



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, May 8, 2024

Day 48

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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Armstrong-Homeniuk, Hon. Jackie, ECA,
Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
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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)
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
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de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)
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Eremenko, Janet, Calgary-Currie (NDP)
Fir, Hon. Tanya, ECA, Calgary-Peigan (UC)
Ganley, Hon. Kathleen T., ECA, Calgary-Mountain View (NDP)
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Ip, Nathan, Edmonton-South West (NDP)
Irwin, Janis, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP)
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(UC)
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Stephan, Jason, Red Deer-South (UC)
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP),
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Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)
Turton, Hon. Searle, ECA, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)
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Wright, Justin, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UC)
Wright, Peggy K., Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC),
Deputy Government Whip
Yaseen, Hon. Muhammad, ECA, Calgary-North (UC)

Party standings:

United Conservative: 48

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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Philip Massolin, Clerk Assistant and
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Demetrios Nicolaides	Minister of Education
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Andrew Boitchenko	Parliamentary Secretary for Indigenous Relations
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Grant Hunter	Parliamentary Secretary for Agrifood Development
Martin Long	Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Health
Chelsae Petrovic	Parliamentary Secretary for Health Workforce Engagement
Scott Sinclair	Parliamentary Secretary for Indigenous Policing
Tany Yao	Parliamentary Secretary for Small Business and Northern Development

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Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Chair: Mr. Yao
Deputy Chair: Mr. Rowswell

Boitchenko
Bouchard
Brar
Hunter
Kasawski
Kayande
Wiebe

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Chair: Mr. Getson
Deputy Chair: Mr. Loyola

Boparai
Cyr
de Jonge
Elmeligi
Hoyle
Stephan
Wright, J.
Yao

Select Special Conflicts of Interest Act Review Committee

Chair: Mr. Getson
Deputy Chair: Mr. Long

Arcand-Paul
Ellingson
Hunter
Ip
Lovely
Rowswell
Sabir
Wright, J.

Select Special Ethics Commissioner and Chief Electoral Officer Search Committee

Chair: Mr. Yao
Deputy Chair: Mr. van Dijken

Dach
Dyck
Irwin
Petrovic
Pitt
Sabir
Stephan
Wright, P.

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Chair: Ms Lovely
Deputy Chair: Ms Goehring

Batten
Boitchenko
Long
Lunty
Metz
Petrovic
Singh
Tejada

Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Chair: Mr. Getson
Deputy Chair: Mr. van Dijken

Chapman
Dyck
Eremenko
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Shepherd
Sinclair

Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

Chair: Mr. Cooper
Deputy Chair: Mr. Getson

Eggen
Gray
Long
Phillips
Rowswell
Sabir
Singh
Yao

Standing Committee on Private Bills

Chair: Ms Pitt
Deputy Chair: Mr. Stephan

Bouchard
Ceci
Deol
Dyck
Hayter
Petrovic
Sigurdson, L.
Wright, J.

Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing

Chair: Mr. Yao
Deputy Chair: Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk

Arcand-Paul
Ceci
Cyr
Dach
Gray
Johnson
Stephan
Wiebe

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair: Mr. Sabir
Deputy Chair: Mr. Rowswell

Armstrong-Homeniuk
de Jonge
Haji
Lovely
Lunty
McDougall
Renaud
Schmidt

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Chair: Mr. Rowswell
Deputy Chair: Mr. Schmidt

Al-Guneid
Armstrong-Homeniuk
Dyck
Eggen
Hunter
McDougall
Sinclair
Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 8, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Statement by the Speaker

Anniversary of VE Day

The Speaker: Hon. members, I would like to bring to your attention a significant anniversary that is being celebrated today. Seventy-nine years ago on May 8, 1945, Canadians and citizens from Allied countries around the world celebrated VE day, or Victory in Europe Day. VE day marked the end of the hostilities in Europe following Germany's surrender to the Allied forces during the Second World War.

Today VE day is a reminder to us all of the fundamental importance of victory, of liberty over oppression, and democracy over totalitarianism. Further, it's an opportunity to remember the tens of thousands of Canadians who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Second World War in Europe and elsewhere around the world. Let us not forget.

Lastly, in these troubling geopolitical times, on this occasion let us remember the ongoing contributions of those in our Armed Forces who defend our way of life, support our democratic institutions, and ensure that we all live strong and free.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's always my great pleasure when we have members of members' families visiting us here in the Legislature, and today is no exception. It's my absolute pleasure and honour to introduce on behalf of the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon his family to the Chamber today. In the Speaker's gallery we have the hon. member's wife, Tatiana Boitchenko; his sons, Andrew and Nathan; and his daughter Nataly Bester and her husband, Ludwig. Today is Nathan's 21st birthday. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all Assembly members grade 6 students, teachers, and staff from Velma E. Baker school. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce my family friend Raja Majid Gulzar. He's accompanied by his wife, Zaiba Asghar, and two daughters, Hajra and Hadaya. It's also the birthday of Majid and Hajra, so happy birthday. I ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

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

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you Xander and his mom, Kate, residents of Edmonton-Strathcona. Xander is homeschooled in part by his gran, who is a resident of Calgary-Foothills. Please rise and accept the warm welcome of this Chamber.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce my guests here today for Heart Failure Awareness Week from Heart and Stroke Alberta, Jennifer Michaud, Kendall Saravanamuttoo; and from cardiovascular strategic network, Agnes Lehman, Shelley Valaire; as well as Dr. Justin Ezekowitz from the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Chamber.

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

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly Stephanie Bach, Nathan Mison, Omar Khan as well as other friends, investors, and job creators from the cannabis industry from across North America. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Marie-Maude Peddle and her two children, Eli and Anna. The Peddles are here today to support me as I introduce Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act. I'd like you to rise and please receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

Geothermal Resource Development

Mr. Rowswell: I rise today to celebrate Alberta writing the next chapter in its energy history. We're the home of energy, Mr. Speaker. Around the world people recognize Alberta's drilling expertise and try to copy and learn from our success, but a new race is also under way. Governments and industry are racing to get ahead in the geothermal sector. This technology provides emission-free baseload electricity and heat, a reliable source of power 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Testing and developing new technologies can be a barrier for many companies. Unlike the United States, Japan, and other countries, Canada does not have an open-access test site to help spur innovation. We are stepping up to fill that gap. Last week we took the first steps in creating the Alberta drilling accelerator. Our government is funding a landmark feasibility study into the first accelerator of its kind in Canada. This facility will help kick our geothermal and clean tech sectors into overdrive. It will help Albertan and Canadian companies launch new innovations. It will kick-start breakthroughs and help bring new technologies to market.

Ultimately, the Alberta drilling accelerator will help make clean geothermal energy cheaper, easier, and faster to deploy around the world. And it's not just geothermal; this accelerator will help CCUS, lithium, helium, critical minerals, and others test new technologies, too. This would be an open-access, technology-agnostic drilling test facility open to innovations of all kinds. The

same skills that built our oil and gas sector could unlock geothermal's massive potential.

Already companies like Eavor Technologies are proving that geothermal technology works and at scale. Right now Eavor is drilling in Germany, setting up a system that will provide enough electricity to power 18,000 homes and enough heat for 200,000 more. We have the talent, we have the resources, and we have the expertise. We believe in Alberta and in our energy innovators, and I cannot wait to see the breakthroughs that await.

Educational Support Staff

Ms Phillips: Mr. Speaker, custodial and maintenance staff keep our schools working. They deserve decent pay that keeps pace with the cost of living; modest benefits; secure retirement; the right to collective bargaining, which is guaranteed to us all under section 2(d) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the right to negotiate an agreement with an employer in good faith.

Custodial and operations staff at the Holy Spirit school division in southern Alberta have done all that, and so did the school board. Led by Chair Carmen Mombourquette, they negotiated responsibly, they settled on an extremely modest 2.75 per cent raise for the workers who haven't had one in years, and inflation in the meantime has been at least five times that. But the Minister of Education hasn't held up his end of the bargain; he's not funding those negotiated settlements. So now Holy Spirit will be forced to dip into the instructional grant, the money that goes to the classroom to support kids.

That's unconscionable. It's one of the reasons why Alberta went from having one of the best supported public education systems in 2019 to today with the lowest per-student funding in Canada. It's one of the reasons why kids with disabilities don't get the support they need. It's one of the reasons why working-class folks who do good work – custodial, operations, maintenance jobs – feel disrespected and left behind.

Mr. Speaker, the answer is obviously government funding and appropriately funding the classroom and the school system, but it's more than that. The answer is also respect for the rule of law, for collective bargaining, for public-sector work, for the fact that these jobs, whether for school boards or cities or towns, are often viewed by conservatives as the first way to degrade wages, break the law by undermining bargaining, or privatizing and contracting out in the name of, like, innovation or whatever. I am calling on the minister to respond to Holy Spirit school division's letter with funding for school support staff, and I am calling on conservatives everywhere to show some respect for working people and the important jobs they do to keep our communities vibrant and safe.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose has a statement to make.

1:40 Heart Failure Awareness Week

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May 5 to 11 is Heart Failure Awareness Week, and I'd like to begin by thanking Heart and Stroke for their efforts to raise awareness of heart failure. Nearly 800,000 people across the country live with heart failure, and each year more than 100,000 people in Canada are diagnosed. In Alberta over 80,000 people are currently living with heart failure, and over 10,000 people are diagnosed with this complex and incurable condition every year.

Despite the number of people living with heart failure, 4 in 10 Canadians do not understand what heart failure is. Heart failure describes a chronic condition caused by the heart not functioning as

it should or a problem with its structure. It can happen even if the heart is too weak, too stiff, or both. This can lead to fatigue, swelling in the legs and abdomen, and shortness of breath. Heart failure places a significant strain on people living with the condition and their families and caregivers. As one of the top reasons why people in Canada end up in the hospital, it also places a considerable burden on the health care system, costing billions of dollars annually across the country.

More work is needed to raise awareness on what heart failure is, what the signs and symptoms are, how to reduce the risk, and how to better support those living with this condition to help Albertans with heart failure lead normal and active lives, stay out of hospital, and live longer. This is why in November Alberta Health Services made enhanced lipid reporting, or ELR, widely available through simple blood tests ordered by your health provider. ELR is an easy-to-use approach to find out your risk of cardiovascular disease. Since then, more than 20,000 Albertans have been screened, ensuring those most at risk can receive early treatment.

This Heart Failure Awareness Week I encourage everyone to visit Heart and Stroke's website at heartandstroke.ca. Thank you.

Government Priorities

Mr. Eggen: Everything. Anywhere. Anyone. Any time. The UCP seeks to control every decision, every dollar spent anywhere in this province: pensions, police, health care, municipal governance, schools, elections, you name it. Albertans did not ask for this. If anything, they demand protections from this sort of tyranny. Imagine a bill that allows this UCP government to dismiss any municipal elected official, declare any municipal law created by mayors and council null and void, change election financing rules, change the way votes are counted: Bill 20, the UCP authoritarian attack on local democracy. It's poorly written, it's ham-fisted, and it's designed to strike fear and create uncertainty.

Now, imagine a bill that would allow the UCP to block funding to any postsecondary research projects that they don't agree with, where the Premier's office can interfere with any federal funding anywhere in Alberta any time: Bill 18, an authoritarian attack on freedom of speech and knowledge and a giant tangle of red tape designed to pick fights with the federal government at the expense of all Albertans. You can see that there's a theme developing here, Mr. Speaker.

Pulling Alberta out of the Canada pension plan: a wildly unpopular idea that puts Albertans' retirement security at risk, and it defies economic common sense. Pension money is money each Albertan has earned over their working lives, and it belongs to each person who earned it. It's not for the UCP to gamble away. And there it is: Bill 2, a bill to enable the UCP to pull out of the Canada pension plan. It's absolutely shameful.

These are just three examples of what the UCP's priorities have been since they took office last May: not to make life more affordable for you and your family, not to strengthen public health care and education; rather to stubbornly cling to the wrong-way behaviour.

Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland Constituency Priorities

Mr. Getson: What matters to you? It's a question I've asked and a statement I've made out to folks in my area ever since I ran: town halls, social media posts, little local papers. I was happy to see some of even my urban colleagues using that same thing. Mr. Speaker, let me share with you and the members on this side of the House and socialist members over there what I've heard from Albertans.

Affordability. Albertans need a break. The cost of goods and services and basic needs have increased drastically, and folks are struggling with it.

Safety. Folks simply don't feel as safe as they used to. Folks are tired of being preyed on by criminals. They want them put in jail and kept off the streets, Mr. Speaker. There go the 10 seconds that I was going to save for the end.

Folks are tired of being taxed to death by the government and having that money used against them on the federal side. They're dog-tired of it, Mr. Speaker. Respect. Albertans are done with being made the whipping boy for having our own unique culture and being targeted for solving problems. Albertans are tired of being vilified since we contribute so much to this country and what we do to protect our environment.

Freedom. Alberta is the province of the strong and free. Freedom is precious, and folks know when their freedoms are being challenged. Despite what the members opposite might have to say, the numbers tell the truth, Mr. Speaker. When Canadians are moving by the droves to Alberta, they believe in what we believe: strong families build strong communities.

Standing up for what's right. Albertans are done apologizing for being who they are, and they want MLAs in here that don't refer to them as embarrassing cousins.

Taking care of those who need it. A hand up is not a handout. When folks stumble or lose their way, we help them. We don't let them linger or languish in addictions.

Health care. Albertans are very happy to have a public system, but they're not very happy when they can't get the services they need when they've paid for it for years, and they deserve better. They voted us in here to fix it.

The economy. They want a diverse economy without turning our backs on our largest industries. They want people to know that what we do is best in class.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Albertans are asking us to stay the course because it's what matters to them.

Thank you.

Electric Power Prices

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, the UCP have had five years to come up with legislation that would prioritize Albertans being able to put food on their tables over paying high electricity prices. As always with this government, their actions are too little, too late. This demonstrates the misplaced priorities of this government. Rather than help Albertans make it to the end of the month, we get bills like the sovereignty act and bills 18 and 20, that will circumvent our democracy and bring more control into the hands of the Premier. I've heard from so many constituents that are one paycheque away from not meeting their household budgetary demands and from a few who have had to move in with family because life is getting too expensive. As I expressed early last fall, I even had two seniors that have had to live out of their vehicles.

As we all know, one of the demands of the household budget is electricity prices, and with the rates skyrocketing, it's leaving some families forced to choose between rent and utility bills. The government should have never put a moratorium on renewable energy so it can meet the demands Albertans are placing on the grid.

This government has been dodging responsibility for the pause and the impact that it is having on Albertans. They claimed it was the AESO, five guys nodding in a room, who demanded the pause, when we all know the truth: this whole thing was cooked up in the Premier's office. Millions of dollars in investment are leaving Cardston county as a direct result of the UCP's meddling. Countless jobs are at risk because of the UCP ideology.

Unlike what the Premier stated a couple of weeks ago, what Alberta needs is flexible, dispatchable capacity. We need production that can come on and offline very quickly and be there when we need it. We don't need production running all the time, nonstop, but rather than lowering electricity prices, the government decided to do absolutely nothing to stop electricity prices climbing to the highest in Canada over the last three years.

As I stated, Mr. Speaker, this government does too little, too late when it comes to the needs of Albertans, but what else can we expect from a UCP government that's more focused on fighting with Ottawa and placating their friends in Take Back Alberta?

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

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

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Select Special Ethics Commissioner and Chief Electoral Officer Search Committee I'm honoured to table the committee's report. This report is the result of six hard months of arduous work.

The recommendation within this report is the appointment of Shawn McLeod as Ethics Commissioner for a five-year term commencing on May 26, 2024. The report also includes an update on the search for a Chief Electoral Officer candidate. Copies of this report will be made available online.

Thank you so much.

Oral Question Period

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

Ethics Commissioner Appointment

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the Conflicts of Interest Act was passed by this Chamber to ensure the integrity of all government decisions. The mechanics and the objectivity of its enforcement have implications for every decision taken in this Chamber and, in particular, by members of Executive Council. They need to be free of both real and perceived bias. To the Premier: with the appointment of an Ethics Commissioner with deep ties to the UCP, she has eliminated that principle of impartiality, so how does this Premier expect Albertans to trust any of her government's decisions?

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I agree with the member opposite about the importance of the independence of this role. The committee of the Members of the Legislative Assembly included members from both parties. They worked at it for six months. They hired an executive search firm, executive search, to vet candidates, and I would say that ultimately the final three candidates would have passed all of the requirements. I'm sure any one of them would have been an excellent candidate. I trust that the committee did their due diligence, and I think we are all going to accept the result because this individual is appointed for the next five years.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, electoral boundaries are being redrawn in the fall, and legislation allows for the Ethics Commissioner to be appointed chair of that process. Albertans deserve elections without concern for undue partisan influence and right-wing, extremist, American-style gerrymandering. To the

Premier: will she commit today that her hand-picked UCP Ethics Commissioner will not be allowed within a country mile of the boundary redistribution process, or is that yet another plank in her plan to undermine Alberta's democracy?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Electoral Boundaries Commission process, which we have to go through every time we have a growth in population: that's going to be a process we're all prepared to be involved in over the next couple of years. I understand the members opposite have the ability to appoint two members of the committee. I look forward to seeing who their appointees are. We are awaiting the final determination of this independent committee on who the Chief Electoral Officer will be. I understand that they've gone back out for additional – the first process did not yield a successful candidate. They've gone out to redo the search, and we'll await that process to complete.

Ms Notley: So no guarantee at all.

Now, this Premier just replaced a unanimously appointed judge with a UCP partisan who has run to be a candidate and donated thousands to their party. As the only Alberta Premier ever found to be breaking the conflict-of-interest law, she could have learned to do better, but instead she chose to appoint an insider to protect her while thumbing her nose at ethical governance and effectively revoking the Conflicts of Interest Act for her government. To the Premier: why?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have no relationship with this individual. I don't know if I've even met him. This is an independent process. We went through an executive search process. Members of the Legislative Assembly were able to hear the credentials of the candidates. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Smith: They were able to look at the credentials of this candidate. Mr. McLeod has decades of experience in executive and leadership roles. He's a seasoned and experienced lawyer with extensive and relevant experience, and he's a member of the Bonaparte First Nation, which I think gives him some lived experience that will assist him in doing this role.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Bill 20

Mr. Kasawski: It is clear that without a Take Back Alberta membership, no Albertan will be heard when it comes to the UCP's authoritarian Bill 20. The UCP hid this bill from Albertans, but Albertans are speaking out now. The minister only needs to read the newspapers to see these views. Mary in Calgary wrote: this government is more concerned about ideology than running the province. She stated: the UCP's plans to give cabinet the power to unilaterally fire councillors and rewrite local laws is astonishing for a government that preaches freedom and minimal government. Will the Premier listen to Mary and scrap Bill 20?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, Bill 20 is a good piece of legislation. We will pass this. I guess the folks across sound like they're not interested in help for affordable housing, on more transparent campaign finance rules, more transparent campaign spending rules, the ability for any Albertan that might not be able to be there on

election day to have a special ballot. I don't know. These are things that actually add to transparency and to democracy, and the folks across seem to not want any of it.

Mr. Kasawski: David from Edmonton also wrote about Bill 20, saying that it was the latest bit of dogma from the UCP that, as usual, lacks any rationale as to why or how it serves the public good. That's because it doesn't serve the public good, Mr. Speaker. The bill is about nothing more than giving the UCP powers to impose Take Back Alberta's ideology on local communities. As David wrote: it's a good thing the minister didn't ask these folks about the solar system because then we'd be banned from using telescopes. Can the Premier tell us exactly what other things she disagrees with that this government will ban?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, generally speaking, banning things is the business of the folks across the aisle. I think we all know that.

Mr. Speaker, this piece of legislation will make elections more accountable, more transparent. The powers that they're talking about over there are powers the government already has; every province in Canada has them under the Constitution. As evidence, we've actually dismissed a council in the last six months. We overrode a city of Calgary thing that made electricity really expensive. We already have these powers.

Mr. Kasawski: Every single member of this House has heard the worries of Albertans about Bill 20, the authoritarian act, and from every corner of the province Albertans are speaking out against Bill 20. The only people not listening are the UCP. In the *Rocky Mountain Outlook* Ric wrote: in my opinion, while I can still express it, their attempts to ruin the foundations of our democracy by directly interfering in local governments, overruling the will of citizens, is disgusting, a disgrace and should be met with strong opposition. Will the Premier hear these Albertans' concerns, recognize the bill's authoritarian overreach, and pull Bill 20, or is this just more blue tape?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, in fact, the legislation will improve how things are done. The folks across want to hide the fact that there were nine members of Calgary city council elected, with a \$1.7 million expenditure; similar situation in Edmonton. The media has complained about that. In fact, the media has complained about business giving too much money as well as unions. So to pretend these things aren't happening and need to have some regulations around them: they can whistle past the graveyard, but the fact is that this needs fixing, and our job is to fix it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North East is next.

Automobile Insurance Rates

Member Brar: Mr. Speaker, this government is proving once again that they'll do anything to make life harder for Albertans. First, they removed the insurance rate cap that our NDP government put in place to keep things affordable. Then the UCP promised they'd freeze auto insurance rates and would not let them increase. For everyday Albertans a freeze means things stop getting more expensive. To the minister: does he understand the definition of a rate freeze?

Mr. Horner: I certainly understand the definition of a rate freeze, and as it came out in Public Accounts yesterday, there's a very reasonable explanation why we saw a very small rate increase in 2023: a rate that was previously already approved through the rate board that hadn't come into play yet, and also at an individual level,

changes where you may have traded in your 15-year-old car and bought a new one, or if you moved from an area where you had a lower risk rating; say you moved from the country to a metro area. All of those things could have impacted your individual rate.

Member Brar: Albertans are struggling with an affordability crisis, and now the UCP's fake freeze has so many caveats that insurance rates continue to increase. Yesterday the Minister of Finance admitted on social media that there was a "small variance of 1.7 per cent." Mr. Speaker, a small variance is not a freeze; it's an increase. Did the minister really think he could get away with increasing Albertans' auto insurance rates while still calling it a freeze?

Mr. Horner: I think I just answered that with my first answer, Mr. Speaker, but, like I said, yes, there was a 1.7 per cent increase for three main, very reasonable, defensible reasons. Changes on the individual level: if you changed automobiles to a more expensive, newer automobile; if you moved locations; and the big one was a rate that was already approved from the rate board before the freeze came into place. It all makes sense.

Member Brar: The UCP promised Albertans that they would freeze auto insurance rates, but somehow those rates still went up. Since they don't seem to know what a freeze is, I'll be happy to tell them. The Oxford dictionary defines freeze as: an act of holding or being held at a fixed level or in a fixed state. That means that rates shouldn't have gone up. To the minister: why did you roll out a fake freeze, and why haven't you done anything to make auto insurance rates more affordable for Albertans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I think that member should look up in the dictionary the definition of a slow learner because that's what I'm hearing as I'm going to answer this again.

Ms Gray: Point of order.

Mr. Horner: Three very clear reasons why we saw a 1.7 per cent rate increase . . .

An Hon. Member: You're a joke.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Mr. Horner: Previously approved . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. While I'm on my feet, I might just note a point of order by the Official Opposition House Leader at 1:59 or thereabouts and an additional point of order by the hon. the Government House Leader at 2 o'clock.

The Minister of Finance has the call.

Mr. Horner: Yeah. Like I said, Mr. Speaker, three main reasons: a preapproved rate by the rate board before the cap came into place and, on an individual level, changes in automobiles or changes in location. It all makes sense.

2:00

Education Funding Formula

Ms Chapman: The weighted moving average used to calculate the amount of money each school board receives from the government continues to punish large urban boards. Why are these boards, responsible for educating over a quarter-million Alberta children, being punished? Because they are growing. The weighted moving average means half of the funds schools receive is based on past enrolment. That's great for stable enrolment boards but leaves the

urban and metro boards out in the cold. Will the minister admit the weighted moving average is a failed experiment and take steps to address funding for growing boards?

Mr. Nicolaides: Mr. Speaker, the weighted moving average works well for the diverse needs of our school boards across the province. Of course, what the member opposite is failing to leave out of her commentary is the fact that we also have the supplemental enrolment growth grant. That grant is specifically targeted for school divisions that are experiencing growth above and beyond their original projections. That grant has provided needed dollars to our fastest growing school divisions in our metropolitan region so that they can help to accommodate the incredible enrolment growth pressures that they are facing. We'll make sure they have the dollars they need.

Ms Chapman: Calgary Catholic was funded for 58,794 students but actually took in 61,584, leaving over 2,500 students unfunded. Edmonton public was funded for 111,803 students but welcomed 115,805, leaving over 4,000 students unfunded. Between in-year additions and being shortchanged by the weighted moving average, CBE had a funding gap for 8,000 students. What is the minister's plan to adequately address funding for growing boards?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, we will ensure that we top up and provide funding through the supplemental enrolment growth grant to school divisions who see enrolment actuals above and beyond their projections. I know it's something that the NDP can't really wrap their heads around, but Alberta is growing. The Alberta advantage is back and booming, and people are flooding to the province once again. After years of the NDP driving away business, driving away investment, we've made Alberta a place of opportunity again.

Ms Chapman: Even at this government's lowest in the country funding rate students are funded to the tune of around \$11,000 per student. Last year the CBE received only \$5 million to address funding growth for an additional 7,000 students. That maths out to a shocking \$714 per student. How can this minister expect us to take these funding commitments seriously? Thirty million dollars is a drop in the bucket. When can we expect the minister to change the formula for the weighted moving average so Alberta schools can finally be properly funded?

Mr. Nicolaides: Mr. Speaker, I'd encourage the member to get up to speed on some of her facts and figures and information. What they're quoting is four-year-old data. Of course, over the last two budgets our government has increased funding to Education by just around 10 per cent. Over the next three years alone we will be providing \$1.2 billion in funding to address enrolment growth and pressures. Again, when the members were in power, when the NDP was in power, they told Albertans to leave Alberta. They drove investment out of the province. People were leaving. We've reversed that trend, and we will be there to make sure . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis is next.

Flood Preparedness

Dr. Elmeli: Being Albertan means thinking about water a lot. If it's not drought, it's flood. The recent rain, while not enough to address years of drought, brings back many traumatizing memories for Albertans who experienced the 2013 floods. We know that southern Alberta needs over 200 millimetres of rain to adequately address the drought they're in, but if the 70 millimetres forecasted

turns into that, we'll get flash floods. What is the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas doing to alleviate Albertans' fear and concerns around flood? Are we prepared?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I do want to thank the member for that great question. As we've said since the beginning, we want to be prepared for any situation. Obviously, over the last number of months there was a lot of concern about drought, especially in our southern basins, where there are a lot of demands for those water resources. That said, we're also working with the Ministry of Forestry and Parks to obviously prepare for wildfire season. We're also working with the ministry of public safety to make sure that we are also prepared for floods. That is not unique in this year. We work with our partners in municipalities across the province on that as well.

Dr. Elmeligi: Given that flood response has been a big focus of government for the last 11 years and that large-scale infrastructure projects that cost billions of dollars continue to be a part of the provincial annual budget, given that the Springbank reservoir and the Cougar Creek debris dam are large infrastructure projects designed to protect several communities from Canmore to Calgary yet neither are completed, let alone operational today, can the minister explain why both of these projects have taken longer and cost more money than originally planned, and what will happen if it does flood this year and these aren't done?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, in this year's budget, Budget 2024, we are making additional commitments when it comes to water infrastructure. We've also been working with Ag and Irrigation and gathering feedback from Albertans right across our province on areas with other water infrastructure to make sure that we have what we need to manage either flood or drought situations moving forward. We are moving forward very quickly, as we've articulated. We do not have enough of that infrastructure in place right now. We know that there's more to be done. We're speeding that up. We're moving ahead, whether it's Ardley, Eyremore, or Bow River reservoir options.

Dr. Elmeligi: Given that, clearly, Alberta's challenges with flood and drought are really just about water, where it is and when it is and how we manage it, given that climate change models have consistently predicted increasing intensities of both flood and drought for years, given that the UCP has no climate action plan to address dramatic fluctuations in water levels and given that what we really need is a plan to build community and ecosystem resiliency to changing levels of water, what is the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas doing to look at and address the big picture, the climate change picture?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, I would say that this is why we rolled out our emissions reduction and energy development plan last spring. It's also why we continue to make record-level investments when it comes to protecting our watersheds, investing in flood and drought mitigation infrastructure, our drought and flood protection program, that municipalities, First Nations, and community groups can access to make sure that they have the infrastructure in place to be resilient in those types of situations. We are absolutely committed to this work. And, further, the Premier has also asked me to prioritize reviewing our water allocation so that we can maximize that for generations to come.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed has a question to ask.

Housing Policies

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Affordable and attainable housing has become one of the most urgent concerns across Canada, and that is no different here in Alberta. People and families are flocking to Alberta, and our population is booming, and we know why. Our province is affordable, especially compared to our neighbours in British Columbia, and it's an excellent place to work, raise a family, and retire. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: can you tell the House how the housing amendments in Bill 20 will help build more homes for Albertans across our province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the many great things in Bill 20 is the assistance that we intend to give municipalities when they want to build affordable housing, that nonprofits won't pay municipal property tax or provincial property tax. That is more money, instead of going to several tax people, to go, rather, to those Albertans that desperately need a home. It's one of the greatest problems of our time, and that's just one of the ways that Bill 20 is helping to do that. I'm hopeful that the House will pass that because there are lots of Albertans that need that help.

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

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that increasing the supply of housing is essential and not measures like rent control and given that all sorts of housing options need to be available like affordable housing, purpose-built rentals, and single-family homes and given that we are setting new records for housing starts, especially in our largest cities, Calgary and Edmonton, through you, Mr. Speaker, to the minister: how will the updates to city charters in Calgary and Edmonton limit cost increases to new housing and help more Albertans enter the housing market?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think everybody accepts that the building industry has to contribute to a neighbourhood when they build a neighbourhood, and that won't stop – they will still be required to do that – but some of the changes will make sure that they know those costs won't run out of control. The fact is that if it happens too much, then they are reticent to actually go to a community and actually invest and build there the homes that that community desperately needs. One of the other things that our ministry is doing are some amendments to the city charters to make sure that developers, big and small, and builders, big and small, want to build more homes in Edmonton and Calgary.

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

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for his answer. Given that we must ensure we are making affordable housing available to those who need it and given that during their time in government the NDP only built 1,770 units of affordable housing and increased the affordable housing wait-list by 76 per cent and given that Budget 2024 allocates \$840 million over three years to provide over 5,000 affordable housing units, can the same minister tell the House why this government has proposed making affordable housing exempt from property taxes?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the people who need affordable housing are the very people that can least afford to pay more for their home in order to carry the burden of property taxes. I can tell you, with the co-operation of the minister of social services, who is the lead on housing, that my ministry and his and all of this government are committed to working together to make sure housing is more attainable, more affordable, and more of that housing, including rental housing, which low-income Albertans need get built. It's already happening, but I would say to people here: stay tuned. I know that the other minister has more announcements to come. We're just getting started. We've got a lot of work to do.

AISH Appeals Process

Ms Renaud: The UCP continues to ignore recommendations from an independent officer of the Legislature. According to the minister they're already doing enough for disabled Albertans. In 2022 the Ombudsman said that AISH appeals were unfair and inaccessible. The UCP made it worse by adding one sentence to the appeal regulation that denied Albertans the right to bring forward new information in their appeal, get a new doctor, or a new medical evaluation, or forget to submit one document while preparing the appeal alone. The answer from the UCP is: forget it; start over. Will the minister commit to addressing the 2022 Ombudsman recommendations?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, we've looked at what the Ombudsman had to say. We appreciate his opinion, but I want to be clear. We support our current programs and the current protocols that we have in place. To be very clear, we're spending almost 3 and a half billion dollars on disability supports, something that we think is important, but we're also going to do it in a way that is credible, that is going to protect against fraud, that is going to be able to make sure that that money is going to get to the people that need it. That's why we have to make sure that our programs are kept care of. At the end of the day, we're working with billions of taxpayer dollars, and tens of thousands of Albertans are counting on us to get it right.

An Hon. Member: How do you sleep?

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:13.

Ms Renaud: Given that there are no translations, no advocacy, nor legal services funded by government for those navigating complex AISH appeal processes and given that advocates say that high caseloads mean their appeals are being pushed to appeal panels in other regions that don't even know the realities of their home community, particularly problematic in rural and remote communities, can the minister tell us in concrete terms what steps he's taking to address an appeal system that an Ombudsman called unfair and troubling?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, we've invested in the last fiscal year and this fiscal year in more staff when it comes to being able to process applications, particularly when it comes to PDD, and that has seen increased speed and elsewhere in the province to be able to access things like backlogs. Again, this government is investing over 3 and a half billion dollars supporting the disabled in our province. We're going to continue to do it. I have to say that I'm very confident in the work that the department is doing, and we're going to continue to support them in their very important work.

Ms Renaud: Given that we're hearing disturbing reports from advocates of AISH appellants being contacted by the ministry about their appeals – some appellants report being told that their appeals have little chance of succeeding – and given that as a result some appellants are either abandoning appeals or refusing to have any contact with the ministry until the hearing – these decisions are life-changing for vulnerable Albertans – can the minister tell us if there will be any changes to how the Appeals Secretariat operates so it is accountable to the public and not just the cruel whims of the UCP?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to AISH, we have a citizen review appeal panel, so it definitely is accountable to the public. The hon. member may not be aware of that. But, again, we are investing in AISH alone \$1.6 billion. This government indexed AISH payments and is very much committed to making sure that we provide support to the severely handicapped inside our province, but we're also going to do it in a way that protects the program for people that need it and for future generations. Alberta taxpayers expect us to do the job right, make sure those who need it get the money, and we will continue to do it. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Bill 20 (continued)

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, last municipal election Albertans went out and elected councillors and mayors to represent them in their municipalities. A fundamental staple of democracy in Alberta and the rule of law is that no one vote should count more than others, but the UCP's Bill 20 gives 25 people sitting around the cabinet table the ability to throw out the democratic will of Albertans on a whim behind closed doors. Why does the Minister of Municipal Affairs think that a cabinet vote should count for more than one that Albertans vote?

Mr. McIver: Well, I'll be happy to repeat what I've said earlier for those that haven't been listening, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that the authority to dismiss a council or councillors is one that has rested with the province of Alberta and every other province in Canada essentially since Confederation. There are no new powers being given to cabinet in Bill 20. There is indeed a shorter path between thinking about making the decision and making it – that's true – but the power has always been there. I would say that, yes, everybody's vote is equal, and we will defend that.

Member Boparai: Given that it's clear that this government thinks they know best and that there is no clearer example than this authoritarian Bill 20, given that this bill has been described as an affront to democracy by the rural municipality association, given that this bill is opposed by everyone from academics, municipal leaders, even the past views of the Premier, why is the Minister of Municipal Affairs so insistent on transforming municipal government from local democracy into local field officers for the Premier's office?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, mark my words: if this Legislative Assembly chooses to pass Bill 20, which I hope they do, the day after it's passed for municipalities will be pretty much exactly the same as the day before it passed. There are no new powers here. We're cleaning up what needs to – I know that the NDP tried to tip the scales in their favour when they did legislation. They tried to stack the deck in their favour. We're leveling the playing field, which is what Albertans would expect.

Member Boparai: Given that the Premier stated after the election that she would rather listen to a group of defeated politicians than the elected members of Edmonton, given that the government tried in 2021 to give the cabinet the power to write laws without the Legislature, given that the government tried with their first-draft sovereignty act to give cabinet the power to rewrite laws in secret with no accountability, given that local decisions should not require the Premier's office to sign off, will the Minister of Municipal Affairs show the respect for local democracy that this bill doesn't and kill the bill?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess my advice for the hon. member is to speak with his leader, who put a social media post out demanding that the government instantly dismiss a councillor – no process – demanded that the councillor instantly be dismissed. The hon. member perhaps should check with his own leader before yelling things that are only half true over the aisle, because over in the centre of the front there is somebody that wants, apparently, governments to be able to dismiss somebody with no process, instantly. [interjections]

Ms Notley: Table the Chu report. Where is it?

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. If the Leader of the Opposition wants to ask another question, I encourage her to rise to her feet to do it.

Federal Carbon Tax

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, on April 1 the federal NDP-Liberal coalition implemented a massive 23 per cent increase to the carbon tax, a move that is only exacerbating the high cost of living that Albertans and Canadians are already experiencing. This decision disregards the negative consequences that the carbon tax has already had, has, and will have on Albertans. Can the Minister of Affordability and Utilities provide clarity on how the provincial government intends to address the impacts of the recent carbon tax increase on Alberta's economy and affordability for Albertans?

2:20

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for that great question. While the federal government continues to make life more expensive for Canadians by adding hundreds of dollars to all of their bills for everything through the carbon tax, our government is lowering costs for Albertans. This includes saving Calgary households \$145, on average, in local access fees if Bill 19 is passed. Our government is making life more affordable by fixing our electricity system and its market, doing the work that the NDP failed to do.

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

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the concerns raised about the effectiveness and fairness of carbon tax policies, especially regarding exceptions and exemptions like for home heating oil and the special exemptions for Quebec granted by the federal government, and further given the importance of implementing emission reduction measures that are both fair and conducive to economic growth, can the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas share what specific policies or initiatives the government is considering to support industries in navigating the challenges imposed by the carbon tax while continuing to pursue meaningful emission reduction goals?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We're helping industry by investing in technologies that help them actually reduce emissions, not hitting them with crippling taxes and regulations that drive away investment and make them less competitive. Last summer we announced \$60 million in funding to help our industries reduce emissions and increase economic performance. This is helping advance technologies to help the heavy freight, ag, forestry, manufacturing, and energy sectors thrive not only now but for generations to come. We believe in Albertans, we are investing in them, and we'll have more to say on that later this week.

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

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given Alberta's commitment to responsible emissions reduction and our investments in technologies like CCUS, hydrogen, and through other R and D supports like Alberta's TIER program and given the competitive disadvantage imposed by the carbon tax on Albertan and Canadian industries compared to free-riding competitors in other nations, can the same minister explain the specific strategies or advocacy efforts undertaken by the provincial government to urge the federal government to axe the carbon tax and instead work with Alberta on a practical approach towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2050?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Ms Schulz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member. While the opposition spent years supporting the carbon tax before suddenly a handful of those members flip-flopping for political purposes, we have always stood firmly in the camp of Albertans from the very beginning. The carbon tax is bad for consumers. It's bad for the economy. It's bad environmental policy because it does not actually reduce emissions. It doesn't actually work. We're calling on Ottawa to axe the disastrous tax every chance we get, including through motions in this House that the members opposite have failed to support. We'll continue to stand up for Albertans.

Presumptive WCB Coverage for Wildland Firefighters

Member Batten: Mr. Speaker, I recently had the time to listen to an experienced wildland firefighter who described the respiratory hazards faced by our heroic wildland firefighters. According to him, and I quote: "It's time to take our heads out of the sand. We used to say that it's just burning veg. It's natural. What's the harm? Now we know how harmful woodsmoke can be." To the minister: when is this government going to take its head out of the sand and extend presumptive coverage for workplace illnesses caused by exposure for fighting wildland fires?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're looking at the information that led Ontario to change their policy on this matter, and we're continuing to meet with firefighters, including wildland firefighters, to hear their advocacy and their recommendations in regard to presumptions, coverages, and benefits. We're also expanding psychological benefits for all first responders, including wildland firefighters, and we recently added wildland firefighters' families to be eligible for our heroes fund.

Member Batten: I appreciate that some work is being done, but how about now?

Given that scientific studies conducted by the U of A and the University of Northern B.C. have shown that wildland firefighters are exposed to elevated levels of particulate matter, carbon monoxide, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and other volatile organic substances like formaldehyde and benzene and given that some of these are three times the safe exposure limit, when is this government going to do the right thing and extend the same protections to the wildland firefighters that they have in other jurisdictions?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the great question. As the members opposite are aware, we are constantly evaluating our coverage for our first responders, including firefighters of all types. That's why we increased presumptions last year to have some of the most presumptions across Canada. That's why we recently added wildland firefighters to be recipients of the heroes fund. That's why we are currently reviewing the information that led Ontario to change their policy. I'd like to thank the members opposite, in particular the members for Calgary-Buffalo, Edmonton-Mill Woods, and Edmonton-Manning, for their advocacy related to firefighters' coverage and everybody, all of my colleagues here, constantly discussing how we can better support firefighters.

The Speaker: There are many ways to ask a question without a preamble, and I encourage the member to do so now.

Member Batten: Given that when Alberta calls on our wildland firefighters, they always answer the call and fight the terrifying infernos that threaten our lives and property and given that they're doing it right now and not waiting for you to figure it out and given that no wildland firefighter can predict or prove their level of exposure to workplace hazards on any given day or any given exposure, why won't the minister assume that occupational illnesses are the result of workplace exposure and do the right thing, require that WCB cover the heroic wildland firefighters now?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, we are evaluating this right now. We know that the benefits and coverages that are available to our first responders are critical to them and their families. We're going to do the work. We're going to look into why Ontario has changed their policy, and we're going to continue to have, really, country-leading coverage for our first responders, including wildland firefighters.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti has a question to ask.

Wildfire Prevention and Control

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that many of my constituents are worried about wildfires. These catastrophic wildfires can have devastating consequences, including loss of homes, infrastructure, and displacement of communities. Our government is dedicated to fighting fires across this province. One of these examples is through the Bow Valley wildfire vegetation management plan. Can the Ministry of Forestry and Parks please tell us what actions have been taken to protect the Bow Valley from wildfire and how this highlights a broader commitment to protecting all Albertans?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Since 2013 there have been 20 projects in Canmore, the Kananaskis improvement district, and the MD of Bighorn, representing \$4.7 million of investment, and some of those projects are in process right now. In December we sent a letter to the town of Canmore to have them consider the opportunity to construct a fireguard to better protect their community. I was happy to hear that on their application along with a letter of support from my department the planning phase has been approved and that the council approved this capital project, so planning can begin as soon as possible. The community fireguard program is available to communities in Alberta, as are many other programs created to protect communities in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister. Given that we are in another wildfire season and the challenges of managing and preventing wildfires become more pressing and given that adequate staffing and retention of experienced personnel is crucial for timely wildfire response, could the minister share what steps our government is taking to ensure that we retain our experienced staff and help them remain engaged and committed to this vital work here in Alberta?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again to the member for the question. Ahead of the 2024 season we received 976 applications for wildland firefighter positions, which is up from last year. With 92 per cent of our seasonal firefighters already hired and trained and ready to go and actually working on the landscape as we speak, we're on track to being fully staffed by mid-May, as we committed to. We looked for opportunities this year to ensure easier rehiring of returning firefighters. We've also sped up the process of hiring and training new recruits, which ensures we have a full complement of wildland firefighters when required. We're working hard to make sure that we keep qualified and experienced personnel here in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that our UCP government is committed to protecting Albertans and the landscape from devastating wildfire and given that municipalities play an important role in fighting fires and that municipal firefighters are trained mostly for structural firefighting and given that Alberta's government wants to train as many people as possible to fight wildfires, can the minister please share what the government is doing to train wildland firefighters in Alberta?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. I'm happy to report that municipalities have free access to online training through Alberta Wildfire's Hinton Training Centre. This includes courses on fire behaviour, fire weather, fire suppression, aircraft operations, and safety on the fire line. Since January 1, 2024, Alberta Wildfire has provided 5,200 courses to municipal firefighters and departments across Alberta. We are working hard to ensure municipalities feel ready and capable as we head further into the wildfire season. We also have our wildfire reservist program for any Albertan to sign up for so they can help when and where they can.

Bill 20
(continued)

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, this government has a fundamental problem with consultation. Under this government the process seems to be to propose legislation, hear the backlash, and decide whether to consult. The minister claimed he consulted with the municipalities, but the municipalities said that he did not. The minister said that the municipalities wanted Bill 20, but the municipalities called it an attack on democracy. Will the minister make an attempt to listen, learn from this fiasco, and just shred Bill 20?

2:30

Mr. McIver: Yes, of course, Mr. Speaker. And we have consulted. In fact, later today, I will... [interjections] Team Angry just doesn't want to hear this. But the fact is that the Municipal Government Act 2023 engagement survey: I'll table five copies of that today. The Local Authorities Election Act 2023 engagement survey I'll table today. They can say that no one was engaged all they want, but the fact is that if they only could discover Google and search it, they would have known that lots of consultation has taken place. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Haji: Given that Albertans across the province are seriously concerned about the impact that Bill 20 will have on their local communities and given that the Premier even once expressed support for local independent decision-making, something that could become a thing of the past if Bill 20 becomes a law, can the minister explain why the UCP government only respects local decisions when it is in their favour?

Mr. McIver: Well, unfortunately, I can't welcome the hon. member to my world. If I could, he would see that I get somewhere between 20 and a hundred letters every week from somebody that wants some municipality's authority to be overridden, and we sign hundreds of letters every week that say: take it up with the local municipality. Notwithstanding that, Mr. Speaker, when the folks were in government, they tried to actually stack the electoral deck in their favour. We're levelling the playing field. Yeah, stacking the deck. You heard that right. We are trying to put things in the right. While they're out spreading hysteria, we're out looking for solutions.

Mr. Haji: Given that Bill 20 has offended concerned Albertans across the province – in large cities, in small towns, hamlets, summer villages, and so on – given that this bill could give the cabinet to make decisions on every aspect of local life behind closed doors, something that worries Albertans, and given that while the minister promises transparency, this bill will deliver none of it, will the minister explain why he thinks 25 people in a room in the Legislature can make better decisions on local issues than local voters?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, we're back to that old constitutional thing, where the provincial government is exclusively responsible to look after municipalities. Nobody likes to dismiss councillors, but the fact is that it is our responsibility. We've had the authority for a long time. We dismissed a council about six months ago. The folks over here were quiet. They don't want us to be able to do it in a hurry, yet their leader posted that they wanted us to fire a duly elected councillor instantly. They don't know what side of the

argument they're on. They should get their story straight and pick a team.

Home-care Services

Ms Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, home care is essential to Albertans. These services support Albertans to age gracefully in their communities, close to family and friends. Sadly, there are many challenges with home care unaddressed by this government. Families still face a significant burden as they take on the administrative work of the system at a time when they should be focused on their family members. Out-of-pocket expenses make universal access impossible. Only families that invest personal resources are able to use home care. How can this government justify excluding so many Albertans from such a crucial program?

Mr. Guthrie: Mr. Speaker, the member's comments are important, and I'm sure the minister would be happy to discuss this issue further. But for now I'd like to highlight our government's commitment to improve the health and well-being of women and children across the province. Last week the minister announced that we are investing \$26 million over the next two years to expand the Alberta newborn screening program to advance women's health research. Through this and other initiatives the minister is working hard to ensure that all Albertans benefit from the exceptional health care services that we provide and that they deserve. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that there are many significant challenges for Albertans who need home care regarding inadequate allocation of hours as a key issue and given that I have spoken with many seniors and their families who are unable to access home care due to the insufficient hours to meet their basic needs and given that this government has demonstrated it does not fix problems, act with speed, nor provide seniors the assistance they need, will the minister commit here and now to increase the number of hours allocated to home care and allow more people access to this vital service?

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

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member is right. There are some real challenges with home care, which is why this government is working through its revamping of the health care process, which includes a continuing care organization. One of the big things that will be looked at during that process is things like home care going forward. We also just completed our lodge review program, where there are some real clear recommendations around how home care can enter into our lodge programs to be able to make sure that life is better for seniors. Again, this is why we're revamping the health care system, that the opposition broke, and we're going to make sure that it works for the province going forward.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that by far Albertans prefer to age in their communities, close to their family and friends, and given that not only do individuals and their families benefit from aging in community but that there are many benefits to society as a whole and given that it costs more to support Albertans in the continuing care system than supporting them to age in community, when will the UCP properly fund home care and allow people across Alberta, from Fort Macleod to Fort McMurray, whether Two Hills or Three

Hills, High Prairie, High Level, High River, to age in their own beloved communities?

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, I completely agree with the member that it is more affordable to be able to help seniors be able to age in place in their communities, which, again, is why we're making sure that we create a new continuing care organization, move these aspects out of the health care system, to be more focused on community building and be able to provide health services to individuals in their own community to again make sure that seniors can age in place, inside the communities that they built. Again, the new continuing care organization is coming on just to do that, to fix what they broke.

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

Federal Carbon Tax (continued)

Ms Pitt: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. I'm fed up and frustrated, a sentiment shared by my constituents and by Albertans across the province. For some time now Justin Trudeau has been playing favourites, deciding on a whim to exempt home heating oil from the carbon tax, leaving the predominantly natural gas heated homes here in Alberta, our friends and our neighbours, to pay more despite natural gas producing less intensive emissions than heating oil. Could someone, anyone, please possibly describe to me how constitutional this is, to play favourites across the country?

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. You're not the only one that's fed up and frustrated; I know many Albertans are. What this really shows is that the carbon tax was actually nothing more than an attempt to curry favour and a political tool rather than an attempt to actually lower emissions. While the federal government is trying to rearrange the deck chairs on the *Titanic* and save some seats in Atlantic Canada, the rest of Canada is left to pay the price of their blatant electioneering, all while Alberta, the only economic bright spot in the country, actually reduced our emissions since 2015.

Ms Pitt: Mr. Speaker, given that the average Albertan household is set to pay over \$900 to Trudeau's short-sighted carbon tax every year, that the NDP support, even after the so-called rebates and further given that Albertan families are paying the most of any province for this tax, which, again, the Alberta NDP support, could the same minister please explain why the federal government is taking over \$900 a year from hard-working Albertans during a time when the cost of living is so high?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you again for the question. Maybe the Edmonton branch of the Trudeau-Singh alliance wants to listen to this answer, because you're not wrong. It has increased the cost on Albertans from \$700 to \$911 annually. I was in the room with the governor of the Bank of Canada when he confirmed spending is actually impacting the fight against inflation. He pleaded with provincial Finance ministers to control government spending so they could bring down the inflation crisis. These are all things we need to be mindful of, and the federal government isn't doing us any favours.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the federal government is really bad and is complicit with having Albertans pay more than any other provinces for Justin Trudeau's backwards carbon tax, especially during an unfathomable affordability crisis of Ottawa's own creation, and further given that the Alberta government is committed to supporting those who are being negatively impacted by Trudeau's pocket gouging of Albertans, could the same minister please outline how our provincial government is making life more affordable for Albertans to counteract the Justin Trudeau-NDP alliance's unaffordability?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member for the question. As my colleague the Minister of Affordability and Utilities has said, we're fixing the Alberta default electricity rate by protecting Albertans from price spikes, increasing competition, and limiting economic withholding. We're going to be implementing our 8 per cent tax bracket in 2026 and 2027, and that will save the average Albertan \$750 annually. That's what we're doing, not quadrupling a punitive tax that the environment minister federally has said himself doesn't work. It's embarrassing that it was created in this Chamber.

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

Introduction of Bills

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

Bill 208 Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to request leave to introduce Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act.

Alberta classrooms are facing complexity problems. This is a result of underfunding, rapid enrolment growth, and a lack of access to essential learning supports. This bill creates a community that will examine problems Alberta students are facing in accessing psychoeducational assessments, training opportunities for teachers in complex classrooms, and funding pathways that address classroom complexity. Every child has a right to learn in a safe and supportive learning environment where they can thrive, and this is why I'm honoured to move my first reading of Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act, and ask all members of the House to support this essential legislation.

[Motion carried; Bill 208 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies of the AESO 2023 reliability requirements road map, which I quoted in question period yesterday. It points out that the rapid pace of renewables connecting to our electricity grid is presenting significant operational challenges and is the basis for all the work that we've begun to fix these issues.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I've got two tablings now and one for the next set of tablings, so I'll just do the two now because I think that's most proper. As I indicated in my question today, I've got five copies of the Municipal Government Act 2023 engagement summary, which you can also find on our website, and five copies of the Local Authorities Election Act 2023 engagement summary.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have five copies of an article in the *Edmonton Journal*, May 8, 2024, by Cindy Tran, Disability Aid Rules Flawed: Report, Ombudsman Finds Eligibility Based Solely on IQ Score 'Unfair.'

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, then we'll go back to the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I have five copies of a letter to the government whip, the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, urging him to seek more knowledge on seniors' housing issues and reconsider his views on Bill 12, the life lease act.

I have five copies of a letter dated May 3 from the Holy Spirit Catholic school division urging the Minister of Education to fund the settlements for non-ATA members of staff based on bargaining outcomes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, I've got five copies of a social media post from none other than the Leader of the Official Opposition demanding the UCP remove a duly elected municipal councillor.

The Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Ms Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the requisite copies of an article from the *Edmonton Journal* dated May 8, 2024, and it talks about Valleyview IGA, which is situated in my riding. It's nestled between Valleyview, Parkview, and Crestview communities. It's owned by Andy Taschuk, and it's a wonderful store that's been around for 60 years, and we wanted to celebrate it.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of an article in today's *Edmonton Journal* which pictures Mr. Jan Novotny, who planted himself outside the Legislature on Monday as he protests beside this sign he brought with him to protest the United Conservative Party, which reads "Ultra Control Party," and the rest is self-explanatory.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that brings us to points of order, and at 1:59 the Official Opposition House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Insulting Language

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I did, under 23(h), "makes allegations against another Member"; (i), "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member"; and (j), "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." I did rise on this point of order. I will also call your attention to the

practices and procedures, page 623. "Personal attacks, insults and obscenities are not in order."

At that time the Minister of Finance, in response to a question from the Member for Calgary-North East, said – and I believe this is a fully accurate quote, but I look forward to your events, Mr. Speaker, through the Blues – quote: I think that member should look up in the dictionary the definition of a slow learner because that is what I am hearing. This is a shocking insult in this House. I do not care whether the Minister of Finance intended it or not. Our words in this Chamber matter, and the minister's behaviour was disgusting in making a personal attack that was both ableist in suggesting that the MLA has an intellectual disability and, frankly, leaves the perception of racism given the minister was choosing to insult Alberta's first-ever international student elected in this Chamber, who speaks English as a second language, a member who was, in fact, a teacher and worked at Olds College and Bow Valley College before becoming an MLA.

Now, I called this point of order immediately, and the entire Chamber was clear on what the point of order was and what had caused it. The minister could have withdrawn and apologized in the remainder of his response, and he chose not to do that. In fact, we witnessed the government whip encouraging him to continue and government caucus members laughing and applauding at his tactless and baseless insult. We had schoolchildren and visitors in this gallery. The comment created disorder in this House. In fact, I believe our very next point of order came as a result of this insult having been hurled in this Chamber. While the minister should have withdrawn and apologized at the time, at the very least he should withdraw and apologize now.

Mr. Schow: Mr. Speaker, I think the only thing that the Opposition House Leader and myself agree upon is the specific words that were used. I was prepared to stand up here and just plead our case on this side, but I've got to tell you that throwing out the term "racist" in this Chamber on something like this is so inappropriate. It is ridiculous that the Opposition House Leader would take it to that level, to suggest that the hon. Minister of Finance is being racist because he made a comment that the members opposite did not like. I'm not going to stand here and take that kind of abuse, because I'm going to defend our caucus and the Minister of Finance, that he is in fact not insinuating anything of a racist nature but making a comment that the member asked the same question three times and got the same answer.

Now, this may be a problem with staffing or may be a problem with him writing his own questions in that he refused to deviate from the script. The reality is, Mr. Speaker, that the term "slow learner" has been used on several occasions in this Chamber, including in '89, when the Speaker himself called himself a slow learner. Now, in the nature of decorum, I will apologize and withdraw on behalf of the Minister of Finance. But I will say this. If the members opposite want to be taken seriously when members on this side rarely say something that could be interpreted as out of order, they should avoid making slanderous attacks like suggesting the Minister of Finance is being racist. It's ridiculous.

2:50

The Speaker: Hon. members, I do have the benefit of the Blues, and I am prepared to rule. [interjections] Order. Order. Order.

It would be advantageous if all members perhaps take the opportunity to take a deep breath, recognize why we're here and what our intentions are, and govern ourselves accordingly.

I do agree that this language and this occasion did rise to the level of a point of order. I accept the hon. Government House Leader's

apology on behalf of the member. I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

I do have some level of reservation on conflating things that are said here to be otherwise intended, and I hope that House leadership will govern themselves accordingly.

Immediately following the point of order raised by the Official Opposition House Leader, the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Schow: Yeah. I did, Mr. Speaker. At the time noted, in response to the comments made by the hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie clearly shouted in this Chamber: “You’re a joke.” That certainly rises, in my opinion, to the level of a point of order. It lacks decorum and lacks any class. Under 23(h), (i), and (j) I present to you that I believe this is a point of order.

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I said in my original argument, I believed this point of order likely to be related to the previous one, which caused disorder in this House, given that the government caucus was laughing and encouraging an insult that had just been hurled. That being said, I did not hear the heckle. I assumed it was a heckle that the point of order was going to be called on, but I cannot speak to what was said in this House. I do not know if you heard it or if it was captured on the Blues.

The Speaker: I do have the benefit of the Blues. Are there others wishing to provide any additional submissions?

The Minister of Finance was saying the following: “Three very clear reasons why we saw a 1.7 per cent rate increase.” And an hon. member said, “You’re a joke.” I at that time rose to my feet and acknowledged the points of order that had been called. I would find it very difficult to comprehend that any member of the Assembly couldn’t have heard it. We heard of whom the accusation is made. The Blues do not attribute that particular language to any member of the Assembly. If he said it, he should apologize. If he didn’t, we’ll move on.

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, I apologize and withdraw.

The Speaker: I consider this matter dealt with and concluded and thank the hon. member for doing the right thing.

At 2:13 the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did. Before I do that, to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie: thank you for that apology and for acknowledging. I appreciate that.

At the time noted, while the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services was answering the question, the Leader of the Opposition said, “How do you sleep?” This was pretty loud and in response to comments with regard to AISH and what the government is doing. I think that this certainly rises to the level of a point of order as it, I think, would be in contravention of 23(h), (i), and (j). I said this yesterday, and it seems that that member continues to bring a level of decorum not fitting of this Chamber. I suspect many members, on both sides of the House, heard it. If the Opposition House Leader is suggesting that she saw things that we

were responding to in the opposite when the Finance minister made his comments, I can assure you I saw the Leader of the Opposition lean over to the Opposition House Leader and repeat the comment that she had said off the record. I believe that you may even have this in your records. You cannot say, “How do you sleep?” in this Chamber. It’s certainly a personal attack and making all wild kinds of insinuations. Anyways, I’ll leave it in your hands.

The Speaker: The Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do not think that this is a point of order. I think that the Leader of the Official Opposition was asking a genuine question, the context being that the minister of community and social services, in response to a very serious question, was making the argument that Albertans with disabilities applying to the government for critical supports are trying to defraud the system. It was very gross, right-wing rhetoric against some of Alberta’s most vulnerable citizens, and I believe that the Leader of the Official Opposition was genuinely asking: how do you sleep?

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to provide additional comments on the point of order?

I do have the benefit of the Blues, and as it has been reported is what was said although the words aren’t attributed to the Official Opposition House Leader, but it seems to me like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has accepted that that’s what she said. I do believe it rises to a level of a point of order. She can apologize and withdraw.

Ms Gray: On behalf of the member I apologize and withdraw.

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

Orders of the Day 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 17 Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act

The Chair: This is its first time in the Committee of the Whole. I seek members wishing to speak to the bill. The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 17, the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act. This is a bill that, if passed, will set up the Canadian centre of recovery excellence, a Crown corporation intended to provide research and advice on recovery-oriented systems of care. Now, one would assume that if you want to provide advice on something, you have some level of expertise and that indeed what you’re providing advice on is something of value. But what we know is that at this point this government cannot demonstrate in any way that its pursuit of the so-called Alberta model of recovery-oriented care in any way offers any particular level of value or, indeed, success.

We know that recently, back around April 2, when the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction had the opportunity to speak with

the press on the announcement of the creation of a new division, recovery Alberta, to look after all mental health and addiction services in the province of Alberta, he was questioned multiple times and asked for direct evidence, data, numbers, anything that would demonstrate that the Alberta model of recovery-oriented care has been in any way effective or successful, and repeatedly, Madam Chair, he was unable to do so, or he chose not to do so.

What we know, Madam Chair, is that under Bill 17 this organization that's being set up is being set up to provide information, collect data, to serve as a defence for a policy that is based on feelings, a policy that may be based on perhaps a very sincere belief, but it is certainly not a policy based on evidence. Now, there are three possibilities here: first of all, that the minister has, naturally, not done anything, that there has been nothing actually achieved and therefore there is no data to share. Secondly, it's possible that simply the work has been done, there may be evidence available, but the government has utterly neglected and failed to actually collect any data, which would be incredible incompetence and a dereliction of duty.

3:00

Now, there is a third option, that the government has collected the data, that they have actually done due diligence and that they have shown that competence, but they are in fact refusing to share that data. They're refusing to be transparent. Now, certainly, Madam Chair, that would be in line with much of the behaviour we have seen from this government. This is a government, of course, that is under investigation, a systemic investigation on multiple fronts for intentional contravention of the FOIP Act in trying to hide information and data. So that is a possibility here.

But, ultimately, whichever of those three is true, the analysis is the same, Madam Chair: this government has failed. We know this because the actual data that exists shows that this government is failing to actually address the core issue, which is stemming the number of people who are dying as a result of drug poisonings in this province. The government under Bill 17 wishes to set up the Canadian centre of recovery excellence but, again, has no demonstration that what they are looking to study, the model that they are building on and intend to spend public money to defend and indeed try to promote, is in any way effective.

Indeed, it is concerning when we have this bill coming forward and the government looking to set up a new research centre of excellence when we have seen, through the recent bringing forward of Bill 18, that this is a government that has no understanding of how proper research is actually conducted: the principles, the ethics, the actual purpose.

Now, I can understand, Madam Chair, the frustration of holding a belief that's fundamental to your world view, that you are personally convinced in your soul of that particular truth, and then being in a place, a reality, a society, perhaps a system where that is not shared, where indeed the preponderance of evidence runs counter to it. I can understand the frustration, in particular, of having the majority of studies, data support conclusions that run counter to you. But the solution is not to use public dollars to build your own alternate universe where you can double down on those beliefs, particularly when that is at the risk and the cost of the lives of Albertans.

Now, Madam Chair, when our government had the opportunity to serve, we set up our Minister's Opioid Emergency Response Commission to address the issue, and we appointed a diverse range of individuals, voices, and expertise to provide advice on a path forward. I would note that one of the co-chairs of that commission, Dr. Elaine Hyshka, an expert in public health, an expert in addictions and treatment, published or coauthored 98 different

papers, has been cited 1,339 times over the course of 15 years. That is expertise. That is where you are actually looking at data. There was a range of people there. You know, we had Dr. Esther Tailfeathers to provide an Indigenous perspective, a physician on Kainai First Nation, the Blood Tribe. We had Dr. Nathaniel Day, who actually has been appointed now as the new chief scientific officer for CORE. We had a range of perspectives. We had folks who had front-line experience, people with lived experience, people who had lost loved ones.

By contrast, what we have with the government under Bill 17 is seeking to duplicate the model of their embarrassment of an energy war room, the Canadian Energy Centre, to conduct new research. Bill 17 is going to give the minister maximum power and control over CORE. He gets to appoint the board. He gets to sign off on the projects. They're going to use public funds to conduct research that only the minister will green-light, a minister, Madam Chair, again, who has no expertise, now who has appointed someone who – as I said, we did appoint previously Dr. Nathaniel Day as the new chief scientific officer. But I would note that unlike Dr. Hyshka, who, again, coauthored 98 papers, cited 1,339 times over the course of 15 years of study in this field, Dr. Day, while he does have some front-line experience working with AHS – in terms of scholarship research Dr. Day, from what we can see, has coauthored three papers in 2022 and 2023, seven total citations by other researchers. This is the appointee by a minister who himself has no expertise, a minister who can provide no data, who after five years – five years – of this government's investment in the Alberta model of recovery-oriented care cannot demonstrate any success at all.

In fact, what we have seen is this minister, again, who through Bill 17 is giving himself the power to direct all of the research – what have we seen for how that minister approaches the data that he does choose to release? On April 2 when he announced the creation of recovery Alberta, Madam Chair, part of that announcement: he made a significant claim that far fewer Albertans have lost their lives to addiction in the province and indeed, and I quote, many drugs have their lowest mortality rate on record.

He threw out a bunch of numbers: 61 per cent fewer deaths from cocaine, 60 per cent fewer from alcohol, 41 per cent fewer from methamphetamine, 33 per cent fewer from benzos. Well, you know what? Five different substances using three different starting points: what they were doing, Madam Chair, was deliberately comparing today's numbers to the year they cherry-picked where each drug had its highest rate of deaths so they could claim the biggest possible decrease, intentionally playing with the numbers.

This is the minister who is now going to select all of the people that are going to use public money to conduct, quote, unquote, research that is supposedly unbiased. This is the minister who will green-light all of those research projects. Not only that, Madam Chair; even more egregious: in that announcement the minister talked about a big reduction in deaths from pharmaceutical opioids, a distraction because pharmaceutical opioids accounted for about 2 per cent of over 1,700 opioid-related deaths that occurred from January to November last year.

He neglected to mention the other 98 per cent, over 1,360 deaths from nonpharmaceutical opioids, things like fentanyl and the other copycat drugs; those deaths up by 148 per cent, Madam Chair. That is the level of transparency, of responsibility with data that we have from this minister and this government, and he is now awarding himself millions of dollars through this bill, if passed, will be taking millions of dollars to establish a centre of excellence, where the Alberta public is supposed to believe that a minister who would make that kind of cherry-picked announcement on one of the most serious issues affecting Albertans today is going to be responsible,

is going to be unbiased in his total control over every aspect of how that so-called independent research body is going to operate.

Really, Madam Chair, the most concerning piece of this: I am certainly concerned about the waste of public dollars; I am certainly concerned about the inherent bias that we see being baked into this, but most concerning is that they are going to be using this to promote a model that we know has failed, that they're going to use this at the cost of other lives as they try to promote this model, this behaviour, this approach across Canada.

You know, there was a paper just published by Dr. Gillian Kolla and a number of others – actual researchers, Madam Chair – called *Mapping a Moral Panic: News Media Narratives and Medical Expertise in Public Debates on Safer Supply, Diversion, and Youth Drug Use in Canada*. Dr. Kolla, in a social media thread regarding the paper when it was published, noted that there is a

disinformation campaign underway against both safer supply and broader harm reduction initiatives in Canada [that] is both purposeful and deliberate. It is being used to serve political ends, ignoring the substantial research evidence that now exists for harm reduction approaches.

This disinformation campaign seeks to undermine our strongest evidence, to re-entrench punitive drug laws (that are largely responsible for the current toxic drug crisis), restrict access to healthcare services for people who use drugs & introduce measures like forced treatment.

3:10

It is my contention, Madam Chair, that through Bill 17 we have the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction, the UCP government, looking to participate in that disinformation campaign by using public dollars to fund the Canadian centre of recovery excellence under the thumb of the minister, at the direction of the minister in every respect, under a government which has repeatedly shown its willingness to be utterly disingenuous with the use of data.

My great fear, Madam Chair, is for the further lives this is going to cost, for the further decimation this is going to cause in our health care system and indeed for the damage it is going to do across Canada. For that reason, I will be voting against Bill 17.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there others that wish to join the debate on Bill 17 in Committee of the Whole? The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise to speak on Bill 17, Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act. As we know, mental health and addictions is serious and one of the biggest issues all around the world. Here in Alberta we have seen record levels of opioid deaths under the UCP government. From January to November 2023 1,706 Albertans have died, the highest number in the province. In other words, if you look at it, we see five Albertans a day die due to opioid use.

With this bill, Bill 17, which gives the minister maximum power and control over CORE, it seems like the minister wants control of everything: the data, the board. There is no clarity. There are no discussions, round-tables, any meetings on the appointment, and it seems like he's appointing his own favourable person to this board. We have lots of other organizations, associations, who are doing the government's job on mental health and addictions in Alberta, and most of the time they don't get any support from the government or his ministry. I can give lots of examples in Calgary and Edmonton who are doing the government's job and paying from their own pocket.

With this bill, it gives power to only the minister. It's kind of another war room where the government is going to waste another

\$5 million a year. As my colleague said, let the politicians be politicians and let the health experts be the health experts. We don't need to poke our nose everywhere as we have experts in health care or in other departments who are already working on mental health and addictions. Rather than working with them – I think there is no point to create another organization, which is named CORE. We do see that the minister has already appointed the CSO and CEO, even without approval, without the passing of this bill. There sounds something fishy in it.

As we know, this is a huge concern in the Indigenous community as well. Every member of this Legislature knows the impact that mental health and addictions has had on Indigenous communities, not only Indigenous communities but also on the immigrant communities. Lots of people when they immigrate here, they work hard, face lots of challenges, language barriers, culture barriers, raising their kids, work two jobs a day and don't get to see their families. They all struggle with these addictions.

In this bill the act makes no mention of supporting Indigenous or any other communities or Indigenous-led research around addictions. Why was Indigenous-led research not mentioned in the mandate of CORE? This Bill 17 does not provide any specific policies to the Indigenous communities or people of colour, and it does not lay out any information in the mandate as to how this CORE will work with other communities as a partner. How is the government planning to ensure CORE will work with Indigenous communities, knowledge keepers, and experts to lead the organization's research? It is safe to say that this act has written out Indigenous perspectives on this issue as the word "Indigenous" never appears in Bill 17. Not only Indigenous, but no other communities are being included in this bill. It doesn't show any inclusivity. Seeing as this is supposed to provide leading research in Canada, why are Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous-centred research not a part of this act?

Mental health and addiction challenges are not one size fits all. There have been no diverse life experiences, trauma, gender identity, sexual identity, race, poverty. All are factors in why a person may face challenges surrounding mental health and addictions in their lifetime. How will lived experience inform treatment pathways, data collection, and findings for CORE? Who will be the third parties, or who will be collecting data and how to make sure it's safe and not to be used for a political purpose or anything?

Well, to address this crisis, treatment is critical, but ensuring that fewer people face mental health and addictions and challenges will save lives and millions of dollars in the long run. Why is prevention not a foundational part of what CORE will be exploring? As we see every day, Albertans don't trust the government, and they have no confidence that CORE is exploring all pathways holistically when prevention is not within the centre's mandate. Why is there no focus on the prevention in this bill?

3:20

If you talk about data storage and disclosure, what processes will CORE have surrounding consent by individuals to have their health data and identifying information shared with CORE and the ministry? Will patients in the recovery communities be given options about what data is collected about them and where and how that can be used? As we know, data will play a significant role informing the work of CORE. As I said, how will the third-party data providers be chosen? How are these groups assessed for qualifications to collect and store personal data? Will all data providers that CORE will use be accredited? What steps are taken to ensure contracted third-party data providers are storing all

relevant data to ensure there are no data omissions that would skew the results?

Madam Chair, with this bill, CORE: how will it look objectively and in full scope of policy and programming across Canada and internationally?

The board is appointed by the minister. Well, what has the scope and process been for finding potential board members? Is there a process? Is there another board? Is there another committee, or just the minister has the power to appoint whoever he wants to or his favourite people and keep the power in his own hands for all the results instead of trusting the health professionals or industry professionals, and he is taking everything in his own hands?

Well, there are lots of other important things that need to be done. What specific steps have been taken to ensure a diversity of options and experience will be present on the CORE board? We don't see anything in the mandate or in the bill. Like, who will be the board members? In diversity will there be a certain percentage of Indigenous communities, people of colour, women? It's not stated in this bill.

Part of the mandate for CORE is communicating with the public about issues related to mental health and addiction. Nowhere in this mandate does it explicitly say CORE should communicate to the public evidence, data, or its findings, Madam Chair. Will data and findings be disseminated to the public? How will this data be made publicly available? CORE as it stands runs the risk of confirmation bias. How is the centre going to share objectivity?

If we talk about public knowledge of grant funding to third-party providers, CORE is able to provide grant funding to third-party providers through bylaws. Ensuring public accountability for funding agreements is important. How will the public be made aware of funding agreements CORE has in place? It's another decision that will be made behind closed doors without any consultations and spending taxpayers' money for the salaries for their favoured people.

As we have seen the track record, history of the UCP about the consultations, who was consulted on this bill? Any community organizations, groups, or experts working on this issue, who have spent their entire lives or decades working on mental health and addictions? Were Indigenous people, communities consulted? Were health care professionals consulted? Well, if we have special, like, experts who are working in this industry for a long time, what's the need for the minister to oversee those people? Why don't we trust or work along with them?

I believe there is no need to create such a board and waste taxpayers' money, so I go against this bill. Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill 17 in committee this afternoon, and I'm disappointed not to see members opposite, from the government side, standing up to speak about their opinions with respect to the bill although I see by body language during today's debate and at other times in this House members opposite in government caucus cringing at what they hear coming out of the hopper from government caucus with respect to pieces of legislation such as Bill 17, this Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act. CORE, as it's known, is something that has been soundly rebuked in public literature, particularly academia and in the press as well and with good reason.

I stood in this House, Madam Chair, numerous times now to speak of my deceased nephew Devin McKee, who after an eight-

year struggle passed away in 2019 of a drug poisoning or overdose at home by himself, having an unseen mental illness which he self-medicated, and ultimately ended up addicted to drugs and went through numerous relapses and attempts at recovery. I've stood in this House and talked about recovery as the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction tries to redefine it. Recovery is not a one-stop shop. It's not a temporary program. It doesn't have a beginning and an end. Recovery is a lifelong process, and Devin's life and, unfortunately, his death were strong evidence of that.

In the consultations or in the lack of consultations that this bill contemplates, what's missing in large measure are those lived experiences, Madam Chair, the people that the government should be looking at to actually form a centre of recovery excellence. To actually get to the bottom, the roots of why the addictions end up in deaths, why the mental health ends up in addictions is to talk to those with lived experience, and research should involve the conversations with mentally ill people, with drug-addicted people, with their family members. That's the reason, I believe, that I see members opposite on the government benches cringing when we speak about these matters, because all of us in this House and all Albertans, frankly, for that matter, have somebody known well to us who has suffered mental illness, who has turned to drugs to self-medicate, and who has had a lengthy but often deadly result, ending in the tragic loss of somebody whose life was valued by family members all around them, by friends who knew them, who were not able to reach the individual so that the solution could be found to actually get the person on a road to recovery.

The Minister of Mental Health and Addiction seems to think that the only actual treatment option is a recovery process, and there's a whole continuum of care, Madam Chair, that the minister rejects out of hand.

3:30

I mean, I know that the professionals who are looking at this – and I'm quoting now from an article by David Climenhaga in *The Tyee* the minister's following words, reportedly out of the mouth of Kym Kaufman, the centre's soon-to-be-appointed CEO, that the Crown corporation “will help the government advance the Alberta Recovery Model.” In other words, they're looking to have the centre support what the government already has decided is the solution, and that is their recovery model approach, to the exclusion of all others. I project, Madam Chair, that this is a very moralistic approach, and it really is unfortunate that the government is taking this and reducing it to a moral issue. It's a health issue, and it should be seen and treated as a health issue on a continuum of care. We shouldn't be cherry-picking recovery as a sole solution.

In the bill itself is the word “recovery,” the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act. It shows how exclusionary the government's approach is. The Alberta centre of recovery, once again, reiterates that recovery is the be-all, end-all in terms of the government's belief that, morally, addiction is your fault if you're addicted, that mental health is your fault if you suffer from mental illness, that if you die a death as a result of a drug addiction, it's your fault; it's a moral failure. Unfortunately, that, I believe, is the fundamental root of the government's approach to adopting recovery as their sole model for solving the mental health and drug addiction problem.

And in a province which suffers five deaths a day from drug addiction and overdoses. Five deaths a day: I can't imagine if five people a day were dying on our highways on a regular basis that we wouldn't take it more seriously than this. But somehow the stigma that's attached to mental health and drug addiction is something that this government wants to deal with by sweeping away those who are so horrifically afflicted by tearing up encampments and

dispersing people or solely moving them towards a recovery model such that they're sort of out of sight and out of mind.

This is not something that the government is properly dealing with. This centre of recovery excellence act doesn't contemplate, in my view, Madam Chair, the multiple times that an individual will relapse, in many cases. They will end up going through a recovery program, a treatment program, but it's not the end of the story. We all should know from the long history which our society has with alcoholism that people will be described as recovering alcoholics. They don't call themselves recovered alcoholics; they are recovering alcoholics. The same with recovering addicts. The problem is lifelong, and it, unfortunately, does end in death. But the treatment can't end, and our efforts to ensure that the proper resources are there for individuals who suffer the blight of mental health and addictions, that that help is there time and time again, not just a one-stop shop where you end up going to a treatment centre and you're out and you're on your own – you need the follow-up, and the follow-up has to be there on a lifelong basis. Otherwise, you're ending up throwing your investment out the window.

That's not me talking to individuals who are of no value; it's me knowing through lived experience what individuals in our family have gone through. So the members opposite who are cringing when they hear pieces of legislation like this coming from their own caucus are reacting to their own lived experiences, in my view, where they see friends and family members having gone through this same affliction of mental illness and drug addiction and perhaps even an overdose death, are seeing the inadequacy of this Bill 17, the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act, and wondering why, with five Albertans a day dying from opioid abuse, the minister only sees fit to try to support his own particular view of a recovery option being the sole end point to treatment. What he does with CORE is basically appoint people to support that belief. I won't belabour the point too long, Madam Chair.

But I do want to say as well that another point I'd like to cover is the matter of Indigenous representation in this legislation, in the appointment process. I know that the government seems to be honing in on individuals who support their views, but they have forgotten that mental health and addictions has had an impact on Indigenous communities which far outweighs other Alberta communities. The act makes no mention of supporting Indigenous-led research around addictions. I'm wondering why Indigenous-led research has not even been mentioned in the mandate of CORE. It doesn't provide specific board seats to Indigenous representatives. It does not lay out any information in the mandates as to how CORE will work with Indigenous communities as a good partner.

Members opposite on the government side rightfully will cringe when they know that this omission is something that could have been dealt with. Perhaps there's still time, Madam Chair, for those members who feel this omission is a glaring one that should be amended. They could perhaps impress upon their Minister of Mental Health and Addiction and caucus to ensure that CORE will work with Indigenous communities, knowledge keepers, and experts to lead the organization's research. It's safe to say that this act has written out Indigenous perspectives on the issue. The word "Indigenous" never even appears in Bill 17.

I could say more, but I think I'll leave it at that for today and invite other members from my caucus to rise and speak to this disingenuous piece of legislation, which is another morality play out of the book and chapter of a government which seeks to control the mandate of research in academia in every aspect of the legislation that they bring forward.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 17. I want to echo many of the comments that have already been made by my colleagues. There are so many problematic aspects with this particular bill. I'll start, first of all, with the fact that it reinforces old stereotypes, myths. It is not evidence based and, in fact, has the potential to increase stigma for those who are looking to seek support with their addiction. The challenge with the current bill and CORE, the centre of recovery excellence, is that it isn't based on today's best practice. It is based on what this particular government deems to be morally acceptable and what lands within their world view. That is particularly problematic, that this government would choose to impose policy and legislation not on best practice, not on evidence, not on what science is telling us but on what fits with a particular ideological world view.

I'm going to share with you some of the myths about opioid addiction that I believe this bill actually perpetuates. This is according to the Yale Medicine website.

3:40

Myth 1. "Opioid addiction is just a psychological disorder and people who are dependent simply need better willpower." That's a myth that Dr. Richard Schottenfeld, MD in psychiatry – and I'll quote just a small snippet of what he says in the article.

Some people think that an opioid addiction is just psychological or a weakness of character, and that people who are addicted simply don't have the willpower to stop. But it's more complicated than that. Long-time use of opioids in an addictive way actually alters brain functioning. It causes chronic and lasting changes in the brain reward system, causing the person to feel less motivation and get less pleasure.

The reason I bring that up, Madam Chair, is that the recovery model itself that this government is espousing doesn't look at other approaches. As my colleagues have already mentioned, addiction is very, very challenging for anybody facing the disease. It's incredibly challenging for families. There needs to be a continuum of supports, not a particular template of supports. It simply doesn't work. It's not one size fits all. By espousing only one particular way towards recovery, we'll perpetuate myths that I've just mentioned.

There's another myth as well that I believe this bill perpetuates, again from the same article, that the best way to combat an opioid addiction is without medication. Dr. David Fiellin, MD, internal medicine, from Yale University, writes:

The idea of treating opioid addiction without medication is attractive, especially because such programs can be effective for some patients with alcohol use disorder. A lot of people think that the goal of treatment for opioid use disorder is not taking any medication at all. However, the truth is that the many people in abstinence only programs for opioid use disorder will [often] relapse.

Madam Chair, what's actually happening here is that this is a bill that is based on some mental models, some antiquated views of the world that simply are not evidence based. It increases stigma. I just want to refer to what the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction has said about stigma. "The stigma around substance use is one of the biggest barriers for people seeking and receiving treatment for substance use disorders."

Madam Chair, I think just in sort of the simple examples I've given today, there is already – I think the consensus is clear. There needs to be a different continuum of care to ensure that all folks who are facing the disease of addiction can get the support that they need. But the reality of the matter is that Bill 17 simply doesn't do that. What it does do is that it essentially creates a recovery centre

war room, one that is narrowly controlled by the minister, where the minister green-lights all that will get funded, and the minister will have maximum influence over who the CEO is, the board, and the chief science officer.

I'm deeply concerned about this because when it comes to medical care – and essentially this is what it's about; it's about ensuring that those who need addictions support can get the adequate care that they need – I want to ensure that if I were the patient, I'd receive the best possible experts, that I'd receive the best possible evidence-based practices, not a political decision. This, I believe, is in so many ways wrong-headed, Madam Chair, in that it is a missed opportunity by this government to fund a model that truly works, that is holistic.

The other thing that I want to mention is that the bill as it's currently structured and the centre as it's currently structured will maximize the opportunity for confirmation biased and politically motivated research with public money because of how the centre is structured, because of a particular world view that is already imbued within this legislation and within the way that the centre is set up. But, more troublingly, it is part of a larger pattern of political control by this government where if you don't agree with this government, you are on their out list. You are not going to be listened to. And when it comes to medical care, this is particularly serious because for so many Albertans it is one of life and death.

The reality is, as my colleagues have previously mentioned, that we are losing five Albertans a day to opioid use. It is a disease that is rampant in all corners of our province. No one is immune. It does not discriminate based on race, background, socioeconomic status. It happens in the bedroom communities of wealthy areas, as it does in impoverished areas. It impacts every Albertan, and many of us know of somebody who is impacted by this rising crisis. Yet rather than working with stakeholders, rather than involving those stakeholders who are most impacted and looking at a holistic model, this government – this government – has instead decided to impose an ideologically driven system of care that, frankly, will be a waste of money because it will not work for everybody.

The recovery model alone – and, you know, it's a bit ironic because I feel in some ways the government has co-opted the use of the word "recovery." The reality is that we all want folks to recover. That's not the matter of debate. It's unfortunate that it's called the recovery model because I don't think it often leads there. It is a model that, in fact, is antiquated and no longer works in many cases, but it is, I think, for the government's base one that is easy to understand. I think what we actually need is a holistic, evidence-driven approach to mental health and addictions. We need to look at the efficacy and viability of all of the options. For example, this government, particularly in this bill nor in their rhetoric, hasn't mentioned anything about prioritizing prevention, investing in health and well-being. There is, in fact, no investment in any of those options, which is also incredibly, incredibly important.

To address this crisis, Madam Chair, treatment is critical, but ensuring fewer Albertans face mental health and addictions challenges will save lives and millions of dollars in the long run. Instead, what this government has done is frame their discussion on a very narrow model of recovery instead of a long-term process. Research has shown that sobriety only works on 9 per cent of the population, so it's clearly insufficient given that, as I mentioned before, five Albertans die of opioid addiction every single day.

3:50

The other troubling piece of this is that there is the lack of Indigenous and diverse perspectives. First of all, this bill disregards the experiences of those who have had addictions and challenges as well as front-line workers who help them, who have continuously

told us that there needs to be a continuum of care. If the minister cared about CORE being objective, Bill 17 would have required CORE to seek diverse perspectives. But it doesn't. It doesn't have that requirement either in its operations or on its board. In fact, it concentrates, Madam Chair, an inordinate amount of power in the minister's office. Bill 17 does not lay out any information, the mandate as to how CORE will work with Indigenous communities as a good partner. What an incredibly unfortunate missed opportunity.

One other point that I want to point out, that I've emphasized already, is that when it comes to mental health and addictions challenges, not one size fits all. We have to recognize the different life experiences that might lead a person or individuals to addictions in their lifetime, the trauma that they might encounter, the life experiences that they might encounter, and how we must ensure that all care is trauma informed.

Now, I want to transition and talk about how this bill and specifically CORE, the centre that this bill is looking to set up, creates a politically motivated confirmation bias with public research dollars. We can't have confidence based on how narrow the mandate is that this centre is going to explore all pathways to recovery holistically and objectively. We can't have confidence based on the structure that the minister will not meddle in the research direction or the funding direction of CORE. After all, the minister will appoint the CEO, the board, even the chief science officer. In fact, the minister will also have full control over the research direction and will effectively sign off on projects before they go forward. So the minister has veto power. The minister can say, "I don't agree with this research direction," and there is no way – no way – under this bill to hold the minister accountable. That is why CORE will be essentially the recovery centre war room. It exists solely to espouse a particular messaging by a particular ideological viewpoint. It is not set up for the public interest and for the benefit of Albertans who need this kind of medical care.

As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, Madam Chair, this approach is, well, very much on point with what we have seen from this government. It is part of a larger pattern that: "If you don't agree with this government, we're not going to listen to you. In fact, we're going to try to concentrate power into our hands at every single opportunity." We have seen this with the original war room, the Energy Centre. We are seeing this in Bill 18 regarding university research. We have seen this with Bill 20. We have seen this with the sovereignty act. This is all the same kind of play. It is about power. It is about power and control at the expense of and certainly not for the benefit of Albertans.

With that, Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to make these remarks.

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise briefly to speak to this bill. I would say, before I say a few things, that in the first 11 months of 2023 1,800 Albertans have died because of drugs. Eighteen hundred Albertans. They were our neighbours, family members, fellow Albertans. In the last two, three years I have been to many funerals in northeast Calgary, many young Albertans dying from drugs. Those parents, those families do need help. They do question, every time they get an opportunity, what their government is doing to stop this pandemic.

A couple of times I had town halls where we asked the Calgary Police Service to come to talk to residents in the northeast of what they should look for in terms of activities among their kids. What are the indicators that they should be watching for so that they can keep a better and close eye and, I guess, help their loved ones? Once

we had somebody come from Safeworks from the Sheldon Chumir hospital in Calgary, and that person talked about harm reduction, provided training on how to use naloxone kits, distributed those naloxone kits, and many people did take that home. Many people appreciated that if they see their loved one in such circumstances, at least they have something to turn to so they can help that person until help arrives, EMS arrives, or someone else gets involved.

But what we are seeing in this bill, instead of helping those families, those Albertans, instead of thinking about not just in terms of numbers but that they are our fellow Albertans who are dying of drugs and mental health issues, is just the energy war room all over again. Government will decide who the board of directors are, government will decide which failed UCP candidate can become the CEO, and government will determine what kind of reports they need and what kind of propaganda they can fund with 30 million public dollars.

Sure. This preamble also says that they want to have the centre – something to do with internationally. Last time we saw the energy war room going after some cartoons, and we did hit the news media internationally.

I think that instead of creating another Crown corporation that will be controlled by the minister, board of directors will be appointed by the minister, their agenda will be determined by the minister, their research priorities will be determined by the minister, their CSO and CEO will be appointed, which I think already have been appointed by the minister, I think the government needs to rethink their priorities. Like, all they have done in the last year or so: it's all about creating fear, I guess, maintaining control on anything and everything that they can. And now they're trying to control what research and propaganda they can fund with public dollars.

I think there is so much research out there in the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. There is so much knowledge out there in our communities, Indigenous communities, ethnic communities in northeast Calgary. There are many organizations who are dealing with these issues on the front line. Government needs to change course, rely on the research that is available to them, rely on the evidence that is available to them, rely on the expertise that is available in the Indigenous communities, person of colour communities, and actually do something to put an end to these deaths, to make sure that families who are reaching out and seeking help have the help available, instead of being fixated on one thing that one of them, I guess, one of their advisers thought is the best for everyone. That's not working. We are seeing record numbers of deaths, and government needs to do better instead of creating publicly funded propaganda arms for the government.

With that, I will take my seat.

4:00

The Chair: Are there others to speak to the bill?

If not, I will call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 17 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? That is carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Madam Chair. I move that the committee rise and report Bill 17.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 17.

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.

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

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

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

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

It's clear that there are significant gaps in current life lease protections that can leave leaseholders and their families vulnerable. We've seen that; we have 180 families that can't get their deposits back for a total of \$62 million. This is absolutely an outrage. But to understand why we need this legislation, we have to go back a little further than that.

In 2015 the NDP were an accidental government. Madam Speaker, they were ill equipped to govern and unprepared to lead. They failed Albertans at every turn, and nowhere was that more obvious than in the life lease industry. But, again, to understand it, let's look at everything that was going on at the time.

We have to start with Bill 6, farm safety legislation. This is when the NDP thought it would be a good idea to unionize the family farm. Next they broke the electricity grid. The short version is that when they cancelled the PPAs, they forgot to read the fine print, and it resulted in ratepayers paying \$1.8 billion because of that negligence. So thank you for that. And don't forget crude by rail. Listen, Madam Speaker, I don't care if industry wants to put crude on rail – you can put it in the back seat of your car for all I care – but it needs to be industry; it can't be government. That's what the NDP did. They thought that it was the job of government to be in the business of marketing oil on rail, and they cost Albertans \$2.4 billion dollars because of this fiasco.

Now we can wrap this all up together with the carbon tax. They made everything more expensive, and they also set the stage to signal to the rest of the country, their ally, their friend Justin Trudeau to do the same thing, Madam Speaker. Now, the end result of all of this is we have a government in 2015-19 that was in crisis.

Now, you will recall two weeks ago, Madam Speaker, I stood up in this House and I said that 27 life lease holders wrote to the NDP minister of service Alberta. By the way, I would be happy to table those 27 letters in the House. All the NDP has to do is stand up in question period and ask me, and I will be happy to table them. They wrote to the minister of service Alberta and they asked for help. They asked for the minister of service Alberta under the NDP

government to basically do what we did, to enact life lease legislation that brings forward protections. And guess what they did, Madam Speaker? Nothing. They did absolutely nothing, and because of their inaction they sentenced 180 Alberta seniors to not having their deposits returned. It's absolutely shameful what happened.

I mentioned just the other day that the MLA Dr. Bob Turner stood up in this House and asked the NDP minister of service Alberta about life lease protections. That was in 2017. You may recall what the minister of the NDP said, Madam Speaker. The NDP minister said that people should read their contract and consult a lawyer. That is the extent of what they were willing to do for life lease holders, to advise them to read their contract and to consult a lawyer. If they had done their fiduciary responsibility, if they had put Albertans first like we did with this life lease legislation, this fiasco never would have happened.

Now, that was in 2017. But they didn't stop talking about life leases in 2017, Madam Speaker. They were still talking about life leases in 2018. In fact, the NDP Minister of Health said in this very House: "We look forward to working with the member and both of our offices to develop an effective solution to support residents in life lease situations." That was from the Minister of Health. Now, I checked my office. I checked my desk. I looked everywhere. I couldn't find any work on behalf of the Minister of Health. As far as I know, she did nothing for life lease holders despite what she said in 2018 in this very House.

This happened because we had a government that was in crisis and, as I said at the very beginning, they were ill equipped to govern and they were unprepared to lead. They left life lease holders out in the cold, and today we have 180 of them that are asking for help. Well, I made a commitment, and that commitment was that what happened under their watch will not happen under ours. We will put forward protections that make sure this never happens again.

If passed, Bill 12 will reduce identified gaps and help prevent others from being subjected to the distress these leaseholders and their families have faced. It will strengthen consumer protections with additional regulations, including regulating the time frame in which funds must be returned and the ability to set an interest rate for overdue repayment, spelling out minimum contract disclosure requirements, introducing a 10-day cooling-off period after contracts are signed, and setting out broad authority to create additional protections for life lease holders in the future if needed. Allowing for future regulatory changes will ensure that government can establish more protection for leaseholders if needed. Additionally, if passed, this legislation will place the life lease industry under the authority of the Consumer Protection Act and make the industry subject to the act's enforcement mechanisms and penalties.

Madam Speaker, that's the very minimum that the NDP should have done in 2017 or 2018 when they were asked. If they had moved on that then, then at least there would be penalties in place now that would be a deterrent to developers from doing this and withholding deposits, deterrents such as fines up to \$300,000 per infraction or two years in jail. Under the Consumer Protection Act this means that any failure to include disclosure requirements and agreements; return leaseholders' entrance fees within 180 days of lease termination; or use standard agreements, forms, or content will be considered offences. That was the bare minimum they had to do, and they couldn't even do that.

Let me be clear, Madam Speaker: the protections provided in Bill 12 will apply to new leaseholders as well as existing leaseholders. If passed, Bill 12's 180-day repayment requirement and the addition of interest on funds not repaid in this time frame will apply to all current leaseholders who decide to terminate their lease after the legislation is in effect, meaning that current leaseholders who

end their lease once Bill 12 is passed and proclaimed would be safeguarded by the requirement for entrance fees to be returned within 180 days.

4:10

Now, since tabling, we've also heard concerns from those awaiting repayment that operators may potentially return entrance fees on new lease terminations earlier than those already in a queue. In response to their concern, we tabled an amendment that confirms this legislation will not create another queue over the return of entrance fees for those already in the queue. This new subsection clarifies that nothing within the section affects any provision related to repayment order within a life lease or substantially similar contract entered into before the coming into force of Bill 12.

Madam Speaker, our government is committed to making life easier for Albertans. Through Bill 12 we are taking the guesswork out of life leases. We are creating clear and consistent requirements to protect consumers and leaseholders and giving leaseholders and operators the tools to navigate the terms of their contracts. The NDP did not do anything for life lease holders when they were in government, and we will not make that mistake because we understand that government has a fiduciary responsibility to put Albertans first, especially when we're talking seniors and other vulnerable Albertans.

Madam Speaker, with that, I'd like to thank all the members for their thoughtful contributions to the discussions on this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak at third reading of Bill 12. I wish I could say that I was surprised by the comments made by the minister. Unfortunately, you know, this is a very serious matter for many, many Albertans, and to do the sort of partisan trumpeting that he just did was a real insult to those Albertans who are deeply concerned about the loss of their life savings but also about the risk that their life savings face. I think it's important because the minister failed to actually – it's surprising to say – give an accurate accounting of the history of the life lease issue, which is that, really, this goes back quite a long way.

I actually want to begin by saying that everybody in this House believes in the need for regulating life leases. That's exactly why we wanted it to be the best legislation it could possibly be, because I think many of us in this House have actually heard just that, the concerns about life leases.

Back in 2008 legislation was introduced by the former PC government to address regulating life leases. If you go back and you read the *Hansard*, you can see that many members of different parties were actually in support of that legislation. They were having a good discussion, and the issues at that time, which were the issues for most of the last 10, 15 years, had been predominantly around the lack of regulation to manage things like: how does maintenance get addressed? Is there proper responsiveness from the life lease operator? How are those, you know, fees accounted for when somebody moves out of a life lease? There is always sort of a piece that was taken back from the operator, and there needed to be more clarity around that. Those were the kinds of pieces that were in discussion. Unfortunately, that legislation was never passed, and it fell off the Order Paper and the PC government didn't feel like it was a pressing enough issue to bring it back the next time that the Legislature resumed. So it fell off the Order Paper, and it disappeared for a little while.

Now, the minister has brought up that these were issues that were brought up, yes, when the NDP was in government. I do recall,

certainly, that, again, life leases have been an issue that Albertans have been calling for some regulation for some time. But what's really important to note, Madam Speaker, is that during that period of time between 2008, when legislation was first brought up, and again when the issues were being raised back in 2013, '15, and onwards, a lot of those issues related to questions about the operation of life leases by nonprofit organizations.

There wasn't the concern that we have now, that is pressing and facing too many Alberta families, which was actually that some for-profit operators and particularly one for-profit operator, Greg Christenson and Christenson development group, actually were using life leases as pretty much a Ponzi scheme, to take the life savings of seniors and to spend it who knows how, because there was no accounting for that, and now refusing to pay these families or these seniors back for the money that they are owed. That wasn't what was taking place. In fact, although the minister has not tabled those letters, I'll ask him right now to table those letters in the Legislature.

I'm also proud to say that it was one of my predecessors, Dr. Bob Turner, who was the former MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud, and the concerns that – of course, I've spoken to him. Of course, I'm familiar with those issues. Those issues were about maintenance fees being paid by the nonprofit operator of life leases in my constituency. Certainly, it's good that we're introducing legislation to address that. But to say that the concerns that have been before this minister for some time now were actually the issues that were raised back between 2015 and 2019: that is simply inaccurate, Madam Speaker, and the minister knows that, and if he'd table those letters, we'd be able to show that.

Now, here's what's really important to note. It's really interesting, Madam Speaker, that whenever we listen to the government caucus members, the ministers, they seem to forget that they have been government for the last five years. You know who actually could have passed legislation that would have prevented precisely what had happened with Greg Christenson, which only arose, by the way, in 2021, 2022? It was actually the UCP government. So I'd really encourage the minister of service Alberta to talk to his colleagues. I can't even remember who was the minister of service Alberta during that time because there were so many rotating people during that time, but he can talk to them and ask them why they didn't take any action.

The reality is, Madam Speaker, that the concerns about Christenson, the stealing, essentially, of the life savings of seniors in this province by Christenson development group and Greg Christenson, was happening under the watch of this government. The minister himself was aware of that, and he hasn't taken any action.

Let's ask the question: why? The reality is that the reason why – well, it's twofold. One, it's because, surprisingly – maybe not so surprisingly because it's pretty evident in public records – Greg Christenson is a pretty big donor and supporter of the UCP. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, while this legislation was before this House, while the minister had been faced with seniors and their families approaching him and saying, "We need to talk to you" because – guess what, Madam Speaker? – he wasn't speaking to them; they had to demonstrate at the Legislature. They had to show up on the steps of the Legislature to get the attention of this minister. While all of this was happening, Greg Christenson, the man who owes over \$60 million right now to Alberta seniors and their families, was attending a UCP fundraiser and got to wave to the minister as he walked in. Maybe that's why we don't see any action.

Now, listen, the minister is all puffed up, the government is all puffed up that they're taking action on life leases. Yes, they are, but they're not doing anything for the very people about whom they're

standing up and saying: this is why we need to do so much on life leases. They're not doing anything for them, and not only are they not doing anything, they refuse to.

We as opposition brought forward some very thoughtful amendments to actually say: here's your opportunity to put your money where your mouth is, Minister. He stands up and he puffs up his chest and he talks about how it's an outrage and that he's going to make sure that these people are being made whole. But when he had the opportunity, life lease legislation before him right now, and he was presented with two options which would give some course of action, some recourse to these people who are owed millions of dollars, their life savings, he chose not to take it.

Now, he chose not to take it. He claims it was because he couldn't go back and retroactively apply legislation to these contracts. Two arguments on that, Madam Speaker. One is that he doesn't even understand how to explain that. Like, he didn't even understand what legal principle he was applying there. Secondly, Bill 12 actually does that. It actually already inserts, thankfully, a repayment term of 180 days for entrance fees for those folks who already have existing life leases. They have ongoing contracts. This bill has no problem going back for those folks – and I'm glad it does – to say that there is a repayment time period for their entrance fee.

To say, though, that that could not also be done for those folks, a class of people who had their life leases terminated and are owed millions of dollars – and some of them in my constituency have been waiting up to three years, Madam Speaker. They've been waiting for three years for repayment of up to \$400,000. This minister said that he just can't do it. He had the opportunity right now in this legislation to actually do the thing that he talks about, but he doesn't do it.

Speaking of talking, Madam Speaker, another thing that this minister is very proud of is how ineffective he is. He has boastfully talked about how he's had nine meetings with Greg Christenson – nine meetings – yet produced zero results. All of those meetings with Greg Christenson, including at the Premier's fundraiser, have not resulted in one single dollar being paid back by Greg Christenson to the people whom he owes that money to. I'm really glad that the minister is proud of how ineffective he is, because he keeps boasting about it, but I think we're well aware by now.

4:20

The second thing, Madam Speaker, is that he says that he doesn't want to take any action to support those people who are currently owed all that money because he is worried that that will push Greg Christenson into bankruptcy and push that company into bankruptcy, and then those folks won't get any money. Let me just point out once again that those people are not getting any money right now, and he's not producing any results for them that way. But, secondly, if only – if only – these seniors and Albertans got as much care and attention and concern from this minister as he has for Greg Christenson's personal fortunes, because that's really what he's saying. He doesn't want to push Greg Christenson into bankruptcy, and in the meantime he's quite content having 180 seniors and their families not get paid back the money they're owed.

So the priorities of this minister are completely . . .

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader. A point of order.

**Point of Order
Imputing Motives**

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I listened intently to the member opposite's speech, saying that he is content that the

members who are owed money from Greg Christenson not get paid back. That is certainly imputing false motives against the hon. member under 23(h), (i), and (j). That is not true. That's why we're moving this legislation. The hon. member takes very seriously the money that these people are owed. That's why we have a bill on the floor. They can debate all they like about previous amendments that were put forward that were denied, but the reality is that we do care very deeply, and so does the member. But for the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud to suggest the minister specifically is content with these members of the public . . . [interjection] If the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has something she'd like to say with regard to this point of order, she's welcome to have her time after I'm finished speaking, but at the moment I am raising this point of order because you cannot do indirectly what you cannot do directly. She cannot attack the minister and impute false motives.

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I do not believe it's a point of order. The Government House Leader just picked up one sentence from the member's comments and interpreted it as the point, that is not in accordance with the rule. But we need to look at the context. While I was listening to the member's speech, the member talked about what provisions are in the bill. The member talked about the events, what happened, how the minister met one individual, Greg Christenson, nine times and other seniors just maybe for a half-hour. Based on those actions and what's in the bill, it is that the government is content, the minister is content with the way it's drafted, so it was not imputing false motives. It's just, I guess, direct inference from the bill and the action of this government, so it's not a point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I think there are two things to discuss with this point of order. The first, I would say, is that there are many comments being made about a member of the public who doesn't have the ability to defend himself about comments that are made in this Chamber. What I'll say about that is: please express some caution in how we proceed with that debate and about a member of the public who doesn't have the ability to defend himself.

The second that I would say is that the accusation that was made against the minister and his motives is certainly not helpful to decorum in this Chamber, nor is it maybe even necessarily relevant. We're here debating Bill 12, the Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024, in third reading. We're almost done.

I will not find a point of order at this time, but I do express caution on both of those fronts, and I expect the hon. member will act in such manner.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think there are a number of members of the public in Alberta who have been mentioned frequently in this House by government caucus over and over and over again. I will continue to exercise some caution, but I do think that in this House we should be remembering that we're here to serve Albertans, not our donors.

Debate Continued

Ms Pancholi: I will continue on to say that I think it is fair to say that while the government has indicated they would like to support those people who have lost their money and are likely to not get their money back as a result of life leases that have been terminated with Christenson development group, this bill does not address that.

It is directly on point to point that out, that there was an opportunity for the government to take some amendments and to make some decisions and to allow for some provisions and protections within Bill 12 to address that very vocal group of people who have seen their life savings disappear. The government chose not to do that, which would suggest that the government is quite comfortable providing no measure of recourse or action for those people. It is obviously clear that they are content to go ahead and do that.

I want to point out that there are many ways that this bill could be improved other than the fact that they've excluded an entire group of Albertans who have been calling, since this government was elected in 2019, for some action on this specific issue, and the government chose not to. There are other things that could have been done in this bill to improve it. I certainly feel that the timeline of 180 days, Madam Speaker, for a return of the entrance fees is far too long. Again, these are individuals who have moved out of these life lease units into long-term care, and they require that money to be able to pay, often, for their long-term care. Sometimes they require it because they've passed away, and that money should be distributed to the estate, and their family members are waiting on that. We do believe 180 days is too long.

I also have to point out that Bill 12 places a lot of emphasis on what's going to happen in regulation. We've already seen that this government has not consulted properly with the people who have actually been affected by life leases in developing this legislation. We don't have a lot of faith in what's going to happen in consultation when it comes to the regulations. That being said, Madam Speaker, because it is important to point out what is missing from this legislation, I come back to my original point, which is that in this House all members have agreed that we need to have life lease legislation. This has been an unregulated area for far too long in this province. We've seen now that that lack of regulation has actually allowed for some bad actors to take advantage of that. We absolutely need to have life lease regulation.

Madam Speaker, I am actually going to support Bill 12 because I believe that Albertans deserve protection. I also believe that all Albertans who have been affected by life leases deserve protection and deserve a course of action. That is why members of this opposition worked so diligently with the government caucus to try to provide opportunities to ensure that those who have been affected by terminated life leases and are waiting for their repayment have a course of action, have the protections that the minister spoke about in such glowing terms, about the abilities to have a prosecution under the Consumer Protection Act, to have timelines, to have penalties applied. All of those things: we believe all individuals who are affected by unregulated life leases deserve to have them, and that includes those who have terminated before this bill came into effect.

There are shortcomings, significant shortcomings, in this bill, including the opportunity that was lost by this government to actually address the issues for those particular people. But I do believe that our job in this Legislature is to ensure those protections are there for people moving forward, so I will be continuing to hold this government to account as it develops those regulations. I will be continuing to work with my constituents who have spoken to me at length and have spoken to this minister at length, or tried to at least, to try to get some better input into what's going to happen to make sure that those regulations and all those provisions coming forward actually protect Albertans and not the bad actors, that I believe right now seem to be the sole focus of this government's protections.

I am not done in my role as an MLA to be vigilant on this issue and to hold the government to account, because we need to make sure that those protections are there. I believe that this bill could have been much better. I believe that there was an opportunity for

this government to do not just a little bit of something but to do the right thing. They chose not to do that. Of course, after five years of serving in this House, my expectations have become quite low when it comes to the government. So I will take, for those entering into life leases in my constituency and across Alberta, what little is generally offered by this government, which is an opportunity to have better input and better regulations to ensure that those who enter in life leases have the protections they deserve.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

4:30

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and offer some thoughts on Bill 12 as well. I want to start my comments off by thanking my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud for her thoughtful comments, and I want to highlight the good work that she's done in representing her constituents on this life lease issue. I also want to extend that recognition to my friend from St. Albert, who has also been a very vocal and effective advocate for a number of families in her constituency who have been victimized by Greg Christenson and his company operating a life lease. So thank you both to my colleagues for their effective advocacy.

I will say that I sincerely appreciate my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud's comments clarifying the history of this issue, countering the spin that the minister of service Alberta has tried to give on what the NDP did or didn't do when we were in government. I appreciate her comments clarifying that the issues that were raised at the time that Bob Turner raised those issues were related to maintenance fees and were not related to this refusal or inability to repay life lease deposits, which we're faced with today.

It's a real shame, Madam Speaker, that we're discussing this bill here today. I think this bill is emblematic of this government's habit of breaking promises and is another in a long string of broken promises that we've seen from this government and from this Premier since she was elected to that position in 2022. Also, more importantly, I think that the fact that this bill exists, that we have to provide legislation to protect seniors against what I would characterize as potentially predatory practices of creating life leases is a failure on the part of the province of Alberta to care adequately for seniors at all.

You know, I want to start off by talking about the broken promises that we've seen and continue to see from this government. The minister of service Alberta was given his mandate letter in July of 2023, and that mandate letter outlined the Premier's expectation that the minister would bring forward recommendations to ensure appropriate protections are in place for life lease holders. Now, I've read the letter. It didn't qualify; it didn't say: "Oh, those 180 people who are owed \$62 million: let's not deal with those people. Let's only work on a go-forward basis." It's certainly clear, from my reading of the letter, at least, and I think any fair reading of the letter, that anybody who had fallen victim to these kinds of contracts would rightly expect that their interests would be protected by the mandate that was given to the minister. And here we find out months later that the minister has failed to do the job that Albertans were expecting him to do and that the Premier expected him to do, to protect the people who are currently owed \$62 million, the people and their families who are owed \$62 million.

You know, I am disappointed but not surprised that here is another example of the UCP government failing to deliver what they've promised the people of Alberta that they would deliver. My friend from Edmonton-City Centre has reminded people a number of times that when the Premier was first sworn into office, she promised to fix health care in 90 days, and here we are 18 months

later, and health care is worse than it was on the day that she took office. That was a broken promise. During the election campaign of 2023 the Premier made a promise to cut personal income taxes for Albertans. We see in this budget that was introduced this year that that promise has been broken. She promised during the election campaign to keep Alberta in the Canada pension plan. In fact, many people that I talked to voted for the Premier because they believed her when she said that she was not interested in taking Alberta out of the Canada pension plan. That was a promise that was broken in the first session after this Legislature reconvened.

The Premier also promised, the UCP also promised during the election not to pursue an Alberta provincial police force. Well, what do we see in Bill 11? We see exactly that; the government is pursuing an Alberta provincial police force even though they expressly told the people of Alberta that they were no longer interested in pursuing that.

You know, a little bit closer to home we saw hundreds of people who were camped out on vacant land all throughout the downtown core of Edmonton. The government promised them that they would be given homes. The police moved in, they swept them out, they cleared out those encampments, and the minister to this day insists that those people were housed even though he said at budget committee that they've only found homes for five people. Five.

Mr. Schow: Relevance.

Mr. Schmidt: I hear the Government House Leader asking for relevance. Where was that cry for relevance when the minister of service Alberta was talking about . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: We don't do this in this Chamber. We are on Bill 12.

The hon. member.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I was saying, this is a failure of the government to keep the promise that it made to the 180 Albertans and their families who rightly expected that the minister was going to protect their interests, and he has failed to do that.

My friend the MLA from Edmonton-Whitemud clearly refuted the arguments that the minister of service Alberta made during debate, the excuses that he presented trying to convince people that he had no power to deal with these contracts retroactively. I want to thank my friend from Edmonton-Whitemud for clearly stating the case that not only is this bill actually amending existing contracts retroactively but that the minister had the power to intervene in these cases that instigated the introduction of this bill in the first place and that he failed to do so on a number of occasions, Madam Speaker.

So the government should not be patting themselves on the back for providing some great service to the people of Alberta. In fact, they've failed again to protect the interests of Albertans. I found it interesting that the minister of service Alberta was using the phrase "fiduciary responsibility" and he seemed to suggest that he knew what that phrase meant. I think perhaps he had learned it for the first time today and was really excited to try it out, but he failed to actually demonstrate that he understood what the concept was because if he understood, if he genuinely believed that his government had a so-called fiduciary responsibility to protect the citizens of Alberta, then he would have implemented a piece of legislation that rectified the harms that instigated this legislation in the first place. But, in fact, we see no such thing.

It seems to me, Madam Speaker, that the only fiduciary responsibility that the UCP government is concerned about is their perceived fiduciary responsibility to their donors. That's why we

see Greg Christenson being protected from having to pay back \$62 million to the people who are owed that. I think that's an important question that the people of Alberta need to keep in mind: who is this government acting in the interests of? It's certainly not the people who are owed \$62 million. It certainly seems to me that it's the person who owes them \$62 million whose interests are being protected by this piece of legislation.

4:40

It's also concerning to me that the minister wants to pat himself on the back for providing life lease protections for people going forward. But what was interesting to me when I listened to the comments that the minister made in previous stages of debate was that he was really afraid that he was going to push companies into receivership. Well, why are these companies in danger of going into receivership in the first place? They've been entrusted with the life savings of their residents, and a mere requirement to pay within 90 days is going to push these companies into receivership.

So the requirement now, if this piece of legislation passes, is to push them into repaying after six months. But we had brought forward amendments that would shorten that time, and the minister refuted that claim, saying that having a shorter time frame would push those companies into receivership. Well, how fragile are these companies that they cannot make a payment within 90 days? That's terrifying. People who are currently in life lease contracts should be given no comfort that the people who are holding their life savings are apparently on the brink of insolvency if they're required to repay those amounts in less than 180 days. Why is it that we are continuing to allow these operators to operate in such a fashion that the life savings of the people that they're supposed to care for are in such precarious positions? That's incredibly concerning to me, Madam Speaker, and it should be incredibly concerning to the people of Alberta, and it is in no way a win that this minister should be crowing about.

More important, Madam Speaker, I think, than the fact that this bill represents a broken promise, another in a long string of broken promises that the people of Alberta have sadly come to expect from the UCP government, is the fact that the need to protect seniors from the predatory practice – seems to me to be a predatory practice – of offering life leases is indicative of our failure to protect seniors at all.

You know, the idea of retirement is a relatively new one in human history. It's really only been since the Industrial Revolution that people have lived long enough that they can expect to work for a period of time and then take some time off in their old age to retire. In fact, the Industrial Revolution brought great promise to people, the idea that increasing prosperity and longer lifespans would mean that people would have to work less than their previous generations did, but that's turned out to be a promise that hasn't been realized, for changing reasons, I suppose.

You know, when I was a kid, or throughout my life, I guess, I've had three images of retirement in my mind. The first image that I clearly remember is that of the *Golden Girls*, a popular sitcom from the 1980s where a number of old, in quotation marks, women of 55 all retired to Florida to live a life of relative comfort and ease after having put in years of hard work.

They had earned the right to take it easy for a while, and that was an appealing vision. Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, that vision that I saw on television is not one that anybody in my family has experienced for different reasons. My grandparents: they were all farmers. Only three out of four of them lived to see retirement. Three of them dropped dead before they turned 65.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members to join the debate? The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to rise to speak to Bill 12. Last Thursday, May 2, I had a chance to go and visit Bedford Village in Sherwood Park, which is a Christenson Developments property, where the people there and all the residents are life lease holders. My friends Betty-Lou and Marion invited me, so I was delighted for the invitation to go to the weekly coffee time. It happens Thursdays at 9 o'clock at Bedford Village. I don't think I was quite ready for what I was going to walk into. I thought I might see my friend Reg, who used to live at Bedford Village but still comes back to visit his friends there. He always has a great suggestion on how I should operate as an MLA. I felt a little sad, too, that the last time I had visited Bedford Village, my friend Keith was still alive. His family is sadly in the queue of over 180 families waiting to receive the life lease entrance fees back from the Christenson Group of Companies.

Before I go further, I actually just want to say that I think that in this Assembly – and it's really challenging in our communication – when we talk about these entrance fees or call them deposits, we're talking about \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000. These are people's life savings. They're their nest eggs, the money they expected to use when they moved to long-term care, the money they might have been hoping to pass on in an inheritance. For over 180 families right now, they are waiting for their money so that they can use it for what they had thought of. The best thing I could tell from the people at coffee time was that your money is in this building, Bedford Village. That's where your life savings are right now. You can't just withdraw it when you need to, and that is a tragedy and a very sad thing.

Back to Bedford Village. I had walked into something, and I was a bit astonished by the sheer number of people that showed up. There were over 60 people that showed up for coffee time. The last time I was there, there were 15. There was something else going on that I wasn't quite tuned in to. The topic everybody wanted to talk about was their life lease agreement. They wanted a report: "What is going on with Bill 12? What is going to be done so that we, current life lease holders, can feel safe again, feel secure with our money?" It was a tough position to be in as an MLA.

What I learned is that people cannot sleep. They are wracked with worry that they have entered into this agreement that is going to hold up money for their family when they pass it on or for them when they need it to go to long-term care. It was a tough situation to be in, to know that I had to say: "You know, this current legislation, Bill 12, is going to help people on a go-forward basis. It's going to have no benefit for you." I don't know that I gave them any rest that evening.

I did get kind of an interesting side story. Irene, a brilliant, bright lady of over 90 years old now can't drive anymore. She's had to give up her parking stall in Bedford Village. This was actually just an interesting little side story. Irene lent Christenson Developments \$30,000 for her parking stall in Bedford Village. Parking stalls are typically deeded in these condominium projects that Christenson Developments builds in Centre in the Park. There are about four condo buildings there, and you are deeded your parking stall. You can trade it. I've seen it on Kijiji. I've seen it on Facebook Marketplace, people selling their parking stalls. Irene had lent \$30,000 to Christenson Developments. Now she can't drive. She's been told that. She sold her car. I was astonished to learn that now Irene has to go into the queue to get her \$30,000 for her deposit on her parking stall. Now she goes to the back of the line of 180 people

to wait for her \$30,000 for her parking stall. It was a bit astonishing. As the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has mentioned, people are waiting three years for \$300,000 and \$400,000 and \$500,000. I don't know when Irene is going to get her \$30,000 back.

4:50

Another thing I was astonished to learn that was a bit surprising: the people that were in attendance told me that Christenson Developments at Bedford Village are no longer entering into life lease agreements for people that are moving in. They are no longer entering into life lease agreements. This was a bit of an interesting tell. The minister has been great about mentioning all the times he's met with Greg Christenson. I'm sure Greg Christenson is very on top of this, and I know he is. He is responding very publicly about the situation, about the lopsided agreements he has with people, and how he's not going to pay them back. He knows now with the passing of Bill 12 that entering into a life lease agreement is not good business for Greg Christenson, so he's not entering into any new life lease agreements.

It's also not good news for the current life lease holders or the people in the queue because that means that new people coming into the residence are not giving cash that could be passed on to take one person off the queue. The Ponzi scheme has ended, but it is a really strong tell that Christenson Developments, knowing that Bill 12 is coming into effect, has said: not good for our business anymore.

Just to backtrack a little bit. The minister has been great about letting us know that we've been involved in this process. Back in October 2023 was when I got first wind of the people of Bedford Village who are concerned about their life leases. Reg was one of the first people to tell me. Once he heard what was going on with the new rental agreements at Christenson Developments, he moved out, but now he's in the queue.

I sent a letter to the minister and to Greg Christenson, and Christenson was great. He was able to meet right away. It turned out that wasn't too productive, but I was able to reiterate the urgent nature of this issue on behalf of the constituents in Bedford Village that are waiting for payment.

The NDP MLA for Lethbridge-West and the MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud also wrote letters to Minister Nally calling on him to introduce life lease legislation to support life lease holders.

Mr. McIver: Point of order. Name.

Mr. Kasawski: Oh. I retract. The minister.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister is amenable with the apology.

Mr. Kasawski: I retract. I meant to say: the minister. Bad notes here.

The NDP MLA for Lethbridge-West and the MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud wrote letters to the minister calling on him to introduce life lease legislation to support life lease holders, the current life lease holders. As the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar pointed out, that was in the mandate letter: let's help the life lease holders, those that are holding the life leases right now.

So many good provisions were offered to provide provisions to ensure that entrance fees are repaid. I'm also grateful for the work of the MLA for St. Albert and the MLA for Calgary-Falconridge to provide ideas to the minister. Earlier this year, February 2024, Minister Nally – the minister. My apologies; I've got to improve my notes, Madam Speaker. The minister invited myself and some other MLAs to provide some input and announced that they would be introducing legislation.

After the meeting the NDP MLAs spoke up and urged the minister to have more consultation with Albertans and include stronger regulations in the bill. Then on March 26 of this year, the NDP caucus held a conference with the Alberta Life Lease Protection Society. Later that day Bill 12 was introduced here in the Legislature. We've had some time to debate it. As a direct result of the public pressure that brought this legislation in, we have had a chance to debate the Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024, hoping that it could help the current life lease holders. However, it's now clear that nothing will be done for the people who are currently in the life lease agreements like the residents of Bedford Village in Sherwood Park. It is a sad situation that we are conveying to them. Some of our suggestions seem to have been incorporated into Bill 12 but not the most critical suggestion: to make it the law that people owed their entrance fees get paid back.

The Alberta NDP MLAs have tried to strengthen Bill 12 by requesting the following amendments in the Legislature covering current life lease holders who are owed entrance fees, but these amendments were opposed by the UCP: adding the ability of people owed entrance fees to get a court order to get their money back as well as personal liability for the directors of companies that withhold their entrance fees, but this was also opposed by the UCP; shrinking the repayment timeline from 180 days to 90 days, similar to Manitoba's legislation for all life lease holders. As you may not be surprised to know now, this was opposed by the UCP.

The minister, I do recall, in the Legislature said that not-for-profit operators cannot handle a 90-day repayment timeline. However, it's interesting that in Sherwood Park there's another life lease building, Laurier House Strathcona, which is operated by CapitalCare. It's not-for-profit, and it promises repayment in 45 days. I know family members through connections in my community that have been there and can confirm that they get their money back 45 days after they move out.

Ms Renaud: Same with Lions.

Mr. Kasawski: Yeah. Similar with the Lions society.

The not-for-profits are actually able to manage this, so it felt disingenuous to have the minister say that that was what's holding an ability to go from 180 days to 90 days.

Alberta NDP MLAs will continue to stand up for life lease holders and advocate for better consumer protection. This legislation is not helping existing life lease holders. Madam Speaker, I want to say that is a disaster waiting to happen, because we are talking about the current life lease holders of over 180 families that are waiting in the queue and that are owed over \$60 million. Each of those 180 is owed \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000.

Madam Speaker, I understand there are 400 families that are currently in life lease agreements with Christenson Developments. Christenson Developments is holding over \$200 million of their money, so this is beyond the 180 that are dealing in the queue. There are 400 families that are affected by this, and I met 60 of them at Bedford Village. It's a disaster waiting to happen that could go down in Alberta history with the likes of Bre-X in terms of financial disasters and fraud. We had the opportunity to help existing life lease holders, and the UCP did not get the job done. Alberta seniors built this province and deserve to know their money is secure and can be accessed in a reasonable timeline whenever it is requested.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others to join the debate on Bill 12?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 20

Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Is it 20 minutes that I have? Is that correct?

The Deputy Speaker: Yeah.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Thank you for that.

I rise today, Madam Speaker, to move second reading of Bill 20, Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

The Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act amends two critical pieces of legislation, the Local Authorities Election Act, or the LAEA, and the Municipal Government Act, or MGA. These two pieces of legislation provide rules for municipalities on how councils are elected and how they are governed.

5:00

The changes to both acts are related but distinct. For the LAEA, we are strengthening the rules so that Albertans can continue to have trust in local elections. For the MGA, we are strengthening councillor and municipal accountability. We are also making some changes to support housing in the province. Finally, for both acts, we are making some administrative changes.

[Mr. Wright in the chair]

Before I get into the meat of the bill, I'd like to let the House know about my intention to bring forward amendments to Bill 20. Since tabling Bill 20, I have spoken with our stakeholders like Rural Municipalities of Alberta, Alberta Municipalities, the chair of the Mid-sized Cities Mayors' Caucus, and the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton. I've received letters from municipalities across the province who have shared their feedback also. They've asked for clarity around specific parts of the legislation, and that is exactly what we intend to bring. I have had discussions with Alberta Municipalities and the RMA about these amendments, and I look forward to presenting them soon. I will also note that many of the changes in this bill are based on the consultation my department conducted over 2022 and 2023. Survey summary results are posted on our website at alberta.ca/strengthening-local-elections-and-councils.

Now, let me start with the LAEA. The first part of any election is making sure candidates are eligible to both run but then also to serve as an elected official. We are making changes so the eligibility criteria in the LAEA and the MGA are the same. Something along the way happened, I'm not even sure when, and there are one or two points where right now you could actually have permission to run, but if you were ever to get elected, you would be ineligible to serve. So that seems like a good thing to fix.

Specifically, the LAEA will disqualify any candidate who is convicted of a crime where the maximum potential penalty is longer than five years. We will also be enabling municipalities to require a criminal record check as part of the nomination package, information that, if collected, will be shared as part of information available to residents. The record will be redacted to protect its

personal information, but if it is collected, the public will be aware. This does not mean that candidates with a criminal record are barred from running. Rather, if and only if a municipality chooses to require the criminal record check, candidates must get a record check included as part of their nomination package, and the public will be made aware.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

These changes also propose some changes to how municipalities record voters. First, we are going to repeal the authority for municipalities to develop voters lists. It's better than it sounds, Madam Speaker. However, if they decide to develop them, then they have to share them with all candidates in that election. The lists include personal information of individual Albertans. Municipalities have told us that having that personal information made widely available has led to negative results, with people with bad intent showing up at not only candidates' homes but also at the homes of AHS officials and such to protest and basically make people feel uncomfortable in their own home. I think people on all sides of this House would agree that that is a negative outcome that nobody wants. So we're going to do the right thing and take away this risk and get rid of the ability to make voters lists.

In its place, importantly, we are going to require municipalities to work with Elections Alberta and prepare a permanent electors register. This will be based on the most current provincial register of electors. In other words, while we're taking away the municipality's ability to make their own list, they're going to be able to use the list that already exists from the province, which should actually save them some time and money.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Municipalities and Elections Alberta will be able to share information and updates to the list. This will mean that there is one single source of information when it comes to who can vote in a local election. The electors register will be used by election officials to help administer elections smoothly and fairly, a single source of information that won't be shared with individual candidates, risking the sharing of that personal information that I talked about a few paragraphs back. Better information sharing between local municipalities and Elections Alberta will mean that all elections, municipal and provincial, Mr. Speaker, will have better information.

We recognize that there are many barriers for Albertans to vote in person. Making it more straightforward to participate in the democratic process is important. We will be expanding the ability for Albertans who are on the permanent electors register and are voting in a local election to access special ballots. But, at the same time, we want to make sure that our elections can be trusted, so we will be strengthening the special ballot process by ensuring the ballots must be mailed in rather than using drop-off boxes and by making it clear that the special ballot process, including the opening of the envelopes, can be observed by candidates or their agents and tightening processes for signature verification.

At the same time, we will be changing vouching for an elector without sufficient identification. The verification of an elector without required identification will now be limited to verifying their address, not their identity. The reason that this is important is because many rural residents will need to vouch for their neighbour in the cases where that individual's driver's licence has only their post office box and not a specific address. Now, someday that may be changed on Alberta's drivers' licences, but that day is not this day. That's why this element of vouching still remains necessary. We hope that with future improvements to identification forms, that will not be necessary, but right now it still is.

We will also be amending the act to eliminate the ability for someone to object to an elector. I know that while this was rarely used, it does allow intimidation at the voting booth. I think we all agree that we don't want people intimidated when they go to cast a ballot for their candidate of choice. It makes it harder for individuals to exercise their democratic right to vote if they feel intimidated.

We're also making it clear for voters to know who they are voting for. Specifically, we are establishing ways for candidates to organize themselves in an election either as individuals or through an informal slate or a more formal political party. There are some that have said that this will increase division and conflict at local councils. We know that, informally at least, there are slates of candidates who have organized to run together and share resources in some of the larger municipalities. We also know that there's plenty of conflict in local councils going on now, so that will not be a new thing.

By putting these rules in place, we are making it clear for voters to know who they are voting for. It also puts rules in place for how these types of organizations can be run and what kind of rules they must follow. The changes to the act will enable these parties, but much of the detail will be in the regulation. That regulation will allow us to work with our municipal partners, as we have committed to, to find ways to implement slates or parties at the local level. Our plan is to have this structure only apply to the cities of Edmonton and Calgary.

Some other considerations about these changes: no candidate will be forced to join a party, and there will be no connection allowed between provincial or federal parties and municipal parties or municipal parties that operate in more than one municipality. In other words, local elections will remain local under this legislation, under Bill 20. These are about local parties focused on the issues of a single municipality.

Now, moving on to voting, Mr. Speaker, to protect the perception of fairness and transparency of local elections, we will be prohibiting the use of voting machines, vote recorders, or automated voting systems such as tabulators. I realize that this is a significant change for some local municipal elections which have used tabulators in the past, but at the same time there have been concerns raised about these machines. While controls are in place, we need to make sure of the most important thing, that the day after the day after the election, when the winners are announced, everybody has confidence that those announced as the winners are the winners and that they can respect those locally elected municipal councillors as they carry on their very important duties and respect the decisions that they make, knowing that they are the ones that were duly elected and properly elected. In other words, things must not only be fair but actually also must be seen to be fair.

We're making it easier for candidates to request recounts also when election results are very close. This would mean that a returning officer needs to conduct a recount upon the runner-up candidate's request when votes between the elected candidate and the unelected candidate with the most votes are within one-half of 1 per cent of the total number of valid votes cast. This ensures that runner-up candidates can request a recount in a close election race and receive it rather than hope that their request will be honoured by a returning officer. Allowing recounts may delay the official results in some cases, but it will ensure that our election results can be trusted.

We are also proposing some changes to election finances. First, we are removing the prohibition on union and corporate donations. The contribution limit for union and corporate donations will be \$5,000 for all candidates running in the same local election. We will also be making clear annual financial disclosure requirements. Sunlight, it has been said, is the best disinfectant. Making sure that

we are clear who exactly is donating money and who they are donating it to is important. While it may seem unusual, allowing these donations with disclosure requirements will bring who is behind candidates into the light. We will be clarifying that unions and their subsidiaries and corporations and their subsidiaries are all considered to be one donor. This will limit shenanigans, we believe, that might happen with corporations trying to donate and also have their subsidiaries donate. This will not be allowed.

We are also removing the concept of a campaign period starting on January 1 of the municipal election year. This benefited incumbents in the past who could easily start to raise money in the election year based on their reputation. By allowing fundraising prior to that, we will allow a prospective candidate the ability to raise the funds necessary to run professional campaigns against incumbents. This levels the playing field between incumbents and new candidates.

5:10

We are also implementing some controls on fundraising at the same time, Mr. Speaker. First, anyone choosing to raise money must inform the municipality of their intention to run, and they must file financial disclosures annually, and there will be penalties for noncompliance. This will ensure that the local community knows who is interested in running for office and who is supporting them financially. We will be working with our municipal partners to implement an expense regulation. This authority already exists in the act, to be clear, and it will help limit election spending. There's no point raising money that you cannot use in an election.

As part of the postelection process, anyone who has raised money will have to donate any surplus funds over \$1,000 to a registered charity once they have paid for their campaigns. In other words, incumbents don't get a running head start on future people that want to run for their seat. Everybody starts as close to the same place as we can have that happen. This will ensure that there is a reset between elections and prevent individuals from raising money over multiple election periods to raise a significant election war chest.

We will be creating a level playing field for third-party advertisers. For issues on a ballot like plebiscites, all third-party advertisers must be registered and disclose finances. We are closing the loophole that allowed foreign donations to interfere in local issues. We don't want people from outside of Alberta or even outside of Canada who have no skin in the game putting their thumb on the scale. In addition to this, we will be limiting the amount that any individual corporation or union could donate to a third-party advertiser to \$5,000.

We will clarify that municipalities must also share financial disclosures of third-party advertisers in the same way they do for municipal candidates. That way, residents in the municipality know where the money has come from. These are significant changes to how elections can be financed, but we are taking an approach that is fair and balanced and ensures our elections continue to be transparent.

We're also making changes that allow us to delay elections in the case of an emergency. We have fires and floods in Alberta, and circumstances may crop up where this becomes necessary. This is something we will work with our municipal partners on as we create the regulation that will decide how this is done.

Finally, there are several administrative updates to the act. These are often things that are missed when the act has been changed in the past. For example, we're going to modernize the nomination package by allowing candidates to pay for their nomination fees by e-transfer, debit card, and credit card rather than just by paper cheque or money order. We are also going to clarify that if you are in line when the polls close, you will be able to vote. There are a

number of other changes to modernize wording or make things more consistent. We believe that they are reasonable and common-sense changes.

With that, I'd like to move on to the MGA changes that we are proposing. It's important, as we improve how our local elections are run, that we also improve the accountability of councillors. First, we are changing the disqualification process. For some kinds of clear-cut reasons to disqualify a councillor, their seat is automatically vacant. The MGA currently puts the onus on the councillor, a local citizen, to go to court to make that disqualification official. This wastes time and money. These changes will mean that should a councillor take certain actions like becoming an employee of the municipality, getting convicted of a crime with a penalty of more than five years in prison, or becoming a judge, Senator, or a Member of Parliament, for example, their seat is automatically vacant, and they must go to court if they wish to reinstate it.

We are also requiring that councillors take some training prior to the first meeting of council after they are elected. Before, this training had to be offered, but councillors were able to refuse to take it. This change will mean that at the start of the new term councillors will need to take some basic governance training. Like starting any new job, there are things they need to know.

We are also going to enable cabinet to order a vote of residents on whether to remove a councillor. This is similar to provisions in Saskatchewan regarding the removal of councillors. To be very clear, this is a provision that needs to be treated with the utmost seriousness and never used lightly. Because there are about 332 municipalities in the province, there may be special instances where a councillor needs to be removed. In this situation cabinet will need to carefully consider if their decision is in the public interest. The decision can be challenged in court. Of course, if cabinet orders a vote of the electors, you know, there will be egg on cabinet's face if the member gets 98 per cent of the vote or something. You will know that cabinet made a bad decision, and it will not be good for them. Also, the future of that duly elected candidate will be in the hands of those that elected that candidate in the first place.

I'll note here that I've spoken with Alberta Municipalities, RMA, Mid-sized Cities, and the mayors of Calgary and Edmonton on this provision. I understand that municipalities would benefit from the clarity of amending the wording around the legislation, and we are working on that. I hope to bring those amendments forward soon.

We are also clarifying that councillors can declare nonfinancial conflicts of interest as part of a council meeting if potentially they should wish to recuse themselves from a vote. This allows councillors who have a conflict of interest that isn't purely financial to share it with their council colleagues and public at large. Right now councillors can only declare financial conflicts of interest that would benefit themselves or their immediate family. Expanding this allows councillors to make sure that they can put on the record anything that may be considered to influence their vote and, if necessary, choose not to vote.

We've also heard that requiring the chief administrative officer to manage recall petitions is a bad idea because essentially they're deciding on whether their boss gets fired or not, and it puts them in a terrible position. We're going to change that. We will take that responsibility within Municipal Affairs, as they have suggested.

There have been concerns raised about other aspects of the recall process, including thresholds. There have to be controls put in place, and we will be consulting on what those thresholds might be. Again, we'll be working with our municipal partners to determine the changes needed to be made regarding these concerns.

That said, there is a limited window for recall petitions to be filed. As of January 21, 2025, there can be no petition filed again till April

2027, so we do have some time in this case to carefully consider these changes and do consultation.

Part of my mandate letter is to protect Alberta's constitutional oversight regarding municipalities. Much of this is what we're doing in Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act, but some of it needs to be captured in the MGA. In particular, we'd like to extend the authority that cabinet already has under section 694(5), which allows cabinet to direct a council to modify a land-use bylaw or statutory plan. This provision has been in place since 1995 and has been used exactly zero times. We will be extending this to all municipal bylaws, and like section 694(5), this is another provision that we hope will not have to be used very often.

We also will be allowing cabinet to direct a municipality to take a specific action or actions in order to protect public health and/or safety. This extraordinary power, again, we hope to only use in limited circumstances, like emergencies, when these changes will be critical. Again, I can confirm that through discussions that I've had with municipal partners, we are working to prepare an amendment to make this more clear.

We originally intended to work with municipalities over the summer on regulations, and we are working towards an amendment to include language on the amendment, but we will still be working with those municipalities on regulations on the rest of the legislation. As we previously committed, my department will be consulting over the summer; therefore, I will be working with associations and individual municipalities on the amendments to provide clarity.

Moving on to joint-use planning agreements, these agreements require municipalities and school boards to work together. At minimum this can be about who uses the gym after school, but it turns out some municipalities don't have any schools, and making them make an agreement with the school board about a school that doesn't exist seems silly. So we're going to give ourselves the ability to make that not possible rather than force agreements that are pointless.

Also, we have a number of changes. We're also going to allow municipalities to assess the right person on property taxes when electricity is being produced. By default the property owner gets assessed, but sometimes it's the one running the electrical generation thing that needs to be assessed. I think I'm down to about a minute, Mr. Speaker.

Finally, we have a number of changes to continue for that. In conjunction with the flexibility within the act and other work we're bringing forward, we are creating the right conditions. We will provide municipalities with digital participation, whether it's a phone call or a Teams call. This will allow the public to better take part in public hearings. We'll make other changes related to planning and development. We'll be restricting municipalities from holding more than one public hearing before approving planning matters as additional public hearings are often used to delay much-needed approvals, and that can be for housing. We've heard concerns that there are some municipalities that might ask for extensive, expensive, and possibly unnecessary studies, so we will work on the regulations to put a limit to that.

Other quick changes to discuss with my colleagues, both of which are around flexibility for municipalities when it comes to using taxes to incent housing: we will talk more about that the next time I get to stand up. I believe my time is up.

The Speaker: Right on the button.

Hon. members, the hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs has moved second reading of Bill 20, Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 20, Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, in second reading. Funny thing about 2024 is that stuff happens in real time. You know, although I am not tweeting or not on social media at all, I may have looked at it. And while the minister was talking and explaining about how great this bill is and how they're using the sunlight to just explain to Albertans why this is going to make democracy stronger and better, we've got the Alberta Municipalities calling for Bill 20 to be pulled. They've issued a pretty comprehensive statement just now, as the minister was speaking, and I'm not sure – I don't have the Blues. I'd have to go back and look, but I'm pretty sure the minister said that they were all good with this bill; it seems they weren't.

5:20

I'm going to go back to the initial message that I've heard from my colleagues as we got this piece of legislation and started to digest what it would potentially do. Actually, I don't know who came up with this saying; I'm assuming it's one of our staff, that are fabulous: the Premier attempts to control everything everywhere all at once. That is correct, Mr. Speaker. What we've seen over the last year – actually, more than a year, but for this term what we've seen is a party doing exactly what they're told, a leader trying to inject herself into places that she has no business being. What's even more galling is that we have ministers and members that will stand up – the minister just did – and use words to try to say that this is okay: we've got sunlight and transparency, and we consulted, and they want it, and it's good. It is not good. It was not consulted.

We heard about the bill. We took a break, a constituency break. We all went back to our constituencies. I'm pretty sure the minister got an earful, and then he decided to consult. But, you know, that is the problem in this place. You need to work with Albertans and particularly the stakeholders that will be impacted by legislation before you bring this legislation to this place so that you get it right, but we're always being asked to amend their disaster bills that were not consulted, that actually harm people, in this case will harm democracy, and then their folksy little explanation is: "Oh, yeah. We're calling. We're having conversations. We're going to fix it. We're going to work together." That is bunk. We have seen again and again and again that it's just empty promises. It's a pattern that we see again and again and again with their bills.

Albertans do not trust this government. For them to say: "Oh, don't worry. We're going to call people. We're going to work it out. We're going to amend it. It'll be all good" – Albertans don't trust this government. We certainly don't trust this government. They have been very clear that Bill 20 is an overreach. It's described as authoritarian, an attack on local democracy, massive overreach, and a stripping away of Albertans' rights.

Now, I'm going to focus on St. Albert a little bit, just to give you their thoughts or add their thoughts to this debate. You know, on May 2, 2024, reported in the *St. Albert Gazette*, Mayor Heron, who is also, I think, a really qualified elected person to speak on this kind of legislation – as you may know, she was also the president of Alberta Municipalities for I believe it was two terms if I'm not mistaken. She has seen first-hand the damage that legislation could do. I think she has a pretty good sense of what is needed. Let me tell you, Mr. Speaker, that mayor and council are not okay with this piece of legislation. It is a massive piece of overreach. The first thing she said to me, when I saw her after this bill was announced, was: you're going to fight against this, aren't you? Yes, I am, as are my colleagues.

Mayor Heron said specifically in the May 2 article that this piece of legislation is a lack of respect for voters. Now, if you know

Mayor Heron, she doesn't say things like this lightly. She is actually very measured, and she is someone that tries to keep partisan issues at bay and actually does try to work with – she has a city that is represented by two different MLAs from two different parties, and she does a very good job, I think, of balancing that work. For her to come out so quickly and say this, that says something. This piece of legislation allows cabinet to remove city councillors if doing so is in the public's interest. It allows government to undo city bylaws if it's in conflict with the provincial priorities. Had a huge issue with that, and she said: mayor and council are representative of the community, and if the municipal priorities don't align with the provincial government, they should not have the ability to just pull it and arbitrarily change it.

But, you see, this is a government that is fearful, and I think we know that they're fearful based on the kind of legislation that we're seeing. It is very crystal clear. We know in the last election they liked to crow about: "Look at us. NDP lost. We formed government." Yeah. We know that. We saw it; we saw the results.

What they fail to mention is that they did not win one single seat in the city of Edmonton, and they lost the popular vote in Calgary. It's going to get worse in 2027, and they are fearful. They are going to do everything in their power to change that, so they're using their ability to make laws and to pass laws to do everything that they can to tilt things into their favour. So it's pretty rich when we heard the minister talking about when the NDP were in power for four years, after 44 years of Conservatives, that they tried to tilt things in our favour. That's ridiculous. It's absolutely ridiculous. By taking big money out of politics, that's tilting it into our favour? That is just ridiculous. But, again, it's a UCP government.

This province already had the power to remove councillors, to change bylaws, and now what this piece of legislation does – and Mayor Heron was very clear about what her council and she are worried about – is that decisions will be made behind closed doors. I think that if we've learned anything in this place, it's that we need to be transparent, not just say that we're transparent like the other side likes to do – "oh, no; we're really into transparency and sunshine" – when they do the exact opposite. But it is so vitally important that Albertans build trust and understand the laws that are being passed that will affect their lives.

What this government is doing is: oh, just trust us; we'll fix it in regulations. You cannot govern effectively and transparently by leading and governing by regulation alone. You need to debate that legislation in this place in full view of all Albertans, and we are not seeing that.

You know, the Premier and her cabinet: well, they do it almost every day. Yes, I almost did say the name, but I did not. But, yes, regularly they will talk about Trudeau or a weird alliance that they think is going on. They will talk about Trudeau almost on a daily basis. They will talk about: he needs to stay in his lane and not do this and not interfere with the province and not do this. Whatever. I don't know if they score points how many times they say his name each day. I don't know. This government is doing exactly what they accuse the federal – I don't know what they're giggling about over there – government of doing. Not too sure what's funny about that, but okay.

Bill 20 will ban the use of electronic vote tabulators. I would suggest that if a government is going to apply a new rule – oh, go ahead. [interjection] Oh, I thought you were standing to intervene. I'm sorry. I was the first speaker anyway; I couldn't.

The Speaker: This being the second speech immediately following the mover, interventions aren't allowed in any case, just for a point of reference for you.

Ms Renaud: Gotcha.

Bill 20 would like to ban the use of electronic vote tabulators. Now, I would expect that if the government is intent on making a significant change about how elections are determined or how winners and losers are determined, they would actually put forward some evidence or some proof or something to let us know or to let all Albertans know why they're doing this, not simply because maybe a little faction of their supporters – I don't know – maybe watch too much Fox News and think that vote tabulators are the problem. I mean, honestly, Mr. Speaker, there are some days I'm just not surprised that they haven't adopted a Make Alberta Great Again slogan.

I think that this piece of legislation is so alarming and disturbing. Now we've got the minister, because I think there was quite a bit of backlash last week, trying to say, you know: we're bearing these really good things in here, and we're going to consult, and we're going to do this. But really what it is: it seems to be following a Conservative playbook – I would suggest a MAGA Republican, Conservative playbook – around voter suppression and around gerrymandering. But that remains to be seen because we will see how the boundaries get redrawn. I think we heard a little bit today about appointments. But, again, we will be watching to see what happens.

5:30

Going back to the St. Albert article, you know, the other thing that Mayor Heron mentioned was about political parties.

Now, the absurdity of the comments from the minister about: yeah, we're only doing it in two cities because it's a pilot. I mean, never mind like over half of the population lives in these big cities. There are 300 municipalities, and they're only doing it in two, but it's a pilot. I mean, it's kind of laughable that the minister thinks Albertans are buying this. I mean, that they actually say it with a straight face is a little bit laughable.

Most people don't want political parties. I think at a municipal level what I've seen in my role here as a provincial elected person is that they operate so differently, and they are really effective because they are nonpartisan. I think they work really hard at being nonpartisan, and for this government to look at changing that because they want to make it easier to retain government in the future is really alarming to me.

I don't know – Mr. Speaker, how much time do I have?

The Speaker: There are eight minutes and 30 seconds remaining.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk to and just touch on another piece of writing that was really interesting. This was published May 1. I think one of my other colleagues has maybe tabled this article already, and if not, I will do so tomorrow. The author is Jared Wesley, and it was published on May 1, and it's titled *Why the UCP Is a Threat to Democracy*. You know, that's a really stunning headline, and I think in this day and age when I see something like that, it is pretty serious. I think if you look around the globe – and it doesn't take much; you know, you just turn on the news, check out what's going on – there are struggles right around this world in democracies. I think that's just a fact. That is just the way it is. So when I see a headline like this from people that are not alarmists saying that this is a threat to democracy, we should all pay attention. I know I certainly did.

In this piece he says: as a resident of this province and "someone trained to recognize threats to democracy, I have an obligation" to be blunt. Here is his blunt statement: "The [UCP] is an authoritarian force in Alberta. Full stop." That's alarming to me, Mr. Speaker. I

think that we have all been sent to this place for a number of different reasons, but I think it's incumbent on all of us to do everything that we can to protect democracy in Alberta. I think if the members opposite, and particularly the minister, were honest with themselves and really looked at this piece of legislation, looked at it not with the eyes that you are in power and the eyes that you are the minister but looked at it as an Albertan: does this piece of legislation actually protect democracy and further democracy and strengthen democracy in this province? It does not.

He goes on to say, "at a bare minimum, we . . . expect our leaders to respect the rule of law, constitutional checks and balances, electoral integrity and the distribution of power," and the UCP have clearly, through this piece of legislation and the many things that they have said on the public record, shown that they are completely disrespectful.

Mr. Speaker, I just have a point – I don't know. I have a procedural question. I'm not sure how to handle this. I have difficulty focusing when people are consistently ripping stuff, and I think that they're doing it because I have trouble focusing when people do that. I'd like them to stop if that's okay.

The Speaker: You could call a point of order, which I think you have done. I'm not entirely sure on the point in the standing orders which might prevent a member – I'm not sure why the member was ripping a piece of paper. I'm not sure it's a point of order. I think you've made your point, and the member has heard it. I'm sure they'll conduct themselves accordingly.

Ms Renaud: If I can just say something. You know, not everybody in this place thinks the same way, and this is not the first time this has happened.

The Speaker: When it comes to decorum inside the Assembly, it requires a certain level of personal responsibility on behalf of all members. I hope that that member will also take that to heart, and I hope that the hon. Member for St. Albert will also take that to heart in the way that she may interact in the Chamber as well.

The hon. member.

Ms Renaud: Thanks.

There are three or four things that the author of this article really focused on, and I likely will run out of time. Again, I encourage everybody to look it up. It was Jared Wesley, and it was published on May 1, and it's called *Why the UCP Is a Threat to Democracy*. In it he outlines his arguments using three distinct points. The first is the rule of law, the second is checks and balances, and the third is electoral integrity. He actually takes his time going through these things. He's not making partisan arguments, and he's not saying things just because he doesn't like the UCP or he doesn't like the piece of legislation. He is very concerned about what will happen if and when this legislation passes and then it trickles down to municipalities and communities.

The rule of law.

In healthy democracies:

- no one is above the law . . .
- there is due process; and
- the rules are clear and evenly applied.

Now, if we think about some of the things that the UCP has done – again, they say, "Trust us. We're doing this because we want to make things better," but let's look at their history. They have fired an Election Commissioner, an independent Election Commissioner. They have a previous minister that didn't like a ticket that was issued and so contacted the chief of police. We have a Premier who went to bat for someone who was charged with some pretty serious crimes at a Coutts blockade. And their idea to make things better

and more transparent and have more sunshine is to bring in political parties in the two big cities where they can't win. They can't win the popular vote; they can't win a seat. Not good.

The checks and balances talks about the separation of powers: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. Hopefully, all MLAs took the training that the Ethics Commissioner suggested so that we would all be clear about what a conflict looks like and how to stay away from a conflict. UCP examples of that where they need to actually pick up their game: how about going back to COVID? I think we remember in early COVID times that this Legislature jammed through a piece of legislation that allowed the Health minister at the time to just circumvent this Chamber and any debate in this Chamber and just change whatever rules the Health minister at the time wanted. Now, that's a simplification of what happened, but thankfully that was changed and that was ended. These are just examples of how this UCP government operates.

Electoral integrity, that Dr. Wesley talked about, in democracies. You know, the key thing he said that when I read it stuck with me is that leaders – true leaders, good leaders – “respect the will of the people.” That is not what this UCP government is doing with Bill 20.

Mr. Getson: Bill 6.

Ms Renaud: Bill 20. Catch up.

This is not what Bill 20 is doing, Mr. Speaker. Not one bit. They are ruling or making legislation or bringing forth legislation for a tiny little sliver – it's for their own audience. They are bringing in things that Albertans do not want. They have been crystal clear. Stakeholders have been clear. Municipal leaders have been clear. Plain old Albertans who are writing in to their MLAs have been clear. I don't know about you, but my office has been pretty busy responding to letters from constituents that say: Bill 20 is awful; it should not be passed. Crystal clear.

Then we think about this government's past or history with electoral integrity. Let's talk about tainted leadership races. Let's talk about ignored legislation, hidden agendas, fake referendums. There are so many examples, Mr. Speaker, that we could talk about, yet their answer to securing and strengthening democracy is bringing in legislation that nobody wants, people are opposed to, and they want to spin it and make it look better by burying a few little nuggets into a really awful bill and saying: “Oh, hey. Look what we're doing. We're going to consult. Yeah. We'll call you next week. Then we'll check that box and say consultation.” But what we know is that this is a pattern. It's a very dangerous pattern of a government thinking that they know best, that they don't need to talk to stakeholders or actual Albertans, and that's false.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. chief government whip.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope everyone was listening to that last speech. By the way, if anyone wants to rip a paper, crumple a ball, make some noise, heckle like the usual members do, I strongly encourage a verbose debate in here while I'm speaking.

5:40

The Speaker: I certainly wouldn't encourage that lack of decorum inside the Assembly.

Mr. Getson: Your discretion, as always, Mr. Speaker, but I encourage that type of interaction.

With the last speech, well, there's an old phrase down in the south of youse, and it simply is: that dog don't hunt. I think we heard a lot of that just taking place. We got this revisionist history that was

pretty wild, pretty fun, but there are a couple of things I think, for the edification of the crowd back home, that we need to start out with.

Bill 20 is looking to amend some items in the Municipal Government Act. Now, I've been asked lots of questions because, again, when we table documents in the House, the first one goes out as the first reading, and we're into the second reading. A lot of people have questions, and there's often a lot of chances when you get to the Committee of the Whole to have revisions, amendments, all those types of things, and good old-fashioned consultation, Mr. Speaker. It's a C-word, and we're allowed to say that, consultation, and we like it. We do it often. As recently as last week I had municipal leaders coming up to me and asking me: what's the deal with this bill? What's going on with it? We started to talk about the intent, the intent of the bill itself, because, again, a lot of the items weren't clearly understood when you're going through it, when you table it the initial time.

And, yes, oftentimes, Mr. Speaker, you get everything one hundred per cent accurate and one hundred per cent right right out of the gate. I normally, in my life and my history, don't every time hit everything right out of the gate. So with that context, that's why you have the consultation. The minister has been working his backside off, doing an excellent job engaging with people. The members opposite are taking little snippets along the way here again. I don't want to say fear and smear, but whatever they coin, the new phraseology of what they do, they grab these little snippets and then they run the flag up the play there and raise a big alarm. This is an ongoing process. They're actually working through these items.

The other one that I heard – and it keeps coming up; it's pervasive. I don't know where they get their speaking notes from, if it's from central command down in Ottawa or where they get them, but they're always talking about this threat to our democracy. I think that since the last member had a little bit of a sojourn down memory lane, we have to set the record straight on that, too. I'm looking at Wikipedia. Not necessarily saying Wikipedia is the greatest thing ever, but it's usually kept pretty accurate because people get a chance to correct anything online. So if I'm looking at, literally, the Wikipedia search, for folks following along at home, with the NDP the ideological orientation says that they're a social democratic party with socialism influences. So when they're talking about their democracy, it ain't the same as the democracy out in my neck of the woods, Mr. Speaker. It's a different democracy altogether, and they keep the sleight of hand of trying to push it back. We do not want central command; that is not the intent. We would like a decentralized government. Socialism, on the other hand: very centralist. That's why you've got them, hook, line, and sinker, tied in with the mother ship back in Ottawa.

With that, I want to do a little bit of a civics update because that also came up with the interactions. They've called it as much, saying: overreach. Overreach, the same as Ottawa is doing to you. You profess that Ottawa is overreaching. They are, because constitutionally the provinces and the country are on the same level. It's kind of like – I don't know – a friendship agreement, a marriage, if you would, roommates. Each one has . . .

Mr. Williams: Confederation.

Mr. Getson: Or Confederation. That's a crazy word to call it, right? That's really what it is. You have authorities and delegation of authorities at the same level. It's that handshake agreement: “Okay. You take out the trash; I'll do the laundry. You mow the lawn; I'll take out the dog.” Except in this context it's how we divide up those authorities within the provinces and the country itself.

Municipalities, however, are clear distinctions underneath the provinces themselves. It's not a roommate agreement; it's a parent-child relationship. Some people prefer to say the munis are creatures of the state. I prefer the child relationship because I'm back to scheduling and how we used to have those and explain those relationships in org charts. Under the Municipal Government Act, it's empowered the munis to act in a certain way, and this House has the authority to make up that Municipal Government Act. This House has that same authority to tweak things as we go along.

Now, one of our private members here – well, I can't say it – Leduc-Beaumont, that gentleman: he won the draw. He got his first bill through, and what he ended up doing was looking at how the parks were managed, that overreach within the munis. There was a loophole. On this side of the House we don't believe in the city state. We believe in our Constitution. We believe in the levels as they're dictated, and we'll emphatically defend those and follow those guidelines every given moment of the day that we can. This member ended up finding a loophole, closed it.

The members opposite were literally losing their minds. How dare we? How dare we, they were saying, Mr. Speaker. Last time I saw that, it was some 16-year-old pigtailed girl from Sweden that came over here and was daring us and asking how dare we manage our own country. It's the same type of rhetoric. Well, how dare we? Well, we do because we dare to win, and we dare to follow the Constitution, and it's because people put us here. From time to time you've got to get a tweak in the system. That is literally what's taking place.

I went to explain to some of my rural colleagues – the reeves and the mayors and also some of the small-city mayors – what the intent was and to keep working through the process, to keep giving us the feedback so we can get it to the minister. They were encouraged by that. Now, why were they encouraged? Because we've developed trust over the last five years. They may not like what we say . . . [interjection] Well, this member laughs. I've been in his constituency. There are tons that don't trust him, but I know they trust me. This is a matter of trust, a matter of debate, Mr. Speaker. I don't want to get on the edge. I see you're looking at me a little cross-eyed there.

It's a matter of trust. The folks in my area trust me. They come up and they ask that. Here's something if that gentleman wants to go and look online. They may not agree with what I have to say, but they trust me, and that's a big thing. This helps reinforce some of those trusts. It helps make sure that the voters are put back in the driver's seat. The other side kept toying with this idea of having noncitizens vote in a democratic process. Is that your plan for a new democracy?

Mr. Sabir: Not true.

Mr. Getson: Oh. "Not true," he says, but it's been potentially tabled, and it's been mused around by the same other sources. Your member opposite wanted to sort something in the U.S. Your side has been flirting with socialism, your new democracy, an awful lot, and it doesn't necessarily line up with the constitutional authorities.

Mr. Speaker, it is my absolute pleasure to rise, given all that preamble, to talk about what we're doing here with Bill 20. If this bill passes in the House – and, folks at home, you have my guarantee we're going to work out the rough edges – it would make critical adjustments to two pieces of legislation, the Local Authorities Election Act, or the LAEA, and the Municipal Government Act.

Before we go into it, I think we should highlight a little bit about what these two pieces do. The Local Authorities Election Act establishes the framework for the conduct of elections in Alberta municipalities, school divisions, irrigation districts, and Métis

settlements. The Municipal Government Act establishes the rules governing the conduct of local elected officials on the council as well as the overall administration and operation of municipal authorities in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 20 is designed to improve these two existing pieces of legislation, which, again, is well within the authority and the wheelhouse of the province to do. If this bill is passed, it would make the conduct of local elections and the conduct of elected officials clearer, more transparent, and more accountable for Albertans. That's the intent. That's what it would do. [interjection] Hear, hear.

We need to build trust in our election rules. Yes, sir, trust. Again, when you can give a handshake and people respect it and they trust you're going to do the right things, let's do that on paper. Let's make sure there's more trust in the process, because people have seen it hijacked for a long time, and quite frankly they've had a bellyful of it. By bringing Bill 20 forward, the government will be aiming at improving democracy, not the socialist democracy, the new democracy, but real democracy, Mr. Speaker, why a lot of us got out of our normal lives to come here, improving democracy at the municipal level.

I would like to proceed with discussion of the changes to the acts in Bill 20. Let's begin with the Local Authorities Election Act. On a practical note, Bill 20 would align candidate eligibility criteria under the LAEA with councillor disqualification criteria in the Municipal Government Act. As it currently stands, candidates elected to council may face immediate disqualification due to misalignment with the MGA's criteria. Aligning these two sets of criteria – again, alignment – provides greater clarity and efficiency in the local election process, which then, in turn, builds trust into the system, inherently builds trust into the system, to make sure that it's being tweaked to enhance that trust.

If passed, Bill 20 would also allow municipalities to require criminal record checks for local candidates. Well, that sounds like a good thing, doesn't it, Mr. Speaker? Not that our legal system is doing anything these days, but you still want to make sure that you have a criminal record check – sounds good – to provide more information to the voters, to make sure your candidates haven't done anything unawares that shouldn't have been done, illegal. Having more detailed eligibility criteria ensures that someone who is charged with a serious criminal offence while a candidate would be disqualified even before being elected. It seems pretty reasonable and practical. I don't think too many people would argue against that. If they do, I would question why they are.

If passed, Bill 20 would repeal the municipality's authority to develop a voters list. Currently municipalities can choose to prepare a voters list, which they must share with all candidates. While transparency is important, so is privacy. If passed, Bill 20 will ensure that the personal information of electors would be kept private. By ending the possibility of a voters list, then personal information couldn't be shared with candidates. It seems pretty straight ahead. It would also make local elections smoother and more efficient by requiring each municipality to have a permanent electors register to align the information with Elections Alberta, again bringing into alignment what we're doing at the provincial levels.

5:50

Bill 20 would also address the issue of donations. Now, this is where it gets a little funny. Over on that side I've heard some really weird conversations going back and forth. Mr. Speaker, there's an old saying: to catch a thief, you've got to think like a thief. Well, I'm starting to see where this is going and why they start looking at things differently. It's pretty alarming. Bill 20 would also address

the issue of these donations. Union and corporate donations to local candidates would be allowed, with the same limits as individual donors, which is \$5,000 a year.

Now, again, when you make a piece of legislation with the best intents – some of the members on our side have argued that when the opposition was in power, they made legislation for different reasons. I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they just stumbled through it, and it accidentally tipped the balance of the scales the wrong way. This is going to start to level it back out again. Nothing wrong with trying something. I said right at the start, Mr. Speaker, that I never get everything right a hundred per cent all the time. So if you have a tweak to it, this is the time to do it. Don't upset that balance.

These proposed changes to election financing would come with meaningful checks and balances. For instance, Bill 20 would lower the donation limit on third-party advertisers from \$30,000 back to \$5,000. Again, these are municipal elections. This is the grassroots of real democracy, where it should be alive and well. Third-party advertisers would be required to register and disclose their finances. These proposed new finance rules increase transparency and oversight in how candidates actually fund their campaigns.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot mention campaigns without mentioning another major change Bill 20 would introduce. The bill, if passed, would enable the regulation-making authority to define local political parties. A lot of these in the big cities are taking place de facto, anyway. When the folks in my area came up and asked what the heck the intent was, "This wouldn't necessarily work in our small summer village" or otherwise, I said: "Comparing apples to oranges would be a better contrast than trying to compare a small summer village to how Edmonton and Calgary work. You're looking at something completely different. Those have actually been there forever." If you look at a current leadership race, as a point of fact, from one of our big cities, that was sitting down there, the former mayor now is running for leadership. At what point do they declare that they've been involved in these other parties? It's been happening de facto for years.

Mr. Speaker, the bill, if passed, would enable the regulation-making authority to define local political parties: this is a positive change for Albertans to know more about the candidates and what they stand for and allows more information for choice at the ballot box. Speaking of the ballot box, Bill 20 proposes prohibiting the use of automated voting equipment. There's no school like the old school sometimes. We've seen a lot of use of technology go sideways, and we've also seen the lessons learned from it. Sometimes the simplest way is the best. It might take a little bit longer, but quite frankly it'll probably save us in the long run, and you'll also instill that voter confidence again. Currently the LAEA permits processing the ballots through automated voting equipment like electronic tabulators. Removing this equipment would be a step forward, ensuring that the election results seem fair and that the results are seen as valid.

Mr. Speaker, once the candidates have finished campaigning and all voters have finished voting, the newly elected councillors will get to work. This is where the changes proposed in Bill 20 would improve the accountability of local councillors under the MGA. For instance, if passed, Bill 20 would require a councillor's seat to become vacant upon disqualification. As it stands now, if a disqualified councillor refuses to vacate their seat, councillors or electors can only remove them through the courts. Wow. Yeah, we need to correct that. We need to correct that, folks, to make sure that these councils don't become stalemated and dysfunctional.

As it stands now, Bill 20 would require the mandatory orientation and training of councillors, which is currently voluntary. Let's get them trained up before they take the reins. We have to do an

orientation. I think that's a good idea. You learn on the fly, but, my gosh, you've got to have the basics under your belt. It shouldn't just be voluntary.

It would also allow elected officials to recuse themselves for real or perceived conflicts of interest. We have that here. That's not a bad thing to put out there as well so that there's nothing untoward, that they're not doing anything for their benefit, perceived or otherwise. Currently they can only recuse themselves from matters in which they have financial interest.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to take this opportunity to assure Albertans that the government is working with municipalities to propose amendments to the legislation to address some of their concerns.

For the reasons above, I encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 20. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think we're standing at the precipice of history in many ways. I think the question before us is: will we continue to safeguard our democratic institutions and traditions, or will we continue, as we've seen with this government, to introduce cynicism and tyranny, which this bill does, into our democratic processes?

If I could just speak to maybe a bit of history. Power needs to be tempered, Mr. Speaker, if not by law, then by tradition, and contrary to what the hon. member opposite has said, trust isn't enough. If my colleagues recall, really until 1982 Canada as a country was governed by various pieces of legislation and, more importantly, by democratic tradition. Now, a lot of it was in fact not written in legislation or law. It was a belief in pluralism, in good democratic governance.

What we've seen with the successive bills that have been introduced since, in this most recent legislative sitting, is a pattern, Mr. Speaker, and I think this pattern tells a story. It's the story of the slow erosion of democracy; of pluralism; of freedom of thought, as we've seen with Bill 18; the concentration of power, as we've seen with the sovereignty act, Bill 18, Bill 20, Bill 17. To paraphrase Dr. Jared Wesley: you don't just wake up in an authoritarian state; it's precipitous, and it happens over time. I am worried that this is exactly what's happening. It hits at the heart of our democratic institutions and undermines our democratic traditions.

The Premier is attempting to control everything everywhere all at once, and that's not just a cheeky allusion to an Oscar-winning movie. It really is no laughing matter. Let's be blunt about what Bill 20 will do. It will allow the government to unilaterally veto or amend municipal bylaws. It can fire elected mayors, reeves, councillors without due process as long as, in the cabinet's opinion, it determines that it is in the public interest. It's not an objective litmus test. It's not based on precedent. It is simply what this government or the government of the day decides. That should send a chilling message to, frankly, everybody in this Chamber.

This bill will also allow big money back into municipal politics with the return of corporate donations to municipal campaigns. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, it also panders to American conservative conspiracy theories with a ban on electronic vote tabulators. But, more importantly, Bill 20 will create instability. It will create fear at the local level of government and undermine business certainty, which I think will ultimately harm Albertans, particularly when it comes to the economy.

I also want to point out that what I've seen from this government, Mr. Speaker, is that it's not a principled government but an authoritarian one. It's essentially saying: so what? They're accusing this side of the

House that we're fearmongering, that things will be exactly as it is after this bill is passed. I want to point out that it's not any one single piece of legislation that is concerning; it's a collection of legislation. It's, in fact, the general trajectory in which we're going. Oftentimes, you know, figuratively speaking, if you have bullets, you don't have to use the bullets. It's the presence of the gun that will send a message. I think this legislation sends a message to every city council in the province that if you don't agree with us, if you don't fall in line, we could dismiss you. We could find ways to dismiss your bylaws. We could . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but time for debate on this matter this evening has elapsed.

Members, I'd like to bring your attention to two quick things. In just a couple of moments we will have the page parent night here at the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. They will be entering the Chamber. If you might just collect some of your papers on the way out, that would be exceptional.

Secondly, approximately an hour ago I sent an e-mail out bringing your attention to a special activity that will take place tomorrow after question period. Please avail yourself of that e-mail.

Hon. members, 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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