Alberta and the rest of Canada has narrowed and continues to do so, so this sort of mirage of the Alberta advantage is actually dwindling away. Any sort of advantage around wages that Alberta used to have is no longer the reality now, and I think I caution the government that these are not good signs for what's to come before us and that we need to take decisive action to address some of these challenges.

The other piece that I want to address that I have some challenges with is with the Alberta Is Calling campaign and the amount of money the government is spending on advertising. First of all, we've already established that $5,000 really isn't very much. I mean, if you think about moving an entire family across the country, their moving expenses are going to be more than $5,000, on top of the fact that I just mentioned, you know, that they're going to be very surprised when they come into Alberta that there aren't schools, the rents are higher than perhaps they expected, there aren't the public services that Albertans and Canadians come to expect.

So let's just put that aside notwithstanding. Even if we're able to attract workers – and I doubt that we will with $5,000 as the number – the government is budgeting $4 million to run a $10 million attraction bonus. They're saying that this is on advertising, that it's not on administration. Some of it is on administration, surely. But I have questions about the value of spending the vast majority of the $10 million on advertising when we don't actually know if it's going to attract the workers that we need.

Madam Chair, this is a pervasive pattern from this government of the short-sighted decisions and poorly thought-through policies that are probably good for slogans, but they don't actually translate into real results. They don't translate into the kind of good fiscal management that Albertans deserve.

There's another pattern here that I see in Bill 10 that is troubling, and that is that not only is the government not doing enough in the supports that they're investing, but they're actually downloading costs to the average Albertan. They're making life more unaffordable for Albertans. I'll give you an example. The changes to the Land Titles Act break another UCP election promise, which is that they won't raise any taxes. And the truth is that what they're doing is that through fees they're actually making things less affordable. Whether you call it a fee – and I know that the members opposite sometimes use "fees" and "taxes" sort of interchangeably, certainly when they criticize this side of the House, so I'll do the same – the reality is that this particular change of the Land Titles Act will now mean that fees for changing land titles will go up specifically when it comes to property transfers and mortgage restrictions. That means that for a home with the price of $450,000 this will add $550 to the price of that home.

This is coming at a time when there are more folks coming to Alberta to try to find work. It's another barrier. I can say that this fee is going to disproportionately impact new and growing constituencies and areas across the province. Edmonton-South West is certainly one of those constituencies because we have some of the fastest new home growth that we're seeing, lots of young families moving in, so it will impact many of my constituents. It shows that the UCP government – you know, at best maybe I can say that they're not really thinking through their policy decisions thoroughly, but at worst I would say that they're not really in it for Albertans but are really kind of focused on their own interests and the interests of their friends.

3:30

Because in addition to raising fees that we see in the Land Titles Act specifically, we also see changes in Bill 10 to the accountability legislation in which there will actually be less reporting on government expenditures, particularly on the Alberta carbon capture and incentive program and the newly created Alberta fund. In other words, they're creating these sort of mechanisms in which government can spend money, but they're ensuring that it's more difficult for the public to hold this government accountable, that there's less transparency. That, to me, Madam Chair, is not only a curious decision, but at worst I wonder what it is that this government is trying to hide and why this specific change is necessary. With this change Albertans will see less financial information on the quarterly update. It also shows, you know, where the government's priorities are. We've seen earlier during the session that they're more interested in removing caps on salaries for their friends rather than addressing affordability in any real or any meaningful way.

In summary, Madam Chair, Bill 10 is a missed opportunity. It is emblematic, I think, of the broken promises by this Premier and this government. I think what pains me most is that we all have the opportunity to do really good things in this House, to in earnest try to address the everyday problems of Albertans, and I just don't see this government doing that. The government is not making life more affordable for Albertans. They're not making life more affordable for the average homeowner who is about to buy their first home. They're tacking on more fees so that they pay more, and it's one of those charges that if you don't really notice, you know, you won't really notice that it's been downloaded onto you. We're seeing that as a pattern. A lot of, I would say, the increases in costs to the average Albertan, particularly around property taxes at the municipal level, are in fact attributable to cuts in transfer payments from the provincial government. What they're doing is that they're downloading costs to Albertans, albeit in sneaky ways at times, and they're not fulfilling what they're telling Albertans they'll do, which is address affordability. They certainly haven't done that.

So I speak against this bill, and I encourage my colleagues across the aisle to either revamp this bill, make it better, or, frankly, defeat it. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Beddington.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise today to speak in opposition to Bill 10, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. This is an omnibus bill. It does a few things: amending the Film and Television Tax Credit Act, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act, the Land Titles Act, the Tobacco Tax Act, the Sustainable Fiscal Planning and Reporting Act, and the Investing in a Diversified Alberta Economy Act. When I was reviewing this bill, the first thing that stood out to me was the change to the Personal Income Tax Act as it relates to the Alberta Is Calling program. I do have quite a few comments on that, but I wanted to just quickly touch base on a few other features of this bill.

The first is what maybe seems like a small change, and that's the change to the Land Titles Act. What it does is that it increases the cost of buying and selling a new home, and that is through a change in the fee charged for land titles. You know, I think we know that we're in a housing crisis. I know from talking to young people that there are many of them who worry that they might not ever be able to afford to buy a home, and these are young people making good salaries. This is something that is feeling increasingly out of reach for this next generation. So when I see things like this, things that add to the cost of buying a home, I know I do feel some concern about what this means for these young people.

Another change that stood out to me was the changes to the Sustainable Fiscal Planning and Reporting Act. These changes were concerning particularly because they appear to decrease transparency.

The change here would allow the UCP to avoid reporting on Alberta fund expenditures and the Alberta carbon capture and incentive program. Two weeks ago, I believe, my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar did a really excellent job of laying out all the particulars about why this is a uniquely terrible piece of policy. I would certainly encourage everyone in the House to go back and review his excellent comments on the issue.

But I'll move on to my main here. It can be easy to get lost in the weeds on these omnibus bills; there's just so much poor policy, you know, that we can talk about in here. It's the changes to the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act that really stood out to me. Of course, this was something that was actually a campaign promise. It's probably why it was the most noticeable to me, because so little of the legislation that we have been discussing this session has any connection to the platform that this government actually ran on. The government release on this bill claims that this program will help attract talent to fill labour shortages. That's through the application of the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus. You may all remember this bonus because it was a campaign promise. During the campaign, if you recall, it was $1,200 that was going to be offered to folks who moved to Alberta, stayed here for a year, in three key areas. Those areas were health care, child care, and trades.

Now, the program as presented in this bill has changed a little bit. The bonus has become much more attractive, now offering $5,000 to eligible workers. I was heartened to see that the UCP did hear the criticism that we offered on that original amount of $1,200. It was our Member for Edmonton-South West last year who called the $1,200 bonus wholly inadequate, and he was absolutely right about that. He noted that at the time Nova Scotia was offering much larger bonuses for nurses, $10,000 bonuses for nurses, and even higher amounts for physicians. It was our Member for Edmonton-South West who rightly pointed out that we are facing shortages of health care workers across the country and that $1,200 really just wasn't going to cut it. So I was glad to see that the UCP did hear and not just hear but action that feedback. Never let it be said that I haven't supported a position of this government because I do support the increase in the benefit that's being offered to workers.

Now, unfortunately, that's not the only change that was made from the original campaign promise. There's a bigger change that I do find much more concerning, and that's the categories of eligible workers. Instead of focusing on health care, child care, and trades, the category has now been reduced down to just trades. There was a good CBC article about this, Janet French, published March 12, 2024. Title of the article: Alberta Unveils Tax Credit to Lure 2,000 Skilled Tradespeople to the Province. Now, in this article the member opposite, the Member for Calgary-South East, specified that workers such as crane operators, electricians, heavy-duty mechanics, welders, and pipefitters would be the trade workers that we will be attempting to attract through that Alberta Is Calling, and this is a $10 million program to attract 2,000 workers in these supposedly high-demand careers. So I did find it interesting that very few of these fields have a forecasted labour shortage based on this government's own occupational outlook.

3:40

For anyone who isn't familiar, the 10-year Alberta occupational outlook provides a long-term assessment of potential imbalances in our provincial labour market. This is where expected trends in job openings are compared to the potential pool of job seekers to identify occupations that might face shortages or surpluses. This is a resource that is updated with regularity, actually, so we've got great up-to-date figures in there to work from; it's updated every two years.

If we take a look at this occupational outlook, the main shortages are forecasted in construction trades and engineering occupations related to construction, computer programmers, information system analysts, health occupations – that's really across the sector and education levels in health, though they do cluster quite a bit around nursing in particular – and also projecting some shortages in educators for primary schools and colleges primarily. These are the top four areas that are highlighted in this report, and none of the trades mentioned by the Member for Calgary-South East are even cracking the top 10 in predicted labour shortages.

In fact, when you look at the occupational outlook, of those five career areas that I mentioned, only welders and electricians are forecasting labour shortages. Crane operators and heavy-duty equipment mechanics are actually forecasting a surplus of workers. The figures out to 2027 for these heavy-duty equipment mechanics are a surplus of workers of 541; by 2030 that surplus will grow by 847. So it's not entirely clear to me why we feel this need to be attracting into this field when it looks like our own data is saying that we are going to have a surplus of workers in that area.

Crane operators is another one. You know, the surplus is a bit smaller, but it is, in fact, a surplus that we're projecting out to 2030, so this isn't somewhere where we're seeing a real shortage of workers. I'm just not entirely sure what problem the government is trying to solve here. I do have to ask myself where they are getting this information on supposed labour shortages if not from their own reporting.

Where has the Alberta government identified labour shortages? It's those four key areas that I mentioned. It's the construction trades, computer programmers, health occupations. It's the nurses – that's where we're really lacking, nurses – and educators. It is concerning that two of those sectors have seen really big increases in their labour force age. In the health sector we're seeing 17 per cent of the labour force over 55 years of age; in construction it's 19 per cent. You know, I don't know that we're seeing a plan from this government to address this aging workforce.

You know, sidebar a little bit maybe, but yesterday and today, actually, I did hear some criticism from the members opposite about reading remarks into this House. Putting aside that there are plenty of us who organize our thoughts by writing them down – and I don't think that there's any reason to pass judgment on how a person chooses to organize their thoughts before they speak in this House – one of the reasons I often write a lot of things down is because I am not keen to memorize these statistics. You know, aside from this bill debate I'm engaging in right now, I don't find that I need to know what percentage of the workforce in construction trades is over the age of 55. I do find it a relevant piece of information to bring into the House in discussion of this bill, and that's the reason that I've written it down. That's the reason that I've written down a lot of these statistics, facts, and figures that I'm talking to you about today. I do believe that we should be talking about these numbers, and I do believe that we should approach bill debate from an evidence-informed position.

Oh, yes. I also have to write things down, too, because 15 minutes is longer than you think it is, and sometimes you lose the plot a little bit. I think I have a few minutes left here, and I really want to point out that one of the things that really stood out to me is the job categories that were dropped from the Alberta advantage program. Originally, as a campaign promise, we were looking to attract, in addition to those trades, child care workers and health care workers, and, Madam Chair, I'm not sure why exactly we have dropped those trades from this attraction bonus. I have certainly not seen any evidence from the government about other measures that are being used to attract these workers to the province, and when we look at

these professions that we're talking about like nursing, we are predicting enormous shortages in these roles.

For registered nurses by 2027: predicting a shortage of 2,250 nurses in the province. By 2030 that grows to 4,428. LPNs: similar numbers; a shortage of 1,829 by 2027, growing to a shortage of 3,187 by 2030. Nurses aides: this one's big, too; it's 1,499 cumulative shortage predicted by 2027, 3,400 by 2030.

You know, one of the things that really stands out to me when I look at these figures is who nurses are, and, of course, nurses are primarily women. Ninety two per cent of nurses are women, in fact. Child care workers are primarily women, too. So why is it that these fields, the fields that primarily employ women, are being left out? We see this government issuing these $5,000 bonuses for really heavily male-dominated fields, fields that I've shown you where we are not predicting a shortage in workers. And when I say male dominated, I do mean male dominated. If you're looking at crane operators, it's only 5 per cent women. Pipefitters, one of the ones that was called out by this government: 2.2 per cent.

Across all of these trades, what we see is that they employ fewer than 5 per cent women, so I really wanted to raise that today because I do think that it's an important piece when we look at where the gaps are, not only where the gaps are in our labour force, but where are we looking to use these sorts of programs to attract people to these fields? It is certainly not lost on me that it is the fields like health care and child care where we primarily have women working. I don't feel that we're seeing the government do the work that needs to be done to attract people into these careers.

Again, I refer to my notes. Another piece that I wanted to mention about the program, too, is the cost. I had mentioned early on the Alberta Is Calling program to attract 2,000 workers. This is a $10 million program that the government is rolling out. The cost is actually $14 million. If you do the math real quick, you'll find that the $10 million is the cost. That's your $5,000 per worker for 2,000 workers. I can do that one in my head, but I did pull up my calculator just to be sure, when you get to all those zeros, right?

3:50

So $4 million, right? If you're saying 40 per cent of the cost of the program to administer and promote the program, gosh, that's a lot. You know, that's a lot that we're spending, and we're spending it, again, to attract people into some of these fields where I feel like the government has not shown us the case. They've not made the case for why we are trying to attract people, crane operators, pipefitters, heavy-duty mechanics: these places where we're predicting this surplus of workers. Or if we're predicting a shortage – actually, if you look at one of them – and I'll give you credit, actually. Electricians are one where the province is predicting a shortage of workers, a shortage of workers of 1,700 by 2027, but it's so far eclipsed by the shortages that we see coming in those health care professions.

Right. We were on the cost of the administration of the program, so $4 million for administration and promotion. You know, I think I just haven't been convinced. I haven't been convinced that the benefits of the program are going to weigh well against the cost of delivering the program. Certainly, I would love to hear from the minister just some explanation on that, on why those costs are so high to administer this program. We know that the Canada Revenue Agency did decline to administer this program for Alberta. I would love to get some clarity on that and why that happens. I know there are some concerns, too, around enforcement. What happens if someone receives the retention bonus tax credit when they shouldn't? But mostly what I would love to hear from the minister is really just that explanation on why the cost of administering that program is so high.

Oh. You know what? I know that I have other colleagues who would like to speak on this. Yeah? Okay. I am going to go ahead and take my seat so that they can have a moment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm proud today to stand before this Chamber to support Bill 10, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. This bill, if passed by the House, will serve to allow for key elements in Alberta's budget to be implemented. This is a budget that supports and strengthens Alberta's world-leading health care and education systems. This bill, if passed, would also ensure that my children aren't burdened with paying back the debt from the government's spending from today. It is the third consecutive balanced budget from this UCP government, a sharp contrast from the previous NDP government record. This year I'm proud to say that we're going to post a surplus of $367 million even during a time of low oil prices.

Now, I'd like to start off with one of the things that encourages me, Madam Chair. You know that by passing Bill 10, this will implement the Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus. This would be done as a one-time $5,000 refundable tax credit that will be provided for up to 2,000 out-of-province skilled trade workers to move to Alberta and utilize their trades. This is a $10 million credit that is budgeted to directly support new Albertans establishing themselves in the province, which will fill much-needed labour shortages and support the continued growth of our economy.

Now, this is one that I'd like to sit and actually commend the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade for. If we look to the NDP, in 2016 they created a similar kind of system. It was a tax credit. It was that we were going through one of the most horrific job losses in our history once they got elected. Horrific. My constituency was seeing record unemployment. I had people coming into my office, Madam Chair. They were crying about: how is it they're going to make their truck payments? How are they going to be able to feed their families after the NDP got in? This program that they announced was a 10 per cent refund for each new employee's salary to a maximum of $50,000 to the corporation.

You know what the running joke was for the former minister Bilous? They created one job – one job – because it was a stupid plan that the NDP put forward.

Mr. Nally: What kind of plan?

Mr. Cyr: It was a stupid plan.

You know what? The thing is that we weren't getting any jobs being created at all, any new jobs, and they were saying: "Hey, come to Alberta. We're the least business friendly government in Canada. You put your money here, and we'll give you money back." So they couldn't even buy jobs. That's the crazy thing. They couldn't even buy it. Moving forward to 2022, they didn't learn their lesson, Madam Chair, because what happened is that they actually campaigned on a $1 billion spend to create 50,000 jobs.

When the NDP looks at how to create an economy – I'll tell you the way to do that: it's low taxes, business friendly, making sure the small-business community knows we've got their back. They know for a fact the NDP doesn't, and I can tell you that when it comes down to it, the NDP will always be trying to buy jobs instead of doing what they need to do, which is giving Albertans a place to be able to continue to grow. You know what? We can't see that under the NDP. That's the problem. All we see is devastation. B.C. right now: every other province is seeing growth except for B.C., which has got an NDP government. We're seeing record growth here because we're doing it right.

You know what? People want to be here. We don't want safe supply here; we want recovery centres. We want to put people to work. We want to make sure they've got the tools to be able to do that. You know what? I can see that my government is doing it. The Premier is moving forward policy that is attractive to Canadians, and we're seeing it in record levels. We see the amount of growth happening in our constituencies. I'm going to tell you: yes, we're going through growing pains, but it's sure better than the pains that we had in 2016 and 2015, when the NDP took over. What I will tell you is that they destroyed our local economies, and they will continue to destroy any province they get into because their policy is just terrible. It's absurd to say that it works, yet they continue to do it repeatedly, over and over and over again, Madam Chair.

You know, when it comes down to a budget like this one, we are actually putting a good foot forward. We are learning from past mistakes. The NDP continue to make the same mistakes over and over again, and they keep thinking that it's somebody else's problem that they continue to fail. It isn't. Your policy fails. It will always fail because it's crappy policy.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there others wishing to speak?

Mr. Eggen: A point of order on that.

The Chair: Sorry. I'm going to let you go to your chair.

Mr. Eggen: Here I am.

The Chair: You have a point of order? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Point of Order
Parliamentary Language

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I think that perhaps we can all watch our language: 23(h), (i), and (j), I think, covers using inflammatory language, which can include something that, you know, verges on obscene. I think that the member knows that better, and I'm sure he would be happy to retract the last statement that he made there because it sounded a little bit off colour, not in keeping with the sanctity of the House, right?

Mr. Cyr: I apologize for that last outburst, for some of my language, and I withdraw those statements. Thank you.

The Chair: I consider the matter concluded.

Debate Continued

The Chair: Are there others wishing to join the debate on Bill 10 in Committee of the Whole?

If not, I will call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 10 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

4:00

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Madam Chair. I move that the committee rise and report progress on Bill 10.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. van Dijken: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 10.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. That is carried.

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading
(continued)

Bill 11
Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

[Debate adjourned April 9: Mr. Haji speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: Are there members wishing to join the debate on Bill 11? The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise to speak to Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. I really struggle with this bill, like so many of my colleagues on this side of the House. This bill truly represents another broken promise by the UCP. In the election campaign last year the Premier said that there would be no provincial police force, yet this bill enables the creation of an independent agency police service. So again we find ourselves in the House debating something that Albertans don't want, didn't ask for, and didn't vote for. Again.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

The other thing that is upsetting is that, again, this bill does not address the primary concerns of Albertans. What are the things that my constituents are telling me are primary concerns? More doctors, more child care spaces, more schools and more support staff in those schools, more funding for municipalities. Every single municipality in my riding receives less money with the LGFF model, so they're all a little bit upset about that. They need that funding for upgraded infrastructure requirements. Many communities in my riding also are requesting increased support for the tourism-based economy that we drive in this province. None of those things are being addressed by this government in general, and they're certainly not addressed in this bill.

The municipalities have made it clear that they don't want this. They've also made it clear that they need more funding to make up for the cuts to municipal funding that have occurred over the last few years, yet the idea of a provincial police force will cost them more. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that one of my growing concerns right now is the increased costs facing all of the municipalities in my riding and how often I hear from every municipal councillor and mayor and reeve that I meet with about how those increased costs to municipalities are really affecting their ability to provide services for our constituents. Something that doesn't come up is the need for a provincial police force, yet here we are.

This is just another example of the province downloading costs to municipalities and not actually providing them the support that they need to meet commitments. So what is the need? I have asked my constituents what their need is around policing. I've had some really great conversations with our rural crime watch folks, who are volunteers working really hard to connect communities to each other and to connect communities to law enforcement to address rural crime, which is a significant concern in large landscapes, where people are really spread out and it may take a while for any kind of law enforcement, whether that be RCMP or sheriffs, to come to a situation where they are needed. What the rural crime watch is asking me is literally for minimal support: about $1,000 a year for operations. It's such a little amount of money that it astounds me that they can't just get that. This bill does not provide for that funding for rural crime watch to help fill in those gaps.

What I also hear from rural RCMP and from rural people in my riding is that the RCMP needs more capacity, not less; that sheriffs need more capacity; that we don't actually need to create a whole new system here. The system already exists. We just need to amplify it. I've also received some e-mails from constituents stating support for the RCMP and requesting additional funding for RCMP capacity.

I want to emphasize here that the RCMP in Banff-Kananaskis are part of our community. They are really great people who build relationships in the community. They build relationships with youth and adults and seniors and all kinds of stakeholders. They are at community events. We know them by name; they know us by name; we recognize each other on the street. They're part of our community. So when an RCMP is posted to Canmore or Banff or to the MD of Foothills, that relationship building takes a long time. There is a trust that forms there between the community and the RCMP officers. It's not a trust that any of us take lightly, so the idea that the government somehow wants to interfere in the structure of the law enforcement relationship in rural communities is something that is very concerning for my constituents. They don't want to lose the RCMP. They don't want to lose the sheriffs that we have. If anything, we want to see more of them.

There is a request that has come to my office from constituents for an $80 million investment for the Alberta RCMP, which would fund 400 new RCMP officers across Alberta. This is the request for increased capacity for policing. What I'm not getting is that those 400 new officers need to be in a completely different and newly created branch of policing. People just want our existing systems to be boosted, not replaced. In my discussions with municipalities I have tried to ask them how much they think a provincial police force might cost them. Part of the challenge with this bill is that municipalities haven't really been consulted, but again they could be the ones bearing the brunt of the cost associated with a provincial police force.

The town of Canmore has estimated that a provincial police force could cost double; the town of Banff doesn't actually know because they haven't been provided answers by this government around how much a provincial police force could cost them; and the MD of Bighorn is already concerned about the cost that they invest in policing and enforcing regulations on public lands through a volunteer fire department and other mechanisms at their disposal. This bill doesn't actually do anything to address those concerns because this bill doesn't actually include any money in it, which I will come back to in a moment.

What does the data say? I, unlike some members opposite, like to actually base my decisions on data and evidence, not on how I feel about a certain issue or my emotional state at the time. Four out of five Albertans are satisfied with the RCMP services. As a rural Albertan I can attest to my satisfaction with my local RCMP detachment and the other RCMP detachments that I've had the pleasure of interacting with as MLA for Banff-Kananaskis. The majority of people oppose replacing the RCMP, and 6 out of 10 Albertans don't think that provincial taxpayers should pay for this.

4:10

I guess it's a good thing that there is no money in this bill. This bill is an enabling piece of legislation but doesn't actually include any budget. On the one hand, this is good because it means that we can just kind of sweep it under the desk without any financial repercussions, but on the other hand I think it also demonstrates that this government isn't actually prepared to fund policing. They're not prepared. They want to create a new police force, but they don't want to attach money to it. They want to do this, but they don't want to fund it.

So where is the money? It's not in this year's budget. I mean, maybe it'll be coming in next year's, maybe not. Who knows? We have no idea on the timeline for that kind of thing. These things are expensive. Creating something new is expensive, creating something new when you have existing structures in place is just a little bit ridiculous, and quite frankly it's a waste of money and effort.

This bill includes no funding for a police service. Albertans want policing dollars focused on the existing fully trained police services. We want existing resources for existing services as a top priority. I can't emphasize this enough. If we have a system in place, we should just amplify and improve that system. It doesn't mean we need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as they say. We don't always have to create something brand new. It's more expensive, and it takes a lot more effort to do so.

So it brings me back to the question I ask with every piece of legislation we debate in this House: why this bill, and why now? What is this for? Where is the need coming from? I'm not hearing from my constituents that there is a need for this bill, so I'm a little bit confused as to why it is a priority for this government.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Why do we need a new act, why do we need a new piece of legislation when we have existing enforcement legislation in place and could just increase the capacity of the RCMP and the sheriffs and have the same outcomes that we're looking for, which is basically just better enforcement of our laws and regulations, especially in rural landscapes? Could we not support increased capacity of existing services without having to debate legislation in the House?

The other thing that I just find a little bit funny is that this bill creates another board, and as you'll remember from last fall when we debated, there are no salary caps for boards anymore. So that's just an interesting turn of events, I guess.

One of the things I find most concerning, though, is that both the RCMP and the sheriffs were caught off guard with the introduction of this bill into the House. Municipalities have also been taken aback with the introduction of this bill, and no consultation has happened. I don't think it's appropriate for a government to introduce a bill in the House that is as significant as this, that actually catches the people most affected off guard. There should be government consultations when we are talking about something as important as provincial policing.

There is a cost of transitioning from the RCMP to a provincial police force that is estimated to be at least $366 million. The province would lose $170 million, and we haven't been adequately funding the RCMP or the sheriffs already. This bill doesn't do anything to address those financial gaps or that lack of capacity. So

we stand here debating a piece of legislation that is solely enabling and does nothing to address the actual concerns on the ground.

This bill creates another layer of bureaucracy because it's all new and duplicates the existing services, that are already partially funded. If we want to cut red tape so bad, it seems a little bit ridiculous to create a whole new system just because it's a pet project.

I'm also a little bit concerned about how this bill continues this antifederal rhetoric and undermining of the RCMP. I and many of my constituents are frustrated and disappointed in the antifederal rhetoric that we hear in this Chamber. It does not serve us. There is a difference between standing up for Alberta and making sure that we are treated equally and continually picking a fight with the federal government. It's not serving us. People see that, and they don't like it. I hear all the time in my constituency that my people want us to collaborate, to work across levels of government, to work together to serve Albertans, yet this government seems focused on picking fights and is getting a reputation as a province who doesn't want to work with others.

We are leaving money on the table. We are walking away from free contraception, we are walking away from free federal funding supports for various things, and now we're considering a bill later, not this one, that will influence the relationship that municipalities have with the federal government. This kind of thing is not helping Alberta become a better province. It's not helping Albertans be the best that they can be, and it's not helping our communities work together.

I'm blessed to live in a medium-sized city in Alberta, which was just considered a town when I first got there, and I am blessed to spend my days roaming around a rural landscape and connecting with all kinds of constituents across my rural riding. One of the things that I have learned from every constituent that I interact with is that one of the magic things about living rurally is that rural communities are all about working together. When you live far apart and you're spread out across a landscape, it's all about working collaboratively to serve your community and to serve each other. I am constantly reminded of this by my constituents every day.

Yet I come into this House and I'm not feeling that same essence of working collaboratively. It's divisive in here, and Albertans don't want to see that, and they are not proud of us. They're not proud of what they see in here. I endeavour us to do better, and I endeavour us to think about how we work across levels of government, how we work across levels of community, and how we can work together to bridge the urban-rural divide, as it's called. This bill does not bring us together. It pulls us further apart.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there other members wishing to join the debate on Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Pleased to join the debate this afternoon on Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. It behooves me to share some of my own reflections on what this bill, amongst others that have been brought forward this session and even in previous sessions, says to me and what it tells me about the pathway of the policy framework of this government, this UCP government that was elected most recently in 2023.

It's a cobblestone of policies, a cobblestone pathway of policies that seems to lead in one direction. It may be something that most Albertans are not keenly aware of yet although I've sensed it for some time, Madam Speaker. This Bill 11 is a prime example of the type of slow walk towards separatism that this government has got Alberta engaged in. Nobody will be fooled, ultimately, by this slow walk – some might call it a sleepwalk – towards separation that is inherent in the underlying ebb and flow of many of the measures brought forward by this UCP government.

This Bill 11 is certainly one of the most clear examples of that. When, in fact, they indeed claim it's not something that we claim it is, it's pretty clear that it actually is what we claim it is. In other words, any time the UCP finds it necessary to say what their legislation is not, it's pretty much an inevitability, a guarantee that that's exactly what the legislation really is all about. If you're in a mode of denial, where you're trying to tell the world, "Well, no, no, that's not what it is," it's pretty clear that it probably is what it is, Madam Speaker.

These cobblestones in this pathway towards separation are clear to me. I've been down this road before in my academic studies in the 1980s with tomes that were written by Larry Pratt and Allan Tupper. *Western Separatism* is one of the books that comes to mind. I've taken it off the shelf again, and I'm actually rereading it to see how it juxtaposes against some of the actions of this particular government. I will be following and reporting in further debate in this House just exactly what parallels I see.

I will accept your intervention, Member.

4:20

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. You know, I find it interesting. I was just reading the news from this morning – and I strongly suspect that this UCP government is watching this with bated breath as well – that the PQ, the Parti Québécois, in that province is polling very high. The threat of separatism or the talk about separatism in that province has come to the fore again. Again, it just reminds me – I'm sure that these UCP people are watching the same thing and anticipating something there. Yeah. I mean, this is a series of calculated moves with the pension plan, with the police force and other issues. Anything that resembles our ties to the nation – right? – these guys take a swing at. They talk about: what's the real cost of removing the RCMP? It's hundreds of millions of dollars to move from the RCMP to a provincial police force, but it's much more than that. It's a nation.

Mr. Dach: Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you very much, Member, for that insight.

I'll pursue some of those themes in my discourse as well, Madam Speaker. Whether it be, as the member alluded to, moving to an Alberta pension plan from the much beloved Canada pension plan, whether it be the elimination of the RCMP in favour of an Alberta police force, nobody is fooled by these claims that Bill 11 simply provides, in this case, a framework to enable existing Alberta police services to operate under a framework or an operational agenda that other police services have.

The creation of this police agency that is contemplated under Bill 11, Madam Speaker, is certainly designed to enable the creation of a provincial police force in Alberta. That's something that is readily apparent to people right across the province, and they've made their voices heard. There are prominent voices that have spoken against this measure and have done so publicly, and I can perhaps paraphrase a couple of them and bring their voices to the floor of the Legislature.

One of them that caught my attention was a voice that was raised in public discourse where a criminology and sociology professor at the University of Alberta, Temitope Oriola, who previously advised this government on changes to the Police Act, said that Bill 11 is setting Alberta on a path to having a provincial police service to replace the RCMP. What many Albertans have said were words that Mr. Oriola used to describe what he sees happening here with Bill

11. I quote. It says that he said: if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. He said: let's just call it what it is; this is going to be, for all intents and purposes, if not immediately, over time, a provincial police service.

Madam Speaker, what I said earlier was that any time the UCP government finds it necessary to start explaining what something is not in the legislation, it is pretty evident to Albertans that that is exactly what they're planning to do. People aren't getting fooled by it although the overarching motivation and theme that we see here, as evidenced in this Bill 11, one of a slow march towards separation, is something that I think Albertans will become more and more convinced of as we see increasing numbers of these measures come to the fore. Of course, the Member for Edmonton-North West recently just mentioned in discourse that the Alberta pension plan is another example of this slow march towards separation.

I don't know, Madam Speaker, if indeed the caucus of the UCP is fully aware of the sleepwalk that they're taking with their leadership towards separatism, that I studied earlier in my academic career, my schooling in university in the early '80s, when western separatism rose its head and became a thing with people like Mr. Elmer Knutson from the Western Canada Concept being in leadership positions, a gentleman who I interviewed for a paper during my university days. It was something that alarmed me a lot because that's something I'm diametrically opposed to because, as I mentioned in this House before, I'm very much a Canadian citizen first and a resident of Alberta.

As the Member for Edmonton-North West spoke about briefly and mentioned, you know, Quebec separatism and how close we came to dividing the country and losing our nation into some other form of union in 1980, during that time, in the spring of 1980, Madam Speaker, I was in Quebec as a 23-year-old student on an immersion program in Jonquière. I heard and learned from people of my age who spoke about the grievances that they felt they had with federalism and the Canadian national government and its role in not being fair to the province of Quebec. It really, really troubled me as a 23-year-old right to the core that I couldn't reach some of those individuals, my classmates, with the arguments that I had about the benefits of federalism and how it should work and how, in fact, their protections were there that otherwise wouldn't be if indeed the Quebec state became a separate state.

I mean, the arguments are much less embedded in history for a western separatist movement, but little by little, Madam Speaker, this government seems to be trying to lay the groundwork and build the wooden sidewalk towards that shore. I'm deeply, deeply suspicious that behind the scenes this is the type of scheming that is going on. It is ultimately why we see bills like this, Bill 11, coming forward to disassociate and to delegitimize the role of the federal government in this province, to demonize the federal government at every opportunity. In fact, I find it pretty counterproductive because that's not where Albertans are.

It is certainly where the UCP caucus seems to be. It seems to be where the tune that they're following seems to be, a separatist tune, and it's a theme that underlies a lot of their legislation, yet the caucus itself doesn't seem to be fully aware of it. In fact, I live to hope, actually, that they're not because if indeed they were and it was the whole caucus who was on the separatist pathway, it would be even more alarming. But as I see it right now, Madam Speaker, it's the leadership and the underlying policy people and, frankly, the right-wing rump and the Take Back Alberta movement who are behind this separatist force that is ruling the province right now through its membership and through its influence that it has on policy within the government. Increasingly, Albertans will become aware of it.

But let's speak a little bit about the bill itself, Madam Speaker. I suggest to the House and Albertans listening that indeed the proposal put forward to create in Bill 11 a framework for policing agencies to operate under is really intended to replace the RCMP with an Alberta police force. It's not something that is desired by the population in Alberta. The polling that I've had opportunity to see is that a majority of the population in this province feels the government, in looking to replace by sleight of hand the RCMP through the back door by enabling legislation such as Bill 11 to enable the creation of a police agency and potentially an Alberta police force – the majority of Albertans say that the government is going in the wrong direction in doing that and it's not something that they support, and it's not seeming to deter the government in any way, shape, or form, as have other measures or other public sentiments failed to deter the government from moving forward.

4:30

Perhaps we should stand by and let that happen and not give the government any fair warning about the lack of wisdom in their choices and their policy directions because they'll be the victims of their own demise. But, Madam Speaker, I do stand on behalf of the majority, the large majority, of Albertans who say: look, we're not interested in getting rid of the RCMP; we're satisfied with the RCMP. Not everybody, but a large majority are, and it's not something that they wish to entertain.

The cost of replacing that force is huge, and Albertans see no reason to do so. They see as a solution, certainly, properly funding the RCMP and making sure that the positions that need to be filled in detachments right across this province are properly funded. That's what they see as the basis for the complaints that people have against the RCMP. It's not because they are the wrong police force; it's because they are not properly supported.

I think everybody in this Chamber, if not related to, certainly has friends who are members of the RCMP, and we have a long history of pride in that force in this province. It's not without its issues or its problems over time. We're at a point now, Madam Speaker, where we wish to maintain it but we also wish to make sure it's not starved of funding so that it can do the job that we ask it to do.

The people that I speak with in my constituency who are past members, retired members, some current members as well who wish to remain anonymous for obvious reasons are always repeating the theme that the funding isn't there, and that lies at the feet of the provincial government, Madam Speaker.

The provincial component of funding is lacking, and that's one of the reasons we have a number of police officers, a shortfall of them in detachments right throughout the province. There is a definite sufficient number of applicants applying for these jobs.

I happened to attend the training centre in Saskatchewan. I've had the opportunity to see how rigorous the training can be and is, and I must say that of the police services I've seen, it's . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I seek the indulgence of this Assembly to make a quick correction on the record for a report to the Assembly from the committee vote.

I'll ask the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul to read it again.

Mr. Cyr: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 10.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. So carried.

Thank you.

Are there any members wishing to continue in the debate on Bill 11? Seeing the hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Today I rise to address Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Bill 11 has two key elements. First is the creation of an independent agency police service that would be responsible for carrying out policelike functions currently performed by peace officers and the Alberta sheriffs. The second element paves the way for a provincial ankle bracelet monitoring program for violent sexual offenders as well as those on bail who pose a risk to public safety.

As a parent this is tremendously important to me. To explain why it is so important, I must share a tragic story which leaves me with a heavy heart. In September 2021 Cody McConnell was put through something that no father or partner should ever be forced to bear. Upon coming home from work, he realized that his fiancée Mchale Busch and son Noah McConnell were nowhere to be found. He called friends and family to see if they knew anything. He knocked on every door in his apartment complex, all to no avail. It was early the next morning when Mchale and Noah were found, and Cody's panic and worry turned to grief and anger. Noah was discovered abandoned in the dumpster outside the apartment, and Mchale was found next door in the apartment of her neighbour, Robert Major.

How could this have happened? How could a neighbour, the person you normally borrow a cup of sugar from when you need it for a recipe, have turned out to be capable of such an unthinkable crime? Whatever made Robert Major commit this act, I don't know, but what I do know is that he should have never had the chance.

Robert was known to be dangerous. Upon his release from prison in 2017, the police issued a public warning that they suspected he would commit another sexual offence against a female, including children, while in the community. Beyond this, he was on several court-ordered conditions when he moved from Edmonton to Hinton, where he would commit the enormous evil that I just discussed. There is no record of when he moved. How he moved into an apartment complex with women and children, near parks and schools, all without residents of the building knowing, is unthinkable.

Cody and Mchale moved to Hinton from Camrose, so I have supported Cody and his family and friends over the last many, many months. The pain everyone involved experienced is unthinkable. Noah and Mchale's deaths were not only senseless but preventable.

I truly cannot think of a more harrowing call to action than this story, yet even today the federal government is not only failing in its duty to keep people safe but has actively made the problem worse by implementing a catch-and-release bail system that makes our communities less safe and robbed so many of their peace of mind.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, Cody started working together with the Conservative MPs Gerald Soroka and Blaine Calkins to create the proposed federal Bill C-336, known as Noah's Law. Noah, Mchale, and Cody all deserve justice, but what's more, they deserve for their governments to take action and ensure that no family ever has to go through what Mchale and Noah did. What I sincerely hope: that the federal government passes Noah's Law.

I'm glad to say that through Bill 11 our government is taking action to protect Albertans from violent and sexual offenders through an ankle bracelet electronic monitoring program. This is why when I say, "I'm proud to rise to this bill," I don't believe "proud" properly describes what I'm feeling. It's something more. It's a feeling of us on the government's side, feeling to do the right thing even if Ottawa seems intent on their soft-on-crime approach.

If passed, Bill 11 would answer this need for better supervision of high-risk offenders by amending the Corrections Act. It would provide the transparency and authority needed for the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services to administer an electronic bracelet monitoring program when the court deems it necessary. Several factors considered by the court in deciding the conditions on a court order: this may include the type and nature of the offence, the offender or accused's history, and other case-specific relevant considerations.

Bill 11, if passed, would ensure that Alberta courts would have one more tool to keep Albertans safe. A centralized monitoring unit of correctional services division personnel within the Alberta government would administer the program, monitoring compliance 24/7, helping law enforcement know when an offender enters a restricted area that violates their bail or release conditions.

Madam Speaker, stories like that of Mchale and Noah highlight the crucial need for Bill 11. With better monitoring of criminals, I hope that no one in our province ever experiences a tragedy like the one I described. I will be voting in favour of Bill 11, and I ask all members of this Assembly to do the same.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Happy to rise and speak to Bill 11, the new police service act from the UCP. You know, the Premier said before the election that they would not be pursuing a provincial police force yet in Alberta, yet here we are with legislation creating an agency for a police service. It was just another broken promise from the UCP, that we're getting quite used to, where we put out this legislation after telling people we won't be creating it.

4:40

I'll rise to speak to it. There's oversight for police services, which is a good thing. As the member was just speaking about, there are ankle bracelets which have been bolted on: very good thing. Yet you've put forward a bad bill that we are going to have to speak strongly in opposition to because we have not taken this to Albertans and had a fulsome discussion with them, socialized the idea, and got back that mandate that we should be pursuing a new police force in Alberta.

Adding to the situation, we have the UCP cutting funding to municipalities, which is going to mean fewer resources for public safety in this province. When we're asked to look at this, there are philosophical discussions that need to be had across Alberta, and these have financial impacts. We're pursuing an ideological agenda from the UCP that is going to have a massive, multimillion-dollar impact on our province.

Municipalities have said loud and clear that they are not interested in pursuing this. They're saying that they haven't been consulted and they want the government to pull back, bring this back to the public. Let's have a fulsome discussion, and then we can look and see: is having a new police force in Alberta what we should be pursuing? It's a worthy discussion that I think people in Alberta deserve to have with us.

I remember at the doors in the election talking about the possibility of a police service, and when the Premier came out in the campaign and said before the election that we will not pursue a police force, I felt the difference at the doors. There was in Sherwood Park a definite relief of: good. In Sherwood Park we have the RCMP, we have the sheriffs, we have a great collaborative agreement. We really like our system. We don't want it to be interfered and messed with by any provincial legislation.

What they did talk about was: can you please fix health care? Can you make life more affordable? Can you make sure that we have a top-notch public education system in Sherwood Park and across Alberta?

This Alberta police force idea that's come forward in Bill 11 is very costly to Albertans. It will be costly to municipalities, and Strathcona county and Sherwood Park oppose Bill 11.

I do want to have that discussion. I think it's an interesting idea. When we go and look across to Ontario, Quebec, and we see their provincial police forces, which I'm sure they brought forward after a fulsome discussion with their citizens and voters, we have this inspiration and idea, but otherwise it looks like this is a sovereign's agenda that's being run through by this UCP that's going to cost us hundreds of millions of dollars to implement and maybe not even with success.

When we look at Surrey, British Columbia, and their attempts to replace the RCMP with their own police force, they have now had to backpedal completely after hundreds of millions of dollars of spending. [interjection] Oh. My colleague would love to . . .

Mr. Eggen: Yes. If I could intervene just briefly.

Mr. Kasawski: Sure. Appreciate it.

Mr. Eggen: I just find it interesting that you brought up Surrey. You know, Sherwood Park is not just a regular detachment either, but it's a training centre provincially for the RCMP and even a regional training centre, so the tens of millions of dollars that they've put into Sherwood Park – that's where I grew up – and the new police station that they have there is not just a regular detachment, but it's a training program for the province and for the region as well.

You know, it's just like you take good money after bad. This UCP government always likes to talk about trying to save money or reducing red tape. I mean, you have another layer of confusion here with this bill, quite frankly, and, again, with the underlying threat, existential threat, to the RCMP as well. I mean, I know that the vast majority of people in Sherwood Park are against this, and the vast majority of Albertans are against this idea, too. I just find it . . .

Mr. Kasawski: I agree. When we see the discussion about the provincial police force that hasn't been brought forward, when there is surveying done and looking across at people in Sherwood Park, we find that there is not support for this. There is maybe 20 per cent of the population of this province saying: yeah, this is a great idea.

Mr. Eggen: Less.

Mr. Kasawski: Probably less. Yeah.

Why didn't the government consult the sheriffs of Sherwood Park? Why didn't they consult the RCMP of Strathcona county? Why didn't you consult Albertans? Probably because if you did, the majority would say that the UCP are going in the wrong direction with this bill.

Eighty per cent of Albertans in RCMP-served areas like Sherwood Park are satisfied with RCMP policing. The satisfaction is high across all regions. I speak well to what's going on in Sherwood Park and Strathcona county, but other municipalities surrounding the capital region are satisfied with their RCMP. In the rural south 80 per cent are satisfied with the RCMP. In the rural north, where I started my life: satisfied with the RCMP. The relationship with the RCMP in the north is historical. It's important, and the community appreciates having RCMP. In central Alberta: 80 per cent support of the RCMP. In the suburbs of Calgary: 80 per cent support. Eight out of 10 Albertans want to retain the RCMP.

Many Albertans think policing in this province needs a higher level of provincial funding. So when we look to the provincial budget, which we've just gone through, where is that additional funding for a provincial police force? They want more capacity and more funding because they want to speed up response times in rural areas, increase response to petty crimes across the board, and retain the police officers.

The majority of Albertans think we should be focusing our police dollars on existing fully trained and operating police services like the RCMP detachment in Strathcona county. A very small minority of Albertans think we should – the member across brought up a question: why doesn't Strathcona county have its own police force? Because they chose not to. That choice exists without the addition of Bill 11. This small minority of Albertans that think we need to bring in our Alberta police force without consulting our sheriffs, without talking directly to the people – the largest group of enforcement services in the province have not even been consulted on this.

The majority of Albertans are rightfully concerned with the start-up costs associated with a provincial police force. Start-up costs for a new Alberta police service, in my understanding, are estimated to be $372 million. That is the entire surplus that you borrowed money for in this current budget. Those start-up costs, which are going to require training a new police service, hiring new members, are going to have to be borne by the province or by municipal governments and always by the taxpayer. The lack of consideration for the taxpayer with this bill is improper. It's offensive.

The federal government currently pays 30 per cent of the cost of the RCMP service; $188 million annually is my understanding. And we're going to need to find that annual reoccurring cost – that's going to keep on going up with population; it's going to keep on going up with inflation – when 90 per cent of Albertans think there needs to be a detailed accounting before we make changes to policing in Alberta. It's a similar amount of Albertans that have said they want to see detailed accounting of any changes to our pension plan before we start talking about it.

Here we haven't talked about it. We haven't discussed it. We haven't socialized. We have no mandate to bring in a new police service. In classic UCP style: bring forward the legislation, and then let's do the consultation afterwards. That's probably when they're going to find out how poorly this idea is going to work.

4:50

Sixty per cent of our voters say that provincial taxpayers should not pay for a transition to the RCMP. I know we're funding a pilot project in Grande Prairie. The majority of Albertans view this as provincial money being spent in a municipality, and that's not fair. They think that if a municipal government chooses to have its own police force, like, let's say, Camrose does, fund it. Go for it. Pay for it. Choose it. Twenty per cent of Albertans think we should use provincial tax dollars to subsidize local governments that choose to replace the RCMP with a new Alberta police service, and here we are moving forward with this idea that the provincial government will fund these changes for municipalities.

The municipalities say that they were not even consulted prior to this bill arriving in the Legislature. Rural Municipalities of Alberta are very disappointed they were not consulted in the lead-up to the introduction of this legislation into the Assembly. It's an organization that represents 69 municipal districts and counties. Of course, they want enhanced capacity in Alberta for our police services. They're really concerned about the risks around having two police services in municipalities. It's a lot of work to get co-operation and collaboration among two police agencies in a community. Adding an Alberta police service into communities will require a lot of work for these start-up

costs. It's an opportunity, I suppose, for consultants to get their work so that we can try and make it work. But, then, back to Surrey, where it's our best example, it's not easy to do.

Alberta Municipalities, which speaks for cities and towns and summer villages, thinks the Alberta police force bill is just symptomatic of another nonconsultative approach by the UCP. Why are you so afraid to go and ask the voters for a mandate to do the work? You prefer back to the season of saying anything to get elected, and then once you're in government, you're going to do whatever it is you want. It's just another example of your election style and your fear of getting a proper mandate from the voters.

Now for the positive on this. The bill has two main functions. It creates a new police agency, which I know the majority of people, including the people of Sherwood Park, oppose, so I'll vote against this bill as it is. What it provides is a framework for the creation of an independent police agency, which we don't want, and we don't need to enable the UCP to establish such services. The bill lays out oversight, which I mentioned earlier – oversight is good, especially in policing – but you're pushing forward with an expensive and unpopular initiative that is not going to improve the safety of people in Alberta.

Madam Speaker, at this point I move on to let someone else speak to this bill.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Today I rise in support of the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, a crucial piece of legislation aimed at safeguarding Albertans and holding violent criminals accountable and addressing the evolving public safety needs of our communities. As was discussed yesterday by one of my colleagues, as elected representatives one of our most critical responsibilities is to ensure the safety and well-being of the people we serve. The core of Bill 11 is measures to enable the creation of an independent agency police service, and to establish a provincial ankle bracelet electronic monitoring program.

Before I speak on the benefits of this program, I need to make a comment about some of the opposition or criticisms made on this bill. This is also connected to an earlier comment on another bill as to why we don't have co-operation between the opposition and the government more. Possibly, I would comment, part of the reason is the continuing creation of nonissues and phantom propositions as to what the motivations are for the bills or our policies.

I spent the last election, going door to door, having to spend all my time explaining to people that the government of Alberta and the UCP Party had no intention whatsoever to make people pay to see a doctor, something that the opposition should know not only was not even being perceived, but it was against federal law, the Canada Health Act. It couldn't happen even if one wanted to, which, of course, we didn't, but there was a lot of effort to put a lot of attention into scaring people about something that nobody was talking about doing.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Then, you know, the Alberta pension plan idea, the concept that we discussed. We were just trying to get some conversation about the issues and get the information, but no: we're going to steal people's pensions. Of course, we can't steal people's pensions. Again, it's against the law, and nobody is intending to steal people's pensions.

Today we're talking about a bill to provide our sheriffs and other policing people that carry out responsibilities that the police carry out so they have the proper tools, legislative authority, and oversight to carry on that task. That's what we're doing.

Now, on the question of kicking out the RCMP, which is what the opposition would like people to believe, which, again, is not true – there are issues, however, in rural Alberta that need to be addressed, and the question of whether or not over the long term the RCMP will be continuing to provide that service here for our rural citizens in Alberta is yet to be discussed. There are a lot of issues there, you know, and there are a lot of challenges that both the RCMP have and we have in rural Alberta, and what this new act is going to do at this current time is just to facilitate, to add, and augment the overall policing authorities that exist in a number of areas, including rural Alberta, but it's not just exclusively for rural Alberta.

On that question of a provincial police force, when did Ontario create the Ontario Provincial Police? In 1909, when it had a population of 2 and a half million people, right? Two and a half million people, and they felt that there was a need for a provincial police authority to help, with the RCMP, govern the issues related to Ontario. When did the Quebec government create their provincial police? In 1870, when they only had 1.2 million people. At that time Canada's two largest provinces, with much less of a population than Alberta has right now, felt it was necessary to have another force that would augment the RCMP support that they were getting in their province. It's not outlandish. It has nothing to do with separation, has nothing to do with anything at all except providing the service that we need.

As an urban representative I recognize that the RCMP does not cover policing activities for our urban residents. I have a lot of passion, you know, love, and admiration for the iconic RCMP in our country, but this is not what the act is about.

With that, I would say that I would like to call to close debate and vote on this.

The Speaker: Just to clarify, you're asking to adjourn debate?

Mr. McDougall: Yes. I am. I certainly am.

The Speaker: Hon. members, having heard the motion as proposed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek . . . [A cellphone rang] Oh, man. That almost sounded like a cellphone ringing from the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon. He's very well aware of the consequences of his actions.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has moved to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

5:00

Bill 12
Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024

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

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to move second reading of Bill 12, the Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024.

Alberta's government has a responsibility to ensure consumers are confident, that they have a level of safety and protection in the marketplace. We are also committed to ensuring a level playing field for the companies who compete for Albertans' business. A life lease is a major commitment both for the consumer and the housing operator. A leaseholder and the operator sign a contract. In exchange for an upfront entrance fee the leaseholder, usually a senior citizen, gets an affordable living arrangement and in some cases additional supports tailored to their needs. When the lease comes to an end, the entrance fee

is returned in full or in part to the leaseholder or their estate depending on the agreement in place.

This is a major investment. Often the leaseholder is putting up their life savings. Those considering entering such an agreement deserve to feel confident in their choice, knowing that there are protections in place to safeguard their interests. Currently there are 22 housing operators offering life leases as an option in Alberta; of those, 17 are not-for-profit organizations and five are for profit, Mr. Speaker. Up to now the life lease industry has been unregulated, subject only to contract law. In the vast majority of cases that has been enough, and the arrangements are working for both the operator and the leaseholder. But, unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, there have been some situations that have shown us clearly that more protection and clarity are required.

Mr. Speaker, since becoming minister, I have heard heartbreaking stories from some life lease holders and their families about the incredible stress and frustration that they've been put through, especially around getting their entrance fees returned and a lack of clarity in the process. We've seen the stories in the media: seniors picking up thousands and thousands of dollars in entrance fees for a life lease. When the lease ends, because they have a change in the situation – perhaps they need a higher level of medical care or they even pass away – they or their grieving families can end up waiting months or even years to get their entrance fee refunded. This is not acceptable.

Last fall ministry officials and I met with many families caught up in this, and the stories they told me made my blood boil. We met with 170 Albertans, all of them life lease holders or their families. I came away from those meetings determined to make sure that moving forward, Alberta's life lease holders are better protected and to give the industry clear rules and guidelines. Mr. Speaker, I want to extend my sincere thanks to the life lease holders' families who shared their stories and helped us identify what was lacking in the current protections. I also want to thank the operators who met with us. Their input will help ensure there is more consistency in the industry while making sure life leases remain a viable business option and living choice. The insights and knowledge of the families and operators have shaped the legislation we are proposing today.

The measures in this bill will help ensure that life leases remain a safe, affordable living arrangement for seniors and provide viability and stability for operators. Mr. Speaker, if passed, Bill 12 will provide clarification and transparency and set out minimum requirements for all new life lease contracts in Alberta. Contracts will be required to clearly spell out in standardized language the terms of the following: the collection and use of entrance fees, the return of entrance fees, contract termination rights, disclosure of occupancy fees, and the obligations of both the lease operator and the leaseholder.

If passed, this bill will make it mandatory for entrance fees to be reimbursed within 180 days after the contract has ended, and if that doesn't happen, any portion not returned within 180 days will accrue interest owed to the leaseholder. Bill 12 would also introduce a 10-day cooling-off period after contracts are signed. This will give consumers time to change their minds if they have second thoughts.

If passed, this legislation will place the life lease industry under the authority of the Consumer Protection Act and make it subject to all of the act's enforcement mechanisms and penalties. Under the Consumer Protection Act it will be an offence for failure to include the disclosure requirements within a life lease agreement, failure to return the leaseholder's entrance fee within 180 days of terminating the lease, and failure to use standard agreements, forms, or content established by the minister.

In addition, if it becomes clear that more is needed, Bill 12 would authorize government to add more protections for life lease holders. Some examples of these future protections could include setting the interest rate for overdue refunds, adding standardized content for agreements, tighter rules around entrance fees, setting a maximum allowable and the percentage that is refundable, financial audit and disclosure requirements, requirements for insurance and financial securities, and minimum notice periods for fee increases. Mr. Speaker, penalties under the Consumer Protection Act could include anything from a director's order to a $300,000 fine per infraction or two years in jail.

Overall, this bill takes a balanced approach, recognizing the need for improved protections for consumers and acknowledging the need to keep life leases a financial, viable option for housing operators, but it is also equipped with additional levers that we can pull if we learn that consumers need more protection. Mr. Speaker, this bill is a clear demonstration of this government's commitment to support all Alberta consumers, but seniors in particular. Implementing the proposed recommendations will help prevent vulnerable seniors and their families from needless stress and anguish because of ambiguous contracts or unclear processes. The new guidelines will also protect the future viability of life leases and continue to provide seniors with housing options that are right for their needs. There are many factors that may influence one's decision in selecting the right housing, but unclear contracts should not be one of them.

Mr. Speaker, one thing that you are going to hear from the opposition as we debate this bill is for the need to put the funds in trust for the leaseholder. This is something that we also heard from the 170 Albertans that we met with, so we also consulted with the 22 operators; 17 of them are nonprofits. When we met with the nonprofits in particular, they made it very clear to us that if this money has to be put in trust, it will increase their costs and the costs will be passed on to the leaseholder. That would take away the affordability option of life leases.

To be clear, Mr. Speaker, in Alberta life leases are an affordability measure. Leaseholders pay well below market, but that industry will be killed if this money is to be put in trust. So we looked for another option, and we found bonds, surety bonds, which for between 1, 1 and a half, 2 per cent we can provide the security and the peace of mind. The challenge is that there isn't a surety bond on the market for life leases, so what we did is that we wrote the legislation with flexibility. We wrote it with flexibility, and I would refer all members to page 5, 41.6(1)(d), (g), and (h). In there, it references both putting the money in trust, because that still would be an option, but it also references the ability to put in surety bonds, so it has that kind of flexibility, so if a surety bond comes on the market, we would be able to change that regulation to reflect that.

I know that the critic for service Alberta is aware of this, or at least he ought to be, Mr. Speaker, because if he consulted with the 17 nonprofits – and I'm sure he did. If he consulted with them, they would have told him the exact same thing that they told me: putting this money in trust will kill the affordability measure of this industry. Now, I hope that there are no NDP MLAs that stand up in this House and ask for the money to be put in trust, because if they do, that would tell us that there was no consultation with the nonprofits, and I hope that's not the case. I would offer to my colleague from Falconridge that if he did not do that consultation, I would be happy to share the contact info so that he may do that consultation and he could hear from them directly, from the 17 nonprofits. They will tell that individual the same thing they told me: please don't kill the affordability of this industry.

5:10

There are many Albertans that still want to participate in the life lease industry. We can see that because of all the buildings there are in the life lease industry. Many of these leaseholders do not want to move out because they are paying well below market value. Some of these leaseholders could see their payments go from $1,500 to $4,000, $5,000, or more, Mr. Speaker. So make no mistake: while we need to provide protections for Albertans to make sure that what happened never happens again, we also have to find that balance so that we don't kill the industry and hence take away the affordability aspect of it. Again, I would encourage any members to reference page 5, 41.6(1)(g) and (h), and they will see that there's flexibility in the legislation to allow for surety bonds in the future.

Mr. Speaker, I am particularly proud of this legislation. I am proud of this legislation because it will go a long way to make sure that this does not happen again, that Albertans do not struggle to get their money back.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I invite the support of the House on this bill and move second reading. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction has moved Bill 12, Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024. Is there anyone wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge has the call.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We heard from the minister of service Alberta, and what we have heard from the life lease members is way more different. You know what? Bill 12 does nothing to allay the concerns of Albertans who have millions of dollars tied up in life leases, people who have worked hard their entire lives, and when it's time for them to ease life or live happily with peace, they gave their hundreds of thousands of dollars to some of the life lease operators, the companies. As we did discuss with them – we talked to them – there were millions and millions of dollars that people haven't gotten back. They don't get any support from the government, from the minister. And you know what? It's another broken promise by the UCP. You know what they say outside? The UCP make promises to break promises. That's what we're hearing a lot at the doors, in the communities, in the House.

Well, as we know, Alberta has the highest rate of inflation in Canada, with housing costs skyrocketing due to the UCP's policies. Look at the insurance rates; look at the utility rates. Yes, we celebrate here that people are moving to Alberta, but you know what? They are being pushed out by other provinces because of affordability. People had hope for Alberta, but you know what? They're moving back. People can't afford that much in insurance rates, utilities, plus now there is another: the land title which has been doubled by the minister. On one side, we are talking about affordability, but on the other side we're doing the total opposite to it.

The minister's mandate is to ensure that appropriate protections are in place for Albertans who signed life lease housing contracts, but this bill does nothing for the people who are owed millions of dollars from cancelled life lease contracts. We have met the families. We had a delegation, and I would like to thank my colleagues as well from St. Albert, Edmonton-Whitemud, and Lethbridge-West, who have all been working hard and advocating for them.

We have tabled a petition here, tabled a document as well, where the minister first said: it's a Facebook group. We have tabled their e-mail that they informed the minister when they registered their organization. The minister says they have met them, but we were told they have not been contacted.

This new bill, Bill 12, amends the Consumer Protection Act to include life lease contracts but only the new contracts, not contracts already signed. What's the government or the ministry doing to protect those seniors? I've seen people who are in a wheelchair, people who have passed away. Their families are waiting for months and years to get the money back, their hard-earned money. The bill details that life lease provisions must include the collection, use, and return of entrance fees, cancellation rights of life leases, including notice and conditions of cancellation, and a cooling-off period for the life lease holder after it's signed, termination right for landlords. You know what? This bill, instead of making their life easier, is making their life hard. Like, we have the same companies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. They get 90 days to return their money, but here the minister has increased it to 180 days, six months, which makes it even worse for them.

A life lease is a form of housing tenure. I would like to get back into the details about that. The life lease is a form of housing tenure where the life lease holder buys the right to occupy a unit in a particular development for a fixed term for life or until the leaseholder can no longer live independently.

The Christenson Group of Companies is holding millions and millions of dollars, and they're making tons of money from it, but the minister only said, like, they will get $300,000 in fines and two years of prison for taking hundreds of millions of dollars from them.

After paying the entrance fee, life lease holders are offered assurance that the monthly housing costs will be low and predictable. In addition to the entrance fees, monthly payments typically cover management, operations, and maintenance. That's what they say. But if we talk to those groups, they're worried. They're stressed out. Their hard-earned money: they're not getting it back. They had hope from the government, from the minister, but, as we all know, it's all useless. It didn't happen. They were here last week in the Assembly, in the gallery, and whatever they were hearing from the ministry was totally different from whatever they've been told. I know where the gap is; lots of things we can't say in the House, but we all know. You know what? Those people, the communities: they don't trust this government anymore. Whatever they say here, they do totally opposite to that. As the minister said, the funds cannot be put in trust. But there must be other ways to protect the seniors. That's your job. That's your duty.

What we have noticed here as well: blaming others to hide their own incompetency, to hide their own failures is not going to work. You've got to do something. Albertans gave you a chance to work for them, not for the bigger corporations. We feel very sorry when we talk to those people and whatever their families are going through. Like you said, instead of putting the funds in trust, the UCP looked at surety bonds, but there are no surety bonds for life leases currently. We can't defer another month and months and years to work on it. Those people can't live that long. While the minister acknowledges that people currently owed money from Christenson have not been grandfathered in because the bill is not retroactive, those people are always front of mind, but he cannot comment on that.

What else is he doing to protect those people, those hundreds of families? We all know that the UCP is doing nothing for the seniors and their families who are currently owed tens of millions of dollars, and this bill allows unscrupulous operators to get away with swindling seniors and their families. The penalties and the consumer protection are too lenient given the scale of funds being withheld from seniors and their families.

5:20

The 180-day period for landlords to release entrance fees is way too long. What was the problem to keep it at 90 days? Who does

that help, instead of increasing 90 days to 180 days? Many of the people who loan landlords these funds, often in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, are nearing the end of their life. The long delay adds needless stress, uncertainty, mental health issues, anxiety, not just to the seniors but to their families as well.

If you looked at the facts, an estimated 161 residents are owed about $55 million for that group, because their lease hasn't been renewed. They have died or – sorry. I would like to get . . .

The Speaker: Sorry. Let me just interrupt. Yeah. This is the first speaker following the mover, and as a result there are no interventions during these remarks, unfortunately, but I'm sure there will be other opportunities.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Member for St. Albert.

You know, as we were talking about, a further estimated $146 million are held by this group, and the life lease holders are still in the properties. Alberta doesn't have a regulation, unlike Manitoba and Saskatchewan. We should look at those ones as well. As the minister said, like, we know there are 22 operators: 17 nonprofit, five for-profit. He advised to have a meeting with them. Yes, we will have a meeting with them, but the seniors are more important for us. We had met them, and we will meet them again.

Again, like, it says that interest is to be paid at a prescribed rate if the lease operator does not pay back the entrance fee within the 80 days. Well, people have been waiting for, like, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and there is no set point on how much interest they will get or who will get it. And return of entrance fee provisions do not apply to the life leases that already are in place. As we mentioned, we've got 171 or 161 families. What are you doing for them? What is the government doing for those seniors and those families?

Life lease requirements are over and above what the bill states: prelease payment disclosure and refund requirements, minimum allowable entrance fees, percentage returnable, provisions of lease operators to provide or submit a security. This UCP bill, as we have mentioned in the statement as well, does nothing to allay the concerns of Albertans who have millions of dollars tied up in their leases. This legislation enables almost all the decisions to be made by regulation without democratic debate or discussion in the Legislature, as would be appropriate on a matter as important as this. The minister needs to be working not just with those 22 companies but also with the seniors. He needs to listen to them. He needs to meet them. The 180 people he had consulted with: none of them were the life lease victims. They were their own people.

It is important that new legislation apply not only to the future but, please, do something for the current life lease holders as well. Given the UCP's track record of not listening to Albertans but, rather, siding with for-profit entities, this leaves us with great concern for families who need this government to stand up for them, to stand up for Albertans, to stand up for our seniors, as we got some notes from that group as well. Their families are devastated to find out now that legislation would not help them. Those were the words of the president. Well, the minister said that they were being talked about, but in reality they were not being discussed. The concerns were not being listened to.

I would like to pass on my time to the next member. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland and the chief government whip.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a while since I've had an opportunity to stand up in the House. Just for the record here, Bill 12: I'm in support of it. You know, I took an opportunity while listening to the Member for Calgary-Falconridge to pop over and ask the minister who's bringing this forward, who's from Morinville-St. Albert – and not only is he the MLA for the area; he lives in that area. He's a boots-on-the-ground type of gentleman. I asked him: Minister, what is the most – I'm standing up here to speak to this. I've got speaking notes, and I've gone through the bill, and have a few ideas. I asked him: what's the number one thing you want me to put in here? It wasn't to make jabs at the opposition. It wasn't to do any shots or anything like that. He says: "You know what, MLA? It's about protecting seniors. It's about knowing that there are 17 not-for-profit providers out there providing a service that the seniors really need. It's about providing that service and an affordable value that seniors really need."

I think the Member for Calgary-Falconridge made some fantastic points about affordability. The affordability crisis is hitting our seniors the most, anyone that's on those fixed incomes. That's where this bill is coming from. It's looking at a way of fixing a problem, making sure that our seniors can afford to have a roof over their heads, that they're not deciding between a good meal, a cheap meal, or turning the heat down, kind of like we talked about before.

Some of the points that I do want to mention with the Member for Calgary-Falconridge: we agree on the affordability crunch. But, unfortunately, the member opposite is neglecting to take some accountability, responsibility, not personally but through some of the policies of his predecessors that are literally driving this affordability issue. I don't want to get into a big carbon levy debate of what that is, but I can tell you full well that I'm getting phone calls from seniors, from people in my area that have been weathering the storm up until this point, the last 23 per cent that's hitting them, and they're about ready to tap out. So if you folks can help me out from that side, Mr. Speaker, through you to them, to figure out how we do this without getting some pressure to axe that tax and give our seniors a bit of a break here. We're doing everything we can on the electricity file. We're trying to bring things down, but, my gosh.

The member from – I can't remember your constituency, sir. Our Health critic is giving me a bit of a facetious smile. I can tell you full well that I was down in the States literally over the weekend. You want to see the impact? It's 80 cents per litre on diesel fuel. I could fill up my truck for 80 cents a litre, cheaper per litre, for diesel fuel, Mr. Speaker, through you to that member. If he doesn't think the cost of diesel keeps things moving like groceries, everything we have, if there is no impact that's passed off that's having a crunch, then I'm sorely mistaken, and I'm wasting my words. The seniors know, the people in our area know about this. Again, it's about that affordability.

Some of the key things for the life lease. I just want to go through a couple of notes here. A life lease agreement is an agreement where a leaseholder occupies a residence for the duration of their life until the agreement is ended or until they choose to leave. Typically the leaseholder pays an upfront entrance fee, some or all of which may be refundable at the end of the agreement. They also pay a monthly occupancy fee for operators, maintenance, and additional services such as meals and housekeeping, et cetera. It kind of levels it out. They get buy-in on the front end, and this survives them as well.

Life leases provide a long-term, more affordable living arrangement typically accessed by seniors, again, fixed-income folks that are looking to manage their bills. The entrance fee helps to keep the monthly payments low. So you kind of pay a bit up front to keep your residual on the back end lower, which is particularly important for seniors, as I said, on a fixed income while ensuring they have access to their

money for a later time for care services or to leave as part of their estate, as an example.

5:30

So they're not putting all that out late on the front end for everything. They're allowed to pay some down on the front end there and still have access to their potential nest eggs for the future.

Current life lease issues: there are some. Obviously, that's why the minister – God bless you, sir, bringing it from your heart to do what we can for our seniors. Honestly, we stand on the shoulders of giants. They've done so much for us.

The most prevalent challenge has been the delay in repayment of the entrance fees to the leaseholders who have ended their life lease agreement, again, cashing out that front end. As a result, gaps in the consumer protection in the life lease industry were identified, leading to the industry engagement and the creation of Bill 12.

Not only did we engage with seniors, understanding those pressures, cost pressures – as the member opposite had suggested, he would get back in his consultations to dealing with the industry folks themselves. We actually did both. You have to talk to them as well to figure out how the model works, not just that there are cost pressures, but: how do we get out of this?

The concerns were all related to one operator in Alberta, which is a lengthy list of former residents and their families who are waiting to be paid for the back-entry fee. Absolutely, these folks were having some issues, and seniors out there are trying to work through it, and our minister and our government is helping them through that. As of September 2023 there were approximately a hundred families waiting to receive money. Some leaseholders have been waiting for over two years for the repayment of the entrance fees. Again, that's the biggest one that's hitting the news and everything else, and obviously we're working through them to try to get this sorted.

The background is that the Consumer Protection Act prohibits unfair or misleading practices when entering into a consumer transaction. These protections also apply to life lease arrangements, so the protection is there. The Alberta government has tabled legislation to increase the consumer protections for Albertans in life leases and to ensure the contracts are consistent with the life lease operators. We want to make sure everything holds oil, tying up those. Life lease is an important platform of commitment. The government is committed to fulfilling the promise to Albertans, especially seniors who have spent their lives contributing into Alberta.

Again, I know the members opposite have grandparents, too. We wouldn't be here without them. They've done a lot to sacrifice for us over the years, and we want to do all the right things. I see the minister has an intervention.

Mr. Nally: Thank you. I absolutely appreciate it. As you were talking, I was listening to what you said about how this is an affordability measure, a life lease. It just hit me for the first time that not only is it an affordability measure, but it's actually a hedge against inflation. We met with the individuals that, essentially, have been victimized by this one developer. We've met with the operators. But we also met with current leaseholders, and the most extreme example I can think of – and I'm sure there are probably some more extreme – in terms of being a hedge against inflation: their lease payment is $1,500 a month. I think, as I recall, they said that they put down $150,000. Like, forget rent caps, because we know how that harms the economy. This is a true hedge against inflation because you have a price that is below market, and it's going to be a hedge against inflation the entire time that you live there. Anyway, we need to protect seniors to make sure that it never happens again.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. Well, I thank you for that, Minister.

Absolutely, once you start to explore the model here, I'm with you on that. If I were one of those seniors, I would want that flexibility. Again, you want to try to keep that nest egg that you had, and quite frankly the inflation chews away at it for all of us, you know, as I pointed that out.

In response to the recent challenges faced by some life lease holders, proposed changes to the Consumer Protection Act would increase consumer protection by providing consistency and ensuring timely repayment for the consumer funds. I think we're in, I wouldn't say – well, maybe I would say violent agreement on both sides of the aisle that we're really trying to do the best for seniors. It might be a different way of skinning the cat that we've talked about here, but the intent is there. We've explored the model both from the operators themselves, looking at the financial model and even, you know, through this conversation, looking at other ways that this is beneficial.

What does it do here? What does the amendment do itself? Alberta's seniors population is expected to reach 20 per cent of the population by 2051. It's important that a full range of housing options are available to serve the diverse needs of our seniors. You know, I can say that full well in my area – and my constituency starts on the Edmonton city limits. I often call it God's country because it's beautiful, and it's so popular that Edmonton decided to build on it so they could look west and get a good view of how pretty it is.

People need different options as they age. A lot of folks want to age in place, and then a lot of folks want to start getting a little bit closer to the city to make sure they have the amenities they need as mobility and everything else comes in there. This is one of those options to do that. That's part of the model itself. They can take the benefits of that, cash out later, and then choose to move into a different area. That's what we're trying to do here. The Member for St. Albert is shaking her head, but that's okay. We all have different opinions even if some of them are more right than left or right than wrong, I'd say.

Albertans deserve to feel safe when entering contracts and should be offered clear and fair agreements, and that's why our government has worked so closely with the leaseholders, the families, the operators to bring forward this legislation so that it was fulsome. Michelle Charlesworth, senior director of operations, Covenant Care and Covenant Living, applauds the government, first thing, in trying to protect the seniors, saying that life leases can be valuable and affordable, quality supportive living when managed appropriately; if not properly secured, they can be risky and potentially devastating for the senior's financial well-being.

Obviously, we're seeing that, and this bill is going to mitigate some of those issues that arose. If passed, this Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act would address the regulation gaps and the Albertans who choose this affordability option while also establishing a clear and consistent criteria for the lease operators, again, fixing the gaps, finding the issues that we've had, the challenges, and then making sure that everyone understands the rules of engagement going forward so that makes it very stable for everyone to carry on.

The Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act would set out minimum disclosure requirements for what life lease contracts must contain; mandate the return of entrance fees to be within 180 days of the termination of the lease; establish and create the interest penalties for entrance fees if not repaid within 180 days. That's very important, to establish that timeline, that you have a bookend, if you

would, that that needs to be taken care of. Mandate a 10-day cooling-off period after the contracts are signed: again, not engaging, being able to go fully so everyone has pause for a second thought on that if there are any changes with those contracts, which, if anyone has gone to any of those high-pressure sales things, Mr. Speaker – I'm not sure if you've managed to make it to Vegas, but every once in a while some people do squeak out of the country and go down there for whatever, and you get those high-pressure sales, and they want you to buy a condo. That would not be part of the deal here: a 180-day cooling-off period to make sure that you go forward from there. Set up board regulation authority to further regulate the life lease industry should additional rules become necessary. This includes the authority to establish security requirements for the life lease industry. Establish that noncompliance within these new requirements would be deemed offensive and under subject to enforcement of acts of the provisions.

Mr. Speaker, I'm encouraging the folks here to support the bill. Honestly, the really good consultation has taken place. We've got both parties in interest – actually, three parties in interest that we carry forward with this. It's really doing the right things for our seniors by maintaining these 17 operators and to make sure that we're good to go forward on that.

Mr. Speaker, I would encourage all members of the Assembly to vote in favour of Bill 12. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there are others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud is next.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak on second reading of Bill 12. This is a piece of legislation that I know many constituents and family members of constituents in my riding have been eager to see for some time. I will confess that prior to about last June I was not very familiar with life leases; it was not something that I had heard that much about.

But then I can tell you that I got a very quick education by my constituents in life leases and what happens when life leases are unregulated because I have the unfortunate honour of representing a Christenson Developments property called Devonshire Village, where the largest number of unpaid terminated life leases currently exists. At Devonshire Village in my constituency there are currently 55 payouts that are individuals, seniors, and their families who are waiting for a payout of their life leases from Christenson Developments.

Just to give you a picture, Mr. Speaker, those are 55 individuals representing over $18 million of owed funds. This is the seniors' own dollars. This is their money. This is their life savings. Often they have sold their family home so that they could enter into these life leases to have a place that they could live until such time at which they either could not take care of themselves and they need to go into some sort of supportive living environment or at which time they passed away, but it was to provide some security for them using their life savings. So $18 million just at this one property in my constituency.

Mr. Speaker, it's quite shocking to find that in most of these life lease agreements that were signed with Christenson Developments, the typical payout period was supposed to be 30 days with the ability to have – the agreement said something about a payment queue of up to about 6 per cent of the units were vacant at any given time. To give you a picture, at Devonshire the person who is first in the waiting list, in the payout queue waiting list, is actually almost three years waiting for payment – three years – and we're talking about substantial amounts of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars. Many of these seniors have been waiting for $300,000 to $400,000 of their own money to be repaid.

5:40

Now, you can imagine, Mr. Speaker, that this is causing an incredible amount of anxiety, of course, for those seniors who are still waiting. Let me be clear. For many of those seniors, they have moved into long-term care facilities, and they're struggling to be able to pay for those long-term care facilities, because their savings are tied up in these life leases, or there are estates where perhaps the individual, the senior, has passed away, and the family member is unable to resolve the estate. I've got messages from folks who are talking about waiting up to two or three years just to resolve their parents' estate because they are still waiting for these life leases to pay out.

Now, that's just Devonshire Village in my constituency, but this group, Christenson Group of Companies, has several properties across the province, and as of right now their outstanding life lease repayments total over $60 million, Mr. Speaker.

Now, I just want to read a little bit from a message I received from a woman, Karen Visser. Her mother, Elsie Pipke, lives at Devonshire Village in my constituency. Elsie is 99 years old, and she came to Canada. This is a quote: "They came to Canada from war-torn Europe in 1948 with nothing but the shirts off their backs for a better life for themselves and their family. Their hard work and courage helped to build this province and grow it to where it is today. The uncertainty of the life lease funds not being paid has caused a huge amount of stress and angst trying to understand how and if this will ever be resolved. My mother is not sleeping and is worried what the outcome will be. She lost everything once in her lifetime and is fearful this may happen again. At almost 100 years old she deserves to have the assurance and peace that she deserves. This money is rightfully hers, and the thought of possibly not being repaid is extremely upsetting for all of our family."

Now, I had the opportunity to meet Elsie and Karen and many, many, many other constituents and family members at Devonshire. Well, I met them inside Devonshire at first – we had a conversation – but I also joined them outside as they demonstrated in the cold weather last fall, coming into winter, trying to get the attention both of Greg Christenson, who is the owner of Christenson Developments group, but also, of course, the minister, knowing that the minister of service Alberta had in his mandate letter to build or to develop legislation to protect life leases. I was excited to see that as well because that meant that there was at least an opportunity to develop legislation that would address the concerns of these hundreds of Albertans but those who might still be entering into life leases.

Now, I want to be clear by saying that life lease regulation has been required for some time. It's been something that's been considered in this province going back to 2008 under the former PC government. They brought in legislation that fell off the Order Paper, and it didn't proceed. It's been known that this is something that needed to be regulated for some time, not because there's any ill purpose behind life leases – people generally do see it as something that is a good affordability measure that they want to be engaged in – but without any protections it was very unclear as to how they would ensure they'd get their money back. Really, this is about an agreement that is related to the life savings of seniors but is not covered by residential tenancies protections. It's not considered a condominium, and there were really no protections. It's not a mortgage, of course, so there was no real protection for these individuals.

There definitely was a need for life lease regulation. Obviously, the government recognized that, because it was part of the mandate letter of the minister for service Alberta, but this situation with Christenson Developments group drew it to a very fine point for many, many of us as to how dire the situation can be when there is complete nonregulation of this kind of a contract.

I want to be clear. One of the most difficult things for me to listen to when I was talking to these constituents and their family members was to hear from these seniors about how ashamed they felt. Like, they felt like they'd been duped. They felt like they had unwisely entered into an agreement, that they were sold something, that they should have known better. There was a lot of guilt. They felt that they were tying up the inheritance of their children and their grandchildren, and that is just an incredibly unfair, awful thing for people who have saved their life savings and are doing this for the security of themselves and their family. They're trying to be able to pay for their long-term care, and it was really heartbreaking – I'll be quite honest, Mr. Speaker – to hear these stories.

I actually have a number of messages from constituents that I've met with that I will be tabling at some point, but I want to be clear, because I'm glad that the minister of service Alberta has brought forward legislation. I had the opportunity to meet twice with the minister and to bring forward the concerns from my constituents about the need for life lease legislation. I also submitted in January, earlier this year, a detailed submission about the kinds of recommendations both to address the circumstance that was absolutely pending for my constituents around Christenson development group and their life lease agreements but also to think about what would look more broadly into life leases. There are many life leases, many nonprofit operators who are great and are doing good work, and we want to make sure that that's all regulated so that everybody has the protections they need.

I did provide those submissions, and I just want to take an opportunity to highlight why there is concern about what's in Bill 12. Overall, it does look like a lot of it will be developed through regulation. Many in this House will know – they have appeared in this House before – a group of very engaged Albertans who are representing their family members as well as themselves who have joined and have created a society, the Alberta Life Lease Protection Society. They have been advocating fiercely on this issue for quite some time. Now, they were given some assurances by the minister that they would be able to participate in the development of this legislation, and in fact I recall very clearly that in my two meetings with the minister I highlighted how important it would be for the minister to work with these individuals as they had come together, over 380 families represented, to talk about what would be in the legislation and work through it.

I really recommended that, because the best way for the government to respond and to get the support of Albertans is to work with them and consult. Unfortunately, the members of the Alberta Life Lease Protection Society have been pretty clear, pretty open that they do not feel that they were properly engaged by the minister in development of this legislation. They were quite surprised to see legislation tabled that they had not gotten an opportunity to weigh in on, keeping in mind that, yes, the minister did have round-tables leading up, but at that point a lot of these individuals were just coming to terms with what was happening with their life leases. They didn't even realize that this was going to be legislation that would be coming forward as fast as it was. It was really an opportunity for them to vent, but there was a promise of greater consultation. When I look at Bill 12 and I look at how much is left to regulations, I certainly am going to be holding this government to account that they will do that work of consulting with those individuals in developing those regulations.

But the other piece, Mr. Speaker, which must be raised, which is why there's so much concern – and the minister raised it a number of times in his comments as he was introducing this bill for second reading – is that he talked about the future protections it would provide, the future protections to those who would be entering into life leases in the future.

The reality is that right now there are hundreds of Albertans, many of whom live in my constituency, who are overburdened, stressed out. They've lost their life savings because of life lease agreements that they're engaged in right now, and the message from the minister and under Bill 12 is that there is no protection for them, that there will be no action taken to get them back their life savings, the things that they have tried to earn for their families.

That is why there is significant concern. We do need protections going forward – there's no doubt about it – but we also need to make sure that we are doing everything we can for the seniors who are currently either waiting in payout queue or those who have a life lease agreement and know that when their life lease is going to be terminated, they don't have any confidence now going forward, people like Elsie, who is currently still living in a life lease in Devonshire. Her life lease will terminate at some point, and now she's worried she has left nothing for her family. This is the kind of concern that Bill 12 completely ignores, and we need to see some recognition.

Now, I know the minister has indicated that there is an investigation going on by the consumer investigation unit. However, that investigation is limited to the rental investment property agreements that now Greg Christenson is trying to force those who are in life leases to enter into. It is not related to the nonpayment of life leases which many of these seniors are struggling with. So any of those pieces that are around, you know, repayment – and we've heard loud and clear from these folks as well that 180 days to repay what is essentially the life savings of an individual is too long, but they're struggling because it doesn't even apply to them under this legislation.

Now, the minister has also brought up, you know, that this is an affordability measure, and I think that if it's working well, it should be. But the problem is that if you're going to ask any of these individuals, any of my constituents who are waiting for payout, there's nothing affordable about the situation they're living in right now. They have given up their life savings, and they have no promises, no assurances – many of them are waiting years and years and years – that they're going to get that money back. For them, I can tell you it will be very, very disappointing to hear that anybody would characterize this as an affordability measure, because for them it is certainly not. We need to be very clear that we are doing everything we can to support these families and make sure that these situations not only don't happen again in the future, but we need to take action now.

Now, the minister has raised any concerns that might be had. Yes, I did hear from every single one of the constituents that I spoke to, from every single senior or family member, about the need to put something into a trust account. The minister has said that the nonprofit organizations that he spoke to have advised that this would make it unaffordable for them. That may be the case, and I certainly don't dispute that. I will mention that I asked the minister, again a couple of times, to provide a what-we-heard document from all of the consultations that he did, not just from the seniors and the family members but from the operators. That was not produced. I would have liked to have seen that in that document.

5:50

Further, I'd also mention that, you know, one of the other suggestions that I made in my submission to the minister, which he seemed to agree with when we had our conversation, was that perhaps life leases should only be limited to nonprofit societies because the nonprofits do seem to be conducting themselves appropriately, albeit they still need some regulation, because that's what everybody needs to have, assurance and confidence going forward.

We have some bad actors, Mr. Speaker, but we have one very, very bad actor, and that bad actor is Greg Christenson and his Christenson development group, who is refusing to repay, while holding many valuable assets in this province, might I add, the millions of dollars. It cannot be the response from this government to these seniors, who have, many of them, contributed in significant ways to our province, to say: there's nothing we can do.

There is an opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to do something right now and to do it with this legislation and to make sure that those protections are offered to those seniors who are currently in life leases or are waiting for payout. That is the bare minimum that we can do to show that we do respect the contributions that seniors have made to this province. I would encourage the minister and the government to say, "Yes, we do need legislation like this," but there's more that can be done to protect the seniors who are waiting for those protections and desperately need them.

I also know, Mr. Speaker, that these seniors and their families live across the province. While I may represent Devonshire, where 55 seniors and their families are waiting for payout, I know that there are families that have contacted me from all over the province, and I know that many of the MLAs, from both sides of the House, have heard from concerned Albertans about this. So I think there's more work that we can do to make sure that Bill 12 protects those people currently entered into life leases and to truly provide protection so that it can be a measure that works for Albertans and protects affordability but really focuses on making sure that there's security for our seniors, which they deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity has risen.

Dr. Metz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm really happy to speak to Bill 12. I hadn't heard about life leases for quite a number of years, but I would reference my own mother's experience, who, when she was looking at her options about where she would perhaps move to as she was thinking, in a very sad way, that she had to start thinking about moving out of her own home, looked at a large number of opportunities, including a place that had a life lease. After looking at this carefully, she sat down and discussed with us, her family members, that this looked like a Ponzi scheme.

She was a recently retired real estate lawyer, so she was very used to reading documents which many people don't read. They sign on the bottom line. That was not my mother. She would read it probably several times. She was going through these documents, and while it may have been a very respectable organization, the idea was that they could do kind of anything with her money. There were no protections built into this. What she would advise a client, if she were still practising, would have been to run away from this very agreement.

It became a regular topic of discussion about what was going on that we were allowing to have these very unregulated agreements, life lease programs, in this province. Fortunately, of course, she ran away from that and chose not to go that direction. But there are many people here who would not have had that long life experience and the eye of a lawyer looking at what was going to happen and her eye in thinking that me and my siblings were going to be or could potentially be burdened with trying to get this money out of someone in the end. Maybe it would work out.

There are many others that have shared their concerns very broadly. I would like to share the concerns that were raised by Jennifer, who is writing about the life lease. Certainly, the first comments are that this legislation does not address the interests of seniors that are currently in life leases or those who may enter into a life lease in the future. There is no protection built in for these seniors. She's asking that there be reconsideration on Bill 12, that it be looked at and revised so that there are indeed protections and limits on these very things that my mother was very engaged in discussing. We need to ensure that where your money is going is safe – like you put it in a bank – and that you're able to get it back out, that there are protections that get that for you.

Now, Jennifer notes that there are many people like her mother, who is trapped in one of these life leases. She's a resident at Citadel east in St. Albert, and her parents signed a life lease in 2016. Her father passed away in 2022, and her mother's health is starting to decline, so it is of great concern that these funds are not available to her. Knowing this whole situation, she's very aware that she may not be able to get these funds out to provide the care and to get her to the next stage of what she needs. Her mother and family are all extremely concerned about what options they have.

If she is to terminate her life lease and transition into a rental agreement, she'll be paying a significantly higher cost for the current home that she's in, and she will also be at the end of the queue, of a very long queue of many years, with no time frame on when these funds will be paid back. As long as she remains in the life lease, her monthly housing costs will stay the same, but she's basically stuck there if she needs more care and can't access that money for the care that she needs. She will need these funds if she is to move into a new housing facility that can provide more care, and of course that will have a much higher cost. So she needs the money. There doesn't seem to be any resolution on when and if her funds will be paid back to her.

Jennifer notes that her parents worked hard all their lives and saved their money so that they could support themselves in their senior years, but these funds are being held hostage at this time. Their mother cannot access them whether she stays or whether she goes. It is completely unacceptable that Christenson Developments can hold onto these funds from her mother and from other seniors at the time when they really need them the most.

Bill 12 does not address these seniors in need. It really must be amended very significantly – and I would say: take it back and redo it – because the main reason that this legislation has come into existence is really because of the disastrous situations of seniors living in these Christenson Developments properties, yet it really doesn't address their needs. We need a lot more opportunity to look at that.

Now, I've heard from others as well. I would like to talk about a letter received from Kim, who also reports that her parents signed a five-year life lease agreement with Christenson Developments in September 2019. They moved into an independent suite in Bedford Village in Sherwood Park the following November. Her father was suffering from rapidly deteriorating Alzheimer's disease, and her parents could no longer remain in their home in Sherwood Park. Now, Kim . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. However, pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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