



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, May 14, 2024

Day 51

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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United Conservative: 28

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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Hunter
McDougall
Sinclair
Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, May 14, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's my great pleasure to introduce to you a guest in the Speaker's gallery. He is a well-known former member of this Assembly, Mr. Deron Bilous. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, also joining Mr. Bilous in the Speaker's gallery today are two of his colleagues from Telus who were packing packs for kids earlier today at the Federal Building. I know that a number of you had the opportunity to join them. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly, Gabriela Gonzales and Catie O'Neal.

The hon. Minister of Indigenous Relations has an introduction.

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you some dear friends of mine: Tasha Hubbard, a renowned writer, filmmaker, and professor at the University of Alberta, and Jade Tootoosis, impact producer for Tasha. Tasha directed the powerful and moving documentary that I saw last night, *Singing Back the Buffalo*. Thank you for being here today and please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you dedicated educators who have positively shaped countless numbers of students through decades of service: Leona Gordey, former principal of Bisset, Inglewood, and Constable Daniel Woodall schools, and Judy Toews, principal of Prince Charles school. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you Paul Carolan. Paul is with HALO Air Ambulance service and has served since 2018. Recently appointed to the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services search and rescue advisory committee, he is a passionate advocate in this realm and, as well, a passionate advocate for the EMS advisory committee he was on last year. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Satvinder Ghotra, with his family, who runs Jag Punjabi media and who has spent decades contributing positively to those around him. He follows developments in the local Sikh community and uses his platform and network to speak on the social, political, and religious issues they face. Please rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise and introduce to you and through you Kamal Ghuman and Navnoor Ghuman, a father-daughter duo and local business owners who do incredible community work through the Sanjha Culture Association here in Edmonton. By supporting and organizing local sports, cultural, and other social events, they bring people together of all ages. I ask that Kamal and Navnoor rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Dr. Metz: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Simon Koots, Sam Pollock, and Robert Winter. They're all speed skaters who have trained and competed and won at the Olympic Oval and internationally. I ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of children's services.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the members of the Assembly some fantastic residents from Stony Plain: Melanie Loyns, a town councillor for the town of Stony Plain, and her son Shane. Please rise and accept the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Why, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise and introduce to you and through you members of the United irrigation district from my constituency of Cardston-Siksika. They're up here today having meetings with ministers about the importance of irrigation and agriculture in Alberta. I ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly engaged citizens of Edmonton-Decore and very good friends of mine: Janet Laddish, Linda Lindsay, Jeff Angelstad, Tina and Dennis Dmytryshyn. I ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Member Brar: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you my parents, who are visiting from India: my dad, Gurmeet Singh Brar, who is a chief pharmacist with the government of Punjab and a marathon runner; he is also joined by my mother Jaspal Kaur Brar, who is a retired lab technician. I owe a lot of gratitude to both of them and their hard work. I ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, it's an honour to rise today and roast – excuse me – introduce to you and through you my brother-in-law, who snuck in here again today. He is an avid Oilers fan, and I feel really bad because he came all this way to meet Hunter and got the date wrong. But I'm excited that I might be able to introduce him at a later date. So please rise and accept this roast.

Members' Statements

Olympic Oval

Dr. Metz: Countless Olympians from around the world have trained at the Olympic Oval, which is situated at the University of Calgary, right in the middle of Calgary-Varsity. International athletes and coaches clamour to use the world's fastest ice, and thousands of people come to see local, national, and global competitions at the oval every year. The Faculty of Kinesiology is number one in North America and uses the oval facilities to conduct cutting-edge research. However, almost 40 per cent of the oval's programming is for the community. It's where my kids and countless others in the community learned to skate. Since the oval was built for the 1988 Olympic Games, it's had an economic impact of more than \$170 million.

But a sense of doom hangs over the oval. Its highly specialized ice-making equipment is on the brink of failure. Like much of the infrastructure in Alberta, the oval systems are at the end of their lifespan. The oval has a \$52 million redevelopment plan. That's a lot of money, and, yes, every facility across Alberta could use more funding, but consider that every international championship at the oval generates millions of dollars of economic activity, and it brings pride in our community. As for the impact on families and kids who have learned to skate there, fallen in love with physical activity, or gained confidence in a sport: well, as they say, it's priceless.

The calculation is clear. We can't let the oval, a one-of-a-kind Alberta gem, slip through our fingers. The oval has given us so much. Now it needs our help urgently.

Skilled Trades Training

Ms de Jonge: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's economy is rapidly growing and diversifying. To remain competitive and reach our full potential we need more apprentices and graduates with an education in the skilled trades. I'm pleased to share that Alberta's government is firing on all cylinders to create opportunities in the trades and help students succeed in the economy of tomorrow. In February the Minister of Advanced Education announced \$24 million per year over the next three years to create 3,200 apprenticeship seats at 11 postsecondary institutions in the province.

I'm a proud SAIT grad. According to David Ross, president of SAIT, "by increasing access to world-class trades training, this funding will advance careers in areas critical to Alberta's growth." This means more opportunities for students to earn while they learn as apprentices in high-demand programs that lead to jobs.

1:40

In April that same minister established a historic partnership with the International Union of Operating Engineers local 955. Under a new pilot program Alberta's government will provide \$350,000 in funding to support them in delivering training for a crane operator program. The pilot program will take place at its training facility just north of Edmonton and will support Albertans pursuing this valuable apprenticeship education. Canadians are choosing to move to Alberta in record numbers, and that means we need more crane operators to grow our infrastructure and get more housing built.

Last week the same minister announced \$12.9 million to expand the CIM-TAC at the Red Deer Polytechnic. This will create more opportunities for students to gain hands-on work experience and more opportunities for students and industry to collaborate and solve challenges. Mr. Speaker, Alberta's government is committed to supporting students and the needs of a growing economy, and that's why we're working across government to establish new

pathways for student success and encourage more Albertans to begin rewarding careers in the skilled trades.

Thank you.

Government Priorities

Mr. Haji: A week ago I had the honour to join Killarney junior high school as they celebrated their 21st Taste of the Middle East cultural event in a room full of parents, teachers, students, former parent council members, and retired educators. A former parent council member reminded me that the school used to have 400 at maximum compared to the current 600 student population. Over the weekend a constituent who teaches English as an additional language in another junior high school in Edmonton-Decore reminded me that her class size grew from 16 to 34. Two weeks ago I reached out to several schools. Two schools in my riding are losing their lunch program this month.

Mr. Speaker, I represent a constituency that has a median income that is \$10,000 less compared to the provincial average, a constituency that has a 4 per cent higher low-income population than the provincial average. This government had all the opportunities to address these difficulties; however, this government failed to table a single solution to address these challenges. They failed to propose a single bill to address affordability, a single bill to address the housing crisis, a single bill to manage class sizes or class complexity, a single bill to tackle Albertans experiencing wildfire evacuations as early as May.

Instead, this government tables many bills as tools to fight with everyone. They picked a fight with Albertans on their pensions in Bill 2, a fight with democracy in Bill 20, a fight with universities and municipalities in Bill 18. The question remains: when will this government wake up and realize that they are supposed to serve Albertans? When will they make life less difficult, more affordable, better quality education for kids, and more accessible for family physicians? One single question from my constituency: when?

Pacific NorthWest Economic Region

Mr. Rowswell: Mr. Speaker, this February the MLA for Cypress-Medicine Hat and I returned from a trip to meet with Oregon State House representatives and Senators. We discussed our shared opportunities and struggles as joint members of the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region, or PNWER, which also includes Washington state, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, British Columbia, Saskatchewan as well as the Northwest Territories and Yukon.

PNWER is a not-for-profit that was created in 1991 as a joint venture to cater to the enhancement of the economic well-being and the quality of life of all the citizens of the region. This would be done by identifying and promoting models of success, exchanging information, enhancing our region's competitiveness, and leveraging our influence on Ottawa and Washington, DC.

During our trip we met with numerous representatives from Oregon's government on all sides of the political spectrum to discuss the potential for Alberta to work more closely with them on common interests, including the development of additional hydrogen infrastructure, agricultural trade, and tourism. We also spoke with government leaders about many of the great obstacles that all of us across the region are facing; these include energy, security, health care, emergency services, public safety, and substance abuse.

One thing for sure, Mr. Speaker: many of the struggles faced by folks all over the PNWER region are shared struggles, and many of the goals are shared goals. It is an honour and a source of pride to represent the government of Alberta within PNWER and to

promote this province that I care so much about. It also gives me great joy to see how Alberta is so well positioned to be a major player in this region. It is crucial that we continue to develop our natural resources and use the talents and entrepreneurial spirit of Albertans to meet the needs of the PNWER region and the world beyond. This success will provide the framework to continue to make Alberta the best place in the world to live, work, and raise a family.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project

Member Kayande: Mr. Speaker, in 2016 the idea of a massive pipeline expansion to tidewater to move Alberta oil to the rest of the world was nearly dead. A pipeline to tidewater lacked public consensus. Some questioned if the environmental impacts were manageable, and others wondered if we could do it while still acting on climate change, yet the pipeline was necessary.

Albertans, as owners of the resource underground, depend on the government to maximize its value. We needed a pipeline to move our products to market and get paid what we deserved for it. Mr. Speaker, the NDP Premier got to work. She lobbied the federal government, she held town halls in Ontario, she moved public opinion from coast to coast, and she convinced the federal government to buy the pipeline from its owner and commit to expanding it.

Let's think about, for a second, what a major accomplishment this was. The last federal Conservative government attempted to bulldoze opposition, and as a result, we lost the Northern Gateway to Kitimat. Gone. Jason Kenney decided that building one-third of a pipeline was good enough, so he burned \$1.2 billion of Albertans' money on Keystone XL, which didn't even have its Nationwide Permit 12, a critical American construction permit. Built, then dug up; the hole filled in. It was the Turkish Tylenol of pipeline projects.

Pipelines are hard to build now both in the U.S. and Canada. Northern Gateway: dead; Dakota Access: late and overbudget; Atlantic Coast: dead; Mountain Valley: rescued by an act of Congress; but an NDP Premier got one built, and she did it working with the federal government.

Not one word of gratitude from the members across the aisle to the former Premier. Not a single acknowledgement that we sometimes get what we need when we negotiate for it. Not a single word of thanks to the federal government or to the rest of Canada, who worked with Alberta to achieve this nation-building milestone, so I'll say it. Through you, Mr. Speaker, thank you to the Leader of the Opposition and to the Canadian government for doing the hard work the UCP or Conservatives . . .

Bill 18

Mr. Ellingson: This government has made it clear that they are not in support of postsecondary institutions and certainly not in support of academic freedom. I've stood in this House and asked the minister how, in good faith, they can stand in support of a bill that challenges academic freedom and risks Alberta's ability to attract and retain researchers and advance ideas that will lead to economic diversification and strengthen our economic future. In response we have heard from the minister that we simply want to clarify the research that is taking place.

Last week we heard that there will likely be exemptions to academic research as the regulations to Bill 18 are developed. Mr. Speaker, if exemptions are already being considered, why are we still pushing forward with Bill 18, the gatekeeper act? Well, the Premier has already answered that question. The Premier has said

that she needs to ensure conservatives are prioritized for research dollars. That's evident with Bill 17 and the creation of the Canadian centre of recovery excellence. Who needs those pesky professors, grad students, and ethics rules when you can pursue your own research agenda with your own think tank under your control?

We also heard the minister tell us that there's support from across the country for Bill 18. Of course there is, Mr. Speaker. They're going to poach our people. They're going to recruit Alberta's best and brightest. Our loss is their gain. While the minister talks about support from across the country, there is no support here in Alberta, as our own researchers have been thrown into limbo, their future uncertain, not knowing what research proposals would be approved by the province.

Mr. Speaker, rather than look at exemptions, drag researchers through months of uncertainty, rather than risk the research and start-up reputation of our postsecondaries, I ask the Minister of Advanced Education and the Minister of Technology and Innovation to do the right thing. Vote yes for postsecondaries, vote yes for research freedom, vote yes for a start-up ecosystem, and no to Bill 18.

Oral Question Period

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

Health Care System Capacity

Ms Notley: Three weeks, Mr. Speaker. Three weeks is a nice, long vacation, but if you're 81 years old and stuck in a hospital hallway, three weeks is a real-life nightmare. Patrice Koshman says her father's health and dementia deteriorated, quote, astronomically, because he was stuck in the UCP's hallway health care for three weeks. To the Premier: what concrete steps is she taking to address the many, many failures within our health care system that led to what Patrice calls the most difficult time in her family's life?

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're very concerned by the situation, and we're glad the family came over to alert us to it. The Minister of Health is looking into it and identifying ways that we would be able to address this so it doesn't happen again.

But that's part of the reason for our overall refocusing of the health care system. Alberta Health Services needs to be focused on providing the very best emergency and surgical care. That's part of the reason we are having four different service agencies that will be focused on primary care, mental health and addiction, assisted living, and acute care, so it doesn't happen again.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, like the Premier, her hand-picked president and CEO of AHS said the story is, quote, regrettable, but the president of the AMA argues that this is actually not a one-time or an uncommon event. To the Premier: with the system strained beyond capacity, when will she stop making things worse by cancelling hospitals, chasing away health care workers, engaging in endless reorganization and instead start investing in what is necessary to attract and retain the critically important front-line health care workers that all Albertans rely on?

Ms Smith: Well, that's already started, Mr. Speaker. We have had success in attracting doctors to Alberta in the last year. We have had success in attracting nurses to Alberta in the last year. In fact, because we're recognizing the credentials across the entire country,

we've been able to very quickly onboard thousands of additional nurses. The issue is the issue that has been in place for decades, the fact that we have a number of people who need to be in alternative levels of care who are in acute-care beds in hospital. When we went and did the review of that, there were over 1,500. As we move those to appropriate care, we'll have the acute-care beds available.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, moving them to motels on the side of a highway is not the answer.

Meanwhile Albertans see through this Premier's attempts at distraction through her increased privatization efforts that are layered on top of intentional, Frankensteinian levels of organizational chaos. Albertans see all of this for what it really is, an admission of failure. To the Premier: when will she stop distracting Albertans, shuffling the deck chairs, trying to take over the jobs of federal and municipal governments and instead focus on the real solutions?

Ms Smith: We are focused on the real solutions, Mr. Speaker. We are going to be developing dedicated beds for assisted living, dedicated beds for mental health, dedicated beds for those who are suffering through the illness of addiction, and as a result we will have alternative places for those individuals to go to make sure they're getting the care in the appropriate place, which will free up the acute-care beds in hospital. I can tell you that I am looking forward to having our hard-working front-line workers have multiple different service providers that they can offer their services to because that will improve working conditions, and it will make sure that we're using all of them to the best of their ability.

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

Bills 20 and 21

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, the Premier would have us believe that opposition to her authoritarian bills is just from her usual opponents. Well, RMA President Paul McLaughlin, a known lefty radical and leader in the NDP heartland – and by that I mean, of course, none of those things – said the government is, quote, basically going after our autonomy and authority and centralizing top down. To the Premier: how does she justify moves that the RMA president is calling, quote, one of the largest underminings of municipal autonomy and authority he's ever seen?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you an example of what we're experiencing today. Fort McMurray has a fire that is 12 kilometres beyond its border. They've identified five communities that need to be evacuated. I've been in direct touch with the mayor, Sandy Bowman, to let him know that we are on standby to help him in whatever way he needs. This is an example of how we collaborate. The individual municipality is able to take the lead, and when we need to step in, we're going to be there for them. I want every single municipality to know that this is going to be the way that we address every single hazard during hazard season.

Ms Notley: Take it from me; you don't need this bill to help Fort McMurray.

Now, Mr. McLaughlin says that UCP cabinet ministers and Conservative MPs tell him they don't understand what this government is doing, and he says, quote, it's hard to get RMA mad, and at this stage RMA is mad. On bills 18, 20, and 21 he says, quote: bang, bang – three in a row – it makes no sense. To the Premier: will she scrap her power-grab bills and stop, as Paul McLaughlin says, quote, going up to their best friend and randomly punching them in the face? End quote.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through the course of the last 18 months we've identified issues that needed to be addressed in various pieces of legislation. In the minister's mandate letter it was indicated that we needed to do a review of the Municipal Government Act and identify areas where we needed to do some additional changes. The Local Authorities Election Act needed to be changed so that it is in preparation for the upcoming election. And based on the fire season that we had last year, we knew that we needed to be able to have clearer lines so that our forest fire entities can step in whenever they're needed. Those are the reasons why we're doing it.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the skepticism around the Premier's exclamations do not stop there. Well-known communist columnist Rob Breakenridge – and by that I mean not that – is also speaking out. Much of his column uses unparliamentary language describing the Premier's relationship with the facts, but he also says that the Premier's recent comments "give the appearance of an inability to justify these moves and that of a government with something to hide." So to the Premier again: will she scrap these bills and finally deliver the honesty, transparency, and accountability Albertans deserve?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was just 18 months ago that the members opposite were asking for us to step in and to remove a council member. We are making sure that there's some clarity and rules around doing that. We also have demonstrated on two different occasions – when we had to step in because municipalities, one in Calgary, one in Edmonton, were overstepping their authority, and we had to make sure that we were providing clarity to align with provincial policy. Finally, last year's fire season demonstrated to us that we needed to have more clarity about when the provincial government would step in to be able to help. There is absolutely reason for all of these bills.

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

Gaza Protests and Law Enforcement Response

Member Hoyle: Following the forceful removal of peaceful student protesters, the community is demanding accountability, and so are we. In an open letter critical U of A associations are shocked by the riot police response and have demanded an explanation from administration about who directed the call to go after student protesters. The events are also triggering an ASIRT investigation even though the Premier originally praised the police response. Will the minister condemn the brutality that peaceful student protesters face on our campuses, and if not, why not?

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Premier, the minister of public safety.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Of course, we respect the independence of our law enforcement communities. We respect the independence of our postsecondaries, as an example. We have asked the director of law enforcement to have ASIRT review these claims, and should allegations of serious injury be sustained, ASIRT will investigate those claims further.

Thank you very much.

Member Hoyle: Mr. Speaker, this morning the associate dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion of the U of A resigned. She witnessed

the forceful removal of peaceful student demonstrations. She wrote, "Not only was this police action unjust and at odds with the university's mission and values: it caused real and deep harm to all it targeted." Under the Post-secondary Learning Act the Minister of Advanced Education has the power to call for investigations. Will the minister launch an investigation under the U of A's and U of C's decisions to remove lawful, peaceful student demonstrations this past weekend?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are aware that this is a very sensitive matter. That's true. Obviously, students have the right to protest and demonstrate within the confines of the law. Universities also have the right to enforce their standard protocols. But having said that, we did have the opportunity to meet with community members yesterday and students and the chiefs of police. There were concerns that were raised, and based on that feedback, this ASIRT review has been launched. As we get more information as to what has happened, we will take the appropriate steps.

Member Hoyle: Mr. Speaker, this government ran on a platform claiming they would, quote, strengthen free speech on campuses. But we know that our institutions are already suffering from the UCP's gatekeeping Bill 18, that gives the Premier the authority to drain our universities of critical research funding. Giving the jarring police response this past weekend on our campuses, one condemned by U of A and U of C law professors and a wide swath of academic community, will the Minister of Advanced Education do what's right, or is she unwilling to defend the values she claimed to run on?

2:00

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I did have the opportunity to read the letter from the law professors, and I will thank them for the time that they took to pen their thoughts. One of their asks was to actually launch an ASIRT investigation, so ASIRT is undertaking a review. Of course, we are committed to freedom of speech on campus and the freedom to demonstrate and to protest peacefully and safely.

Unemployment and Job Creation

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, the most recent report from StatsCan tells a different story about jobs in our province that this government won't brag about. Under the UCP Alberta is no longer Canada's wage leader. Under the UCP Alberta has the second-highest jobless rate in the country. Under the UCP Alberta also faces the highest youth unemployment rates even though we have the youngest population in Canada. They say that Alberta is calling, but there may be no job, health care, or schools when you get here. To the minister: will the minister admit that the UCP record on jobs is a disaster?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From October to March Alberta was responsible for 90 per cent of private-sector jobs added in Canada, so if Alberta is a disaster, Canada is in real trouble and it needs more Alberta. Let's compare that to 2015 to 2019 under the previous government, the NDP. We lost 183,000 jobs. We had record unemployment, record business closures. A recommendation to the members opposite: stick to other questions than the economy.

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, cut through the UCP's rhetoric and the truth is that this government has a weak record on jobs. Alberta's unemployment rate has grown by 20 per cent since this Premier came into office, youth unemployment is at its worst since this government has taken office, and Alberta has amongst the highest jobless rates in Canada for women aged 25 to 54. Calgary alone has the fifth-highest unemployment rate in the country. Everyday Albertans are being left behind while GDP growth lags. What is the minister doing to address the worsening economy that's taking place on his watch?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, the members opposite only look at half of the equation. Alberta is leading the country in economic growth. We are leading the country in job growth. At the same time we're attracting record numbers of Canadians from other provinces and territories to Alberta. It takes time for them to attach to the labour market, which is temporarily causing an increase in the unemployment rate. Again, Canadians are voting with their feet. They are moving to Alberta, which is quite different than the 13 consecutive quarters of people abandoning Alberta to work everywhere else under the NDP. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, if the minister listened to Albertans, he would know that under the UCP it is getting harder for parents, seniors, students, renters to make ends meet. The UCP is picking fights with mayors, reeves, the feds, university researchers, renewable energy, and so many more, and with TransAlta cancelling a multimillion-dollar project, this government is costing communities, jobs, and investments. Stakeholders like the Calgary Chamber of commerce are panning this government for creating investor uncertainty with their bills 18 and 20. Will the minister acknowledge that the UCP's policies are actually driving away jobs and job creators?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, I will acknowledge that there are affordability concerns across Canada, which are causing Canadians to choose the best place to live, work, and raise a family. That's right here in Alberta. Are there real challenges out there? Absolutely. But Canadians view Alberta as having the best combination of quality of life, relative cost-of-living advantages over, say, Ontario and B.C., the lowest taxes. We're going to keep putting those policies in place to support Albertans and Canadians, who are all moving here. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Health System Reform

Ms Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, as much as this government flip-flops on everything from pensions to police to the fundamentals of democracy, there is one area in which they remain constant, their cataclysmic failures within the health system. No matter what, you can count on this government to take a bad situation and make it worse. Thousands of Albertans don't have access to a family doctor, promised hospitals are being cancelled, several emergency room closures, and the list goes on. How many more promises will be broken and mistakes made before this government admits they've wreaked havoc on our health system?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we are seeing records in terms of the number of nurses that have been hired in the province. Over 4,700 nurses have

been hired under our tenure. In fact, we're seeing more doctors come into the province. We've had over 500 doctors just within the last six to eight months alone, of which 215 are family physicians. We have announced the nurse practitioner autonomous availability to do their work autonomously.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that the UCP is responsible for massive problems within the health care system, from motel medicine to highway hospitals to hallway medicine, and given that this government has shown they can't be trusted with our health care system, with health care workers consistently betrayed by this government, doctors fleeing the province, and overcrowded hospitals leaving Albertans needing medical care abandoned in the hallways, can the Health minister justify her reasoning for this continued health care chaos, or should we expect even more of the same from the UCP health care hysteria?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, the only people hysterical are the ones on the other side. On our side we are focused. We are laser focused on improving health care in this province. It's the very reason that we started the refocusing, where we will continue to make sure that the organizations that we are standing up in mental health and addictions, in continuing care, in primary care as well as acute care are laser focused on improving access as well as quality of health care for Albertans. I'm going to continue to do that.

Ms Sigurdson: Given that it has been one year and 206 days since the Premier said that she would fix health care in 90 days and given that over a year ago the Premier declared that there's no crisis in our health care system and given that since then we've seen that not only is the crisis real but it's getting worse, does the Health minister realize that despite the Premier's spin and this government's denial, there actually is a crisis in health care, or is she completely blind to the reality facing all Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are laser focused, as I said, on improvements. We are seeing improvements in the number of surgeries that are being completed within clinically recommended times. We are seeing improvement in the workforce, in attracting and recruiting and retaining our workforce. We have worked diligently with the Alberta Medical Association to come up with the framework for a new funding model for family physicians. We are continuing to do the work for nurse practitioners. We are seeing 63 nurse practitioners wanting to practise autonomously.

Wildfire Update

Mr. Yao: Mr. Speaker, it's the season for wildfires, and even smoke from another province passing through Alberta is causing a lot of distress. It's triggering a lot of emotions with people in places like Fort McMurray. The wildfires are starting up again in Alberta, and it's good to ask the provincial government exactly where we are at in this reoccurring challenge. The media stirs up emotions with images of great fires. People are scared. To the Minister of Forestry and Parks: how many wildfires have been reported so far this year, and what are we doing about it?

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

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member for the question. Of course, it is a serious time in Alberta when it comes to wildfire. Just to give you the numbers, we've had 318 wildfires so far this year, and only one is confirmed to not be human

caused, so we can't stress enough the importance of each and every Albertan being careful and to not be that person that starts a wildfire. With the May long weekend approaching, we want to make sure that Albertans are very careful and prevent wildfires in our province. This time last year we had 454 fires and over 461,000 hectares burned. This year we're at 17,000 hectares. It's important for everybody to watch the fire bans across the province.

Mr. Yao: Mr. Speaker, nine minutes ago the subdivision where I live had been told that they have two hours to leave their part of town. Despite the fact that these fires would have to travel through previously burned-out areas and forest that has significantly less fuel than 2016, people are still concerned about these fires reaching Fort McMurray. Our government has made significant investments in the province's wildfire preparedness response to ensure Alberta's government can support communities for this wildfire season, including the incorporation of technology. To the same minister: what are some of the measures this government has taken to enhance wildfire firefighting operations?

2:10

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

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks again for the question. Of course, our hearts go out to the people of Fort Mac, who are in a stressful situation right now. I just want to assure everyone that we have air and ground crews, and it is a priority for our province right now. We only have a couple of fires that are considered out of control, but that's the one that's most concerning to us because of its proximity to the community.

This year we added two new groups of air tankers that were able to drop water and fire retardant to quickly stop fires. We have the three night-vision helicopters. Two of them have been fighting in the Fort Mac fire so far, and one is on its way there right now to make sure that we can fight those fires when the fires drop down at night and they tend to slow down. We have the community fireguard program, too, working for Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that despite our government's best efforts to prepare for and mitigate the threat of wildfires, these things are inherently unpredictable. The wind is blowing towards Fort McMurray, and my friends are extremely concerned. Their concerns are a reflection of our community, who are resilient and strong, but we also know to be prepared, and we've experienced stuff. There's a lineup of vehicles right now flowing out of Fort McMurray. There's been a lot of talk about how many firefighters we actually have available to fight these wildfires, so I'm asking the minister: can he give the House an update on how many people are involved with fighting these wildfires that are happening right across our province?

Mr. Loewen: Thanks again for the question. Just to give a little focus on the numbers of wildland firefighters we have, we hired an additional 100 wildland firefighters, we hired an additional 40 firetack firefighters, we have additional forest officers that we've hired, we've hired additional seasonal and full-time personnel, that are essential to fight wildfire, and that's over and above last year's numbers, Mr. Speaker. Just to give you an idea, we have unit crews; helitack crews; firetack crews; Incident Command Teams; full-time wildfire staff; logistics, communications, and warehouse personnel. We have air tanker pilots, air tanker support teams, bird dog pilots and support, helicopter pilots, heavy-equipment operators, and dozer bosses all helping.

Bill 20

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, when people speak, politicians should listen. When they speak almost unanimously across political and regional divides, this government should straighten up and realize the mess they've made. Alas, this government doesn't seem capable of that. The Minister of Municipal Affairs used to call the people of Alberta "his bosses," but it seems to me he has changed his tune. Does the minister no longer believe that people of this province are his boss, and if not, why won't he listen to them and scrap the authoritarian Bill 20?

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

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The people of Alberta certainly are my bosses and always have been. The folks across would be wise to actually consider the same thing. Bill 20 is a good bill. It will actually add to the transparency and accountability of elections. It will make it easier to build affordable housing in municipalities. I know why the folks across don't like it, because they like that in the last election the unions, without being exposed, gave \$1.6 million to seven candidates in Calgary.

Ms Goehring: Given that this made-in-Alberta authoritarian legislation is just another power grab by a leader desperate to consolidate power in the Premier's office and given that RMA, with the 69 counties and municipal districts they represent, called it an affront to democracy in Alberta and given that the Alberta Municipalities, with their 260 municipal members, called it a power grab, and given that the Premier's own hometown mayor of High River, Craig Snodgrass, called on residents to call on their MLAs to scrap the bill, when will the minister finally realize what a complete mess he is making of his file and pull Bill 20?

Mr. McIver: Again, Mr. Speaker, the mess was made by NDP legislation. The fact is that our legislation will make the disclosure of donors to third-party advertisers more transparent. The city of Calgary, for example, after 2021 refused to release names of those that donated to third-party advertisers, and that included the two unions that donated \$1.6 million to Calgary people running for council. There was also another third-party advertiser that donated \$400,000 to somebody running for mayor in Calgary. I know the NDP doesn't want these things disclosed, but we're going to do it.

Ms Goehring: Given that as interim PC leader the Minister of Municipal Affairs said, quote, "I actually believe in democracy; I actually believe that what the voters decide should be final" and given that when he failed to win PC leadership in 2014, he stated Albertans, quote, "are the only ones who should tell me and the government what to do" and given that when he failed to win as mayor in Calgary in 2010, he stated that voters are ready for somebody to be interested in what they have to say and is going to engage them in the process, will the Minister of Municipal Affairs take his own advice, listen to Alberta voters, and shred Bill 20?

Mr. McIver: Well, I sure appreciate the rundown of every election I haven't won in my life, Mr. Speaker. That's fun to listen to. But the fact is that this one is an important opportunity to fix the mess that the folks across made. Their legislation tilted the playing field for municipal elections towards the NDP and those that agree with them. It's time to fix that. That's what this legislation does. I know they're railing against it because they don't want that to change, but we're going to make it fair again. They wrecked it. We're fixing it.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Evacuations

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, it's just unfortunately been announced, and it's very troubling to hear that the people of Fort McMurray have now been told to commence evacuating the city. Our heart here in the Official Opposition goes out to them. We know how disruptive this can be. My question is simply to the Premier. Where will she be expecting these folks to be evacuating to, and what efforts will the government be taking to ensure that folks who are evacuated immediately get the support they require?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know this is very difficult for the member opposite, having gone through exactly this kind of scenario at about exactly this time. I've been in touch with Mayor Bowman throughout the morning and asked him to let us know if he was going to be making the decision to ask residents of his communities to leave. There are five communities where they can see the fire within line of sight, 10 kilometres away. They just pulled the decision to evacuate at 2:05 today, and we will be working with the evacuation centres to be able to make sure that they are all taken care of.

Ms Notley: It's being reported, Mr. Speaker, that the Fort McMurray hospital is now in evacuation mode, and they will be evacuating the hospital. For the benefit of those folks with family and loved ones who are in the hospital, can the Premier or perhaps the Minister of Health tell us where it is expected that folks who are in that hospital will be evacuated to and where their families can find them to ensure that they receive the support that they need?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you require accommodation support, we are asking people to go to the Parkland Motel I in Lac La Biche. Obviously, we often ask people to be planning for a 72-hour evacuation, take their pets, medication, important documents, emergency kits with them. We also are going to make sure that information goes out through the RMWB social media website, the Alberta Wildfire app, which can be downloaded. If you're not in an area under evacuation order, we just want you to remain in place to facilitate a safe evacuation. We'll continue to update as we know more.

Ms Notley: One of the most important issues that we had to deal with when Fort McMurray was last evacuated was the fact that many people had their income interrupted and disrupted. It was critically important that those folks got access to income. At what point in this process will the government activate all effort to ensure that appropriate income replacement is made available to those people whose way of making a living is disrupted by the evacuation?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, like last year and in previous hazards, we have allowed for, after seven days of being evacuated, \$1,250 per adult as well as \$600 per child. That will also be the case. We've already had some evacuations this season. That has been something that has already been approved by cabinet, and planning around the health centre has been taking place for several weeks anticipating this. It remains open, and planning for additional evacuation supplies that might be required for a prolonged bus ride is under way. Operational planning continues, and once again go to the website to make sure you have the latest information.

Rent Regulation

Member Irwin: Rents continue to skyrocket out of control. The latest rent report has just come out, and there is more bad news for Albertans. Calgary and Edmonton continue to experience the highest rent increases across the country when it comes to major cities. We've heard from thousands of Albertans who are getting hit with huge rent increases and having to choose between eating and a roof over their heads. We offered one solution with rent caps, and we were clear that they were a temporary measure in addition to focusing on supply, but the UCP said no. When will they act?

2:20

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, the government has already acted. We are investing a quarter billion dollars in rent supplements. Doing it through rent supplements prevents the industry from not being able to build, which is what would have taken place under the NDP's plan, which would have made more people homeless. Also, I think it's important to note that CMHC reports continue to make clear that Alberta is the best place when it comes to affordability anywhere in the country. They cite this government's economic work and it's work when it comes to reducing red tape. Again, we'll see the numbers shortly. I anticipate we will continue to have record-breaking construction amounts inside our province.

Member Irwin: Given that we will see the numbers and given that this government loves to claim that this side of the House has urban privilege, yet the community where rents are actually increasing faster than anywhere else is Lloydminster, Alberta – Lloydminster posted the fastest annual rent growth in the country during April, with rents shooting up a shocking 26.7 per cent. I have friends in Lloyd who are raising their families and contributing to that community. What does the minister have to say to the good people of Lloydminster who are struggling with skyrocketing rents but are getting absolutely no support from the UCP?

Mr. Nixon: I would remind the hon. member and all Albertans about the enormous amount of money that is being invested by Alberta taxpayers to tackle the affordable housing crisis in this province, Mr. Speaker. Again, \$9 billion is being invested in affordable housing across the province; it's a record amount. The efforts that we see taking place to be able to reduce red tape and other components are resulting in record construction, impacting supply, and a quarter billion dollars of Alberta tax dollars helping with rent supplements across the province. This government is investing in housing in a big way, and we're going to continue to do it.

Member Irwin: Given that I've said all along that caps on rent would be one short-term step to help Albertans struggling with skyrocketing rents right now – and both sides of the House agree that we need more supply, affordable supply, not market housing with rents that many Albertans will never be able to afford. Even former MLA and now head of the Chamber of Commerce Doug Griffiths pointed out just last week that rent control could be one short-term solution that could help in combination with, quote, more comprehensive solutions that get to the social and health issues surrounding housing, homelessness, and encampments. Will the minister ever listen to these countless Albertans saying that he needs to take action on skyrocketing rents?

Mr. Nixon: Who we will listen to is economists, Mr. Speaker, who made it clear that if we were to go down the road with what the NDP want, it would be the equivalent of bombing our economy and destroying our community. We've seen rent control not work. Case

in point: two jurisdictions that have it in our country, Ontario and B.C., Toronto and Vancouver, have the worst rents anywhere in the country. So no, we're not going to do what the NDP ask and destroy our housing economy; we're going to continue to invest and make sure we have record-breaking supply numbers and continue to maintain our affordability in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Gender-based Violence Prevention

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Speaker. Gender-based violence is something that affects everyone. Far too many of us know someone that has been affected by this terrible form of violence. We need to ensure that every Albertan can live a life free from violence. I'm proud to see that Alberta's government is working to end this terrible cycle of violence through a made-in-Alberta, 10-year action plan. To the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women: can she please provide an update on the creation of this action plan?

Ms Fir: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's government is working hard to ensure we secure a safe and brighter future for all Albertans. We've held more than 60 engagement sessions in 11 communities across the province with a variety of community leaders, service providers as well as First Nations, Indigenous, and Métis communities. These engagement sessions will help Alberta's government craft a well-rounded, survivor-centric action plan. The strategy will build upon other actions already under way such as the Premier's Council on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and two-spirit people and the implementation of the human trafficking action plan.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta has a government that is dedicated to ending gender-based violence within the province and given that many steps have already been taken to create this made-in-Alberta action plan and further given that prevention is the first step in tackling gender-based violence and given that the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women just announced new prevention grants this morning, to the same minister: can she please provide more information on these new prevention grants and why they are so important?

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

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that important question. We've heard clearly that funding for prevention efforts is a key step towards addressing gender-based violence. Our government will be providing \$2 million to 11 organizations across the province to assist them in prevention strategies. While engagement sessions continue and will be used to inform the action plan, action is also needed right now. Hence, our actions to fund prevention initiatives. In addition to this prevention funding, our government has invested over \$100 million annually in related programs over the last year.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and the minister for her work on this important issue. Given that everyone in Alberta has a role to play in ending gender-based violence and given that this work requires collaboration between women's shelters, sexual assault centres, and organizations supporting survivors and those at risk of such violence and given Children and Family Services has received significant funding through the action plan, can the Minister of

Children and Family Services explain what work his ministry is doing to support the prevention of gender-based violence in Alberta?

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

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that question. Too many Albertans are faced with the traumatic impacts of sexual and gender-based violence, and I'm proud that we're taking action to help survivors get the support that they need. I'm proud to deliver on our commitment to provide an additional \$10 million to women's shelters as well as sexual assault centres to do just that. We also launched the prevention of family violence campaign, which is increasing awareness of the resources available. Now, I know our work on this issue is not done, and I look forward to working with our stakeholder partners to help end gender-based violence.

Community Safety

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, the people of Slave Lake are fed up. Trudeau's soft-on-crime policies combined with his ridiculous spending has made life not just unaffordable but also incredibly unsafe. Families and innocent people are living in a constant state of fear while gangs are exploiting the most vulnerable and avoid real punishment through the revolving door of the current criminal code. Since our out-of-touch Prime Minister refuses to help and since the members opposite refuse to ask their CEO, Jagmeet, to stop propping up and enabling Trudeau, could the Minister of Justice please explain what measures this government is taking to address the lawlessness created by Trudeau's bill?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and the keeper of the Great Seal of Alberta.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for that question. Our position remains absolutely clear: there is no safe haven in this province for criminals. Albertans can proudly boast that their justice system is the best supported it's ever been. We have more prosecutors, we have more law-enforcement support, we have more court staff, and we have more judges than ever before. Unlike the Liberal-NDP coalition that my friend referred to, we will never advise Albertans to leave their car doors unlocked or their keys outside. We will chase criminals out of this province.

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, given that homelessness has become a huge issue not only in our major cities but across this province and given we're seeing many people lose themselves to addiction, ending up on the streets or inside of these dangerous encampments, and further given many of the people trapped by these addictions are Indigenous with many of the same complex intergenerational traumas as families like mine or perhaps even worse, could the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services please explain what positive steps are governments taking to find real solutions, like the navigation centre here in Edmonton, to ensure vulnerable Albertans have access to the supports they need?

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

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we've discussed in this House many times, we're seeing great success from the work in the Edmonton navigation centre, with the vast majority ending up in long-term programs and supports and outside of dangerous

encampments that are costing them their lives in some cases. We're going to be doing that same process in Calgary, and we're also going through a process right now to make a mobile navigation process, where we can go to communities like Slave Lake, work with the local municipality, local law enforcement to deal with isolated encampment situations, like they're facing in Slave Lake, but also bring that compassionate service to the people that find themselves in those circumstances, and it's our hope to use Slave Lake, actually, as a pilot project for that.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Minister. Mr. Speaker, given that there is nothing compassionate about watching our loved ones suffer from the deadly disease of addiction to drugs like meth and fentanyl, further given that this Alberta government is investing \$1.5 billion through Budget 2024 to continue building the Alberta recovery model and further given no expert could ever convince me that the solution to my own family member's struggles with drugs could possibly be solved by feeding them more drugs, could the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction please explain what's being done to ensure those suffering from addiction are getting the help they need so they have a real chance of recovery and reintegrating into society?

2:30

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

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The truth is that right now in Alberta, just like every other province across Canada, we have a choice to make. We can choose to go down a path where we maintain and facilitate addiction like we've seen over the last 20, 30 years of Canadian policy-making, or we can adopt the recovery model, a model that is filled with hope and opportunity for those, not continue to facilitate addiction but bring them out of addiction, give them the tools and the capacity to live a life of hope and a second lease on life and not be condemned to the deadly disease of addiction but instead enlightened by that opportunity of hope, which is why we are investing in the virtual opioid dependency program and 11 recovery communities. I can't wait to partner with that member on the path forward.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Evacuations

(continued)

Member Arcand-Paul: We have heard moments ago that the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo issued an evacuation order for the Fort McMurray communities of Beacon Hill, Abasand, Prairie Creek, and Grayling Terrace. On Saturday an update notified residents that the fire was still out of control and that due to increased smoke and the proximity of the fire to highway 63, it may be closed. Mr. Speaker, if highway 881 closes as well, the routes out of Fort McMurray will be extremely limited. Our families won't be able to get out. This hits home for me and my partner. It is time Fort McMurray has more road access and evacuation routes. Where is the expansion of highway 686 that this government promised the people of Fort Mac?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health has risen.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for the question. It is a quickly evolving situation with this wildfire advancing. I just want to give an update on the hospital. The hospital has not been evacuated. The hospital in Fort McMurray, that is. AHS is evacuating 21 patients at this time based on their more complex needs, and they have buses ready to go should a full evacuation be required. These 21 patients are from various continuing care and acute-care settings, not all from the hospital,

but we want to make sure that you have the most up-to-date information possible.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you to the minister for that update.

Given that the fire MWF-023 is located near the Fort Chipewyan Airport and the Allison Bay fireguard, just a few kilometres northeast of the community, and given that we are thankful to the wildland firefighting teams currently working on the fire and are glad that it is being held and given that the only way in and out of Fort Chip in the summer is either by plane or water and given that the dock in Fort Chip is currently run aground due to the drought and the lake being so low, what is the minister doing to ensure that the dock is accessible so people can evacuate if needed, and when will it be done?

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Premier, the minister of emergency services.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much for that question. Certainly, due to the isolation of the folks in the Fort Chipewyan area, evacuation at times can be a concern, but I can tell you that Alberta Emergency Management is working very closely with the community. They have directors on both the Alberta Emergency Management side as well as the Fort Chipewyan side in that particular community. In the event of an emergency, certainly, we will be able to use airplanes in order to evacuate people, and certainly if we have to bring in the air force, we will do that as well.

Member Arcand-Paul: Mr. Speaker, given that the government introduced Bill 21, that gives the government full control to manage emergency response without having to work with municipalities and Métis communities, and given that there are concerns from RMA about how this bill will remove any involvement from the local experts and given that this government has already failed to plan for potential evacuation of Fort Chip communities by not building the dock or creating an emergency plan, how does the minister expect anyone to trust him to use the powers in Bill 21 when he can't even prepare for wildfire before this emergency?

Mr. Ellis: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are providing clarity and transparency. We're working with all municipalities in the province of Alberta, including First Nations and our Métis communities, to make sure that everyone understands that there's a staged approach. What we don't want to see, which is what is currently happening right now, is that we have the ability to go in and take control over any critical incident. That's not what we want to do. We want staged approaches so that the municipality understands, so that emergency management understands, so that we can assist people and protect Albertans from wildfires.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. Based on the Alberta emergency alert and understanding that there is an evacuation order for Beacon Hill, Abasand, Prairie Creek, and Grayling Terrace and wanting to make sure that all Albertans are getting accurate information and that the Official Opposition is able to understand the situation, which is evolving and, as the Minister of Health recently said, is a changing situation, will the government be providing briefings to the Official Opposition so that we can understand this situation and be able to assist in any communication and serve our constituents?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has risen.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Emergency Management Cabinet Committee met on a daily basis during a crisis last year. We have been meeting on a weekly basis since we began the preparation for hazard season. We have an emergency management committee meeting planned for 6:30 this evening to get up-to-date information. Last year we made the same resources available to the Leader of the Official Opposition so that she could be briefed, and I will certainly raise that at the emergency management committee this evening so that the opposition can also maintain the most accurate and up-to-date information.

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier. Given the, again, changing situation, I just want to follow up on what the Minister of Health had to share around hospital evacuations. I understand that the hospital is not evacuating, but you are evacuating some patients across various settings. For family members who might be concerned and wanting to understand, where can they best find the information about where their loved ones may be going? How can they best find out about who is being impacted by these handfuls of patients now? Again, evolving situation; it could include more in the future.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much for the question. Alberta Health Services has been preparing in, you know, what was hoped to be an unlikely event of evacuating. All of the preparations are ongoing. They are in constant communication with the people on the ground. Alberta Health Services will be leading that particular piece at this point in time. We will continue to provide information as we get it, and as the Premier said, the emergency management committee meeting is going forward this evening.

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you. The Official Opposition will be happy to share more information for families as it becomes available, and we'll be happy to collaborate with the government on that.

Given the evacuation concerns it raises about the safety of communities and residents and given that we know the efforts that firefighters are currently going through battling this fire and others, thinking about making sure we have the resources to address the crisis, can the minister speak to what steps they are taking to ensure that all firefighters and support staff are getting the resources they need and that we have enough for this situation?

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

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member for the question. Yes, we do have an incident management team there right now working on this fire. We do have resources moving from across the province there. We've had resources moving there as this fire developed. One of the biggest problems we've had right off the start with this fire was the wet ground that it took place in and moving heavy equipment around on that wet ground to create the firebreaks that we needed to help control this fire. Our air attacks have been grounded based on smoke and on winds and things like that, so that hasn't been helpful either. But we are working. We got the equipment and manpower there to fight the fire.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon has a question to ask.

Health Services in Rural Alberta

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Access to health care in rural Alberta remains a challenge, and many of my constituents in Drayton Valley-Devon have raised concerns about having to travel to Edmonton to receive urgent obstetrical care. Having three children of my own, I can relate to the concerns my constituents are expressing. Can the Minister of Health explain how our government is supporting women's health care, especially in rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Our government is committed to supporting women, and we want to ensure that their health care needs are prioritized. We recently announced a \$20 million investment over two years to help advance women's health research. This investment will help create opportunities for women to receive tailored clinical care that addresses their unique health challenges and concerns. Two essential Alberta foundations will lead these initiatives, and we will work together to promote women's health care. We will continue to support and invest in women in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given that access to primary care continues to be the top priority for many of my constituents and given that nurse practitioners play an important role in Alberta's primary health care system, can the same minister please update this Assembly on how the nurse practitioners model will help improve access to care in rural Alberta?

2:40

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The recently announced nurse practitioner primary care program will allow nurse practitioners to receive direct funding to practise comprehensive patient care autonomously and operate their own practices or practise autonomously in existing primary care clinics. I'm very excited to bring forward this opportunity for nurse practitioners and increase access in Alberta. We've already received over 60 expressions of interest for this program so far, and there have been over 1,000 nurses apply for the nurse practitioner training program at the University of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the minister. Given that health care in rural Alberta continues to be a challenge and further given that many of my constituents have to travel to large cities to receive urgent care, to the same minister: what steps is our government taking to improve rural health care across Alberta?

Member LaGrange: We are absolutely laser focused, Mr. Speaker, to address access-to-care concerns in the province, and that's why we're investing \$164 million in Budget 2024 towards initiatives to attract, retain, and train new physicians, especially in rural and underserved communities. We're working with Northwestern Polytechnic and the University of Lethbridge to develop regional training centres which include interprofessional teaching clinics for medical students as evidence shows that students who learn in rural areas are more likely to practise in rural areas. These centres are an excellent addition to our province.

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. the Minister of Health.

Bill 22

Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise and request leave to introduce Bill 22, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

This bill would support the implementation of Alberta's health system refocusing and enable the transition from one regional health authority to an integrated system of sector-based provincial health agencies. This act would lay the foundation for improving health care by updating legislation and enabling better governance and oversight of the health care system.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I hereby move first reading of the Health Statutes Amendment Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 22 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices and in accordance with section 4(6) of the Election Act I'm pleased to table the 2023 general election report of the Chief Electoral Officer as volumes 1 and 2, and copies of this report will be provided to the members.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have five copies of a *National Post* column entitled Political Parties Exactly the Shakeup Alberta City Councils Need.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of an op-ed piece written by Mr. Rob Breakenridge in the *Edmonton Journal* this morning titled How Does the Premier Justify Power Moves? asking what the justification for Bill 20 is, and he has none.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Dach: And, if I may, a second tabling.

The Speaker: Oh, correction. Please proceed.

Mr. Dach: Municipalities Pan Emergencies Act: another article in the *Edmonton Journal* this morning, saying that the bill will confuse and complicate future crisis responses, according to the RMA.

The Speaker: Now the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you. As a follow-up to my question earlier, I'd like to table five copies of an article from the *Gateway*, which is entitled Rent Keeps Going Up, Alberta Government is Fighting Solutions, and it talks about the UCP failing to support my Bill 205.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Hon. members, gold stars for everyone. That brings us to Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 11

Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Premier, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to rise and move third reading of Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

Alberta's government is continuing to improve safety and security in all of our communities. That includes responding to the needs of rural populations. Mr. Speaker, all Albertans deserve to feel secure in their communities. This bill, if passed, enables the creation of a new independent agency, a policing agency. The new agency enabled by this legislation would allow the already policelike functions done by the Alberta sheriffs to be arm's length from government and continue our work to augment the current policing models throughout Alberta. This agency would work with the RCMP, would work with municipal and First Nations police to strengthen law enforcement right across this province, an agency with oversight, with accountability, exactly what Albertans expect.

Mr. Speaker, oversight and accountability are critical components in ensuring proper governance and transparency in any system, and it ensures that laws and regulations and ethical standards are being followed. By having strong oversight and accountability mechanisms in place, it helps prevent corruption and misconduct and unethical behaviour, ultimately promoting integrity and trust within the system.

Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, will also provide Albertans reassurance that Alberta's government will not sit idly by as repeat violent offenders out on bail, because of Liberal-NDP policies, continue to terrorize our communities. The new legislation, if passed, guarantees that offenders out on bail are held accountable with the use of electronic monitoring to track them.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans are tired of having repeat criminal offenders out on bail reoffending constantly in our beloved province, so let me be clear. Ottawa, held together by the NDP-Liberal coalition, has made Canada less safe by creating an environment where organized crime and repeat offenders face little to no consequences.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Bill C-75 has led to the increasing sense that our criminal justice system is not holding criminals properly accountable for their actions and that the administration of justice is in disrepute, and this is completely unacceptable, Mr. Speaker. If Bill C-48 fails to protect Canadians and repeat criminals continue to wreak havoc in our communities, our stance in Alberta remains the same, that Bill C-75 should be repealed. Alberta's government will do whatever it takes to protect Albertans. While we assess the impacts of C-48, Alberta's government will not sit idly by, and we will do whatever it takes to protect our communities. Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, if passed, will be used as that protection.

Mr. Speaker, this government has been committed to ensuring that Albertans' voices remain strong in our priorities, our interests,

and our concerns. Rural Albertans have spoken out about the level of crime in their communities, and Indigenous communities are at a crisis point. As we continue to remain true to our word, our government is now taking action to stand up for Albertans.

When someone calls 911, I expect someone in uniform to answer that call. Mr. Speaker, Albertans in rural parts of the province should expect and get the same service as the residents in one of our urban centres such as Calgary or Edmonton. Wondering if an officer will show up during an emergency when called should not be on the minds of Albertans and especially those in rural Alberta, and I expect someone to answer that call. Despite the seemingly desired chaos that seems to be coming from the Trudeau-NDP alliance, our government is taking a firm stance against crime, and Bill 11 is no exception.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I move third reading of the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Are there any others wishing to speak?

2:50

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, Bill 11 is a definition of another broken promise by this government. The Premier said before the election that they would not pursue a provincial police force, yet this legislation creating independent police agency services is the architecture of creating an Alberta police force. This government has a problem with transparency in terms of what they intend to do as far as policy is concerned.

An Alberta police force will be extremely costly for Albertans. Municipalities made it loud and clear that they don't want it. Albertans don't want it. Similar to many other bills that Albertans and municipalities rejected, Bill 11 falls into that list. The UCP has no credibility on public safety. I represent a constituency that day in, day out talks about public safety through gun violence. They cut funding for municipalities, which meant fewer resources for public safety and social supports: as a result, increased social unrest and increased safety issues for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, therefore, I would like to introduce an amendment on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-North West. I would like to distribute the amendment first.

The Acting Speaker: If you can just give the copies to the page and wait till the table receives a copy, then we can proceed.

Members, this amendment will be referred to as HA1.

The member can proceed at this time.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. Mr. Speaker, I move that "Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, be not now read a third time but that it be read a third time this day six months [from now.]"

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak? I'll have the Deputy Premier and the minister of emergency services to speak.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much. Let me be very clear. We're not going to support this amendment. I'm not surprised that the folks opposite would want to delay vital supports for folks in rural Alberta, as an example. As we have stated time and time again, we want an officer to show up when somebody calls 911. Sadly, these are some of the challenges that we're having.

As I've stated before, it's not about more money for the RCMP. Twenty-one point six per cent: that is how short they are on what they are supposed to be supplying as far as officers right here in Alberta. That's equivalent to about 413 officers. What I have stated

to the RCMP, as an example, is: why don't you please start by giving us here in Alberta what we are authorized, and then we can possibly have a conversation about more officers.

The reality is, Mr. Speaker, that the RCMP are not able to supply that here in Alberta. They're not able to supply that in British Columbia. They're not able to supply that in Saskatchewan and New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. We are seeing similar numbers. When we do the simple math on that, now we're talking about thousands and thousands of officers that they are short. What I have heard from folks in rural Alberta, as an example, is that we do not have time to wait for the RCMP and Public Safety Canada to figure out how they are going to address this very, very complex issue when it comes to recruiting or when it comes to just providing the basic complement of police officers that they are supposed to be supplying for us here in Canada, let alone here in Alberta.

As I've stated before, when somebody calls 911, I expect somebody to show up to that call, and if it happens to be somebody in a sheriff's uniform, then so be it, but we are not going to delay this for six months to, again, continue to put folks in rural Alberta at risk.

You know, I know my friend from the Slave Lake area has talked, and he's the parliamentary secretary for Indigenous policing. He talks quite frequently about a crisis point, not just a crisis point in his community but a crisis point in our First Nations communities right throughout Alberta, because of the lack of policing that is in these communities. I'm sorry; is that the position of the NDP, which is – what? – to continue to let Indigenous communities flounder, to have them overrun by guns and gangs and organized crime? On this side of the House we're not going to do that. No, we're not going to do that. If this is the quickest path in order to help support and augment our current deployment model, which is the RCMP, if it means we can augment and support Calgary and Edmonton, Lethbridge as an example, or Medicine Hat, then that's what we're going to do.

Mr. Speaker, it is not acceptable in any way to allow – I want to think about how terrifying it is. Now, I know they don't like hearing about their urban privilege, and they don't like to acknowledge that they have urban privilege on the NDP side, but I want you to think how terrifying it is as a rural Albertan at 2 o'clock in the morning when somebody is breaking into your property. You call 911, and they say: we don't really have anybody available, but – you know what? – I'm sure when that officer gets on shift at 6 in the morning, we'll make sure that we send them out. The level of fear that they would have is something that is, quite frankly, unmeasurable and that those that live in urban municipalities do not understand.

I've actually challenged them. I'll challenge anyone from an urban municipality to go out into rural Alberta and be in an area where there's a high rate of crime and know what it feels like when you call 911 and nobody is available to show up for that particular call. We're not going to do that here. We're not going to do that here in Alberta. We are going to support our friends in rural Alberta. We are going to support our friends in the First Nations communities. We're going to support our friends in the Métis communities. You know what, Mr. Speaker? The NDP doesn't want to support our friends in those communities. Hey, I guess – you know what? – everybody has got to make choices in life, if that's the choice that they choose to make, but on this side of the House, we're not going to do that.

In short, Mr. Speaker, we're not going to support this amendment. I recommend all members of this House to vote down this amendment. Let's get on with business. Let's get police officers protecting rural Alberta.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Any others wishing to speak? The Member for Edmonton-South has risen.

Member Hoyle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise here to speak on why Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, should not be read for a third time. I've said this before when I last spoke on this bill: as someone who has family members who served in some of the highest ranks of law enforcement across Canada for decades, who also has many family members who live in rural Alberta who do not support the creation of an Alberta police force, and as someone who deeply values public safety as the utmost importance for our communities, I just simply do not support Bill 11.

Bill 11 would allow the government to create any kind of police agency. We have here the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services that stated that it is meant for sheriffs and in case the RCMP won't renew its contract in 2032. And, yes, I do agree as an Albertan and someone who's here to serve all Albertans that all Albertans deserve to feel safe in their communities, but the answer to that is not to lay the foundation for one day establishing an Alberta provincial police force. We need solutions now that are enacted to help people feel safe in their communities.

3:00

This bill is yet another step in the contentious debate over who provides policing in Alberta outside of the municipalities that have their own police forces. The push to establish an Alberta provincial police force started after the report from the Fair Deal Panel, that was released in 2020. That report recommended the province move ahead with its creation. While the government's news release seemed to be carefully composed to obscure the reality of what Bill 11 entails, the obvious is that it will be the start of the provincial police force, yet the UCP said that it wasn't going to start one.

I think we need to acknowledge that this UCP government's track record of saying one thing and doing the complete opposite is what we see time and time again. Even the minister stated, quote: these changes are part of a broader paradigm shift that reimagines police as an extension of the community rather than as an arm of the state.

Yes, Albertans have the right to be concerned that this will inevitably happen again because the truth of the matter is that this is a policy that Albertans simply don't want. Proposed changes to policing in Alberta have been deeply unpopular with Albertans, and Bill 11 is yet another attempt to force an unwanted, expensive policing change on the taxpayer's dime.

The minister has referenced the proposed marshal service in Saskatchewan as an example of a model that could be implemented here in Alberta, but the marshal service has received similar criticisms on the added burden faced by taxpayers. Morgan Buckingham, president of the National Police Federation, has stated, quote: rather than listening to residents, taxpayers, stakeholders, and policy experts in the province, the government has chosen to invest a significant amount of money in a very expensive and, in our opinion, redundant and politically motivated police force. End quote.

Experts are saying that establishing all-new policing agencies is redundant and politically motivated. Is this the kind of policy the UCP government wishes to mimic? There's no denying the political undertones of this unwanted and unnecessary proposal when we can see that this is just another attempt to pick a fight with Ottawa and our federal government. It's more political games, that we have come to expect from this government here in Alberta.

It may well be that we have too few police officers to handle the increases in crime, but adding yet another police bureaucracy doesn't move us one step closer to solving those problems. While

the UCP claims that the establishment of provincial police will serve to enhance safety within the province, the creation of a brand new agency runs the risk of duplicating existing law enforcement efforts. It also has the potential to fragment the delivery of policing services.

Alberta already has several local police services plus sheriffs, the RCMP, the rural Alberta provincial integrated defence unit, the Alberta law enforcement response teams, the Alberta Serious Incident Response Team, the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railway police, wildlife and conservation officers, bylaw officers, peace officers, and transit police. Even the Alberta humane society and Alberta Environment and Parks have peace officers with law enforcement authority in limited areas. Implementing an entirely separate provincial police will undermine the current collaborative approach and lead to inefficiencies related to resource allocation as well as co-ordination.

How can the UCP look at this extensive list and suggest that we need yet another policing agency? The only possible reason seems to be the eventual creation of a provincial police force to replace the RCMP and consume the Alberta sheriffs branch. It's incredibly troubling because we know that added bureaucracy seldom leads to more efficient delivery of services and, in this case, the care and safety of Albertans.

Can the minister explain what, if any, public desire there is to replace the RCMP, and what would be the point, especially since bureaucracies tend to get in each other's way and gum up the works in the process? The implementation of a provincial police agency would undoubtedly require the reassignment of law enforcement personnel from existing police services to staff the new provincial force. This could potentially result in a significant reduction in the capacity of existing law enforcement to effectively address local emergencies, risking community safety. This leaching of officers would furthermore reduce the capacity of municipalities, mid-size cities, and rural towns to effectively provide adequate service to their communities, all while they struggle with the fact that the UCP has done nothing to support municipal budgets over the past five years.

They took funding for the police away from municipalities in 2019 and increased the provincial share of fine revenues from 26.7 per cent to 40 per cent. Based on 2018-2019 data, this was roughly \$32 million lost that financial year alone. These funds support different public safety related efforts in municipalities. In comparison, \$32 million is roughly the salaries of 300 police officers. To make matters worse, the price tag for setting up the Alberta provincial police force would place drastic financial burdens on municipalities, whose budgets have already been slashed by this UCP government. Downloading of costs to municipalities has put further pressure on policing and public safety budgets, not to mention the millions of dollars that everyday Albertans will have to pay as communities scramble to train new officers to fill vacancies by a new police force.

The Premier and her cabinet seem to be more interested in prioritizing their battle with the federal government over the safety and needs and wants of Albertans. Wouldn't the province be better served if the UCP government ensured that local agencies had enough resources, had resources to help them properly serve their communities instead of investing over a billion dollars into a program that nobody wants? The unfortunate reality is that this legislation does little to address safety concerns held by Albertans.

So what are Albertans looking at with Bill 11? It's clear there is no substantive action here to keep our communities safer. Bill 11 creates a police service with a mystery mandate. This government will establish a new provincial police force but can't say what the force is actually going to do. How big will it be? What is its

jurisdiction relative to other police? What will it cost? All of this seems clear as mud and about as straightforward as numerous other policies this UCP government has put forward.

Dr. Temitope Oriola, a criminology and sociology professor at the University of Alberta who previously advised this government on changes to the Police Act, said it best, quote: if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck; let's just call it what it is; this is going to be, to all intents and purposes, if not immediately, over time, a provincial police service. End quote.

This is only made worse by the fact that Alberta sheriffs have been left in the dark when it comes to the provincial government's plan to create a new police force that would take over some of their duties. As I stand here talking about Bill 11 and think about all the things I've just said, I think about my family's safety, I think about the safety of folks in Edmonton-South, and I think of the safety of folks here in this province. This bill is not just about pitting urban against rural. Everybody is scared and afraid. When they have, you know, crime happening around them, everybody needs that help. I would love to see the UCP really talk about this care for all Albertans, not pit rural and urban against each other. This is the safety of Albertans we're talking about. This is making sure our police have the resources and that we get quality care when we need it in these grave circumstances.

So for these reasons and others I simply do not see the need for Bill 11 to be read for a third time. I support this hoist amendment.

Thank you Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any others wishing to speak to amendment HA1? The Member for Lesser Slave Lake has risen.

3:10

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise in support of Bill 11 originally but not in support of the amendment tabled by the members opposite. I do this, and I have a well-written speech here in front of me that goes over all the really well-worded reasons why. But I'd like to talk a little bit about something that's actually happening in Alberta because I feel like the members opposite are ignoring real Albertans' concerns. They are real. These things that I speak about in here that affect my communities or affect people like me or where I'm from are real. They're not bumper sticker answers. They're not designed for political points.

I was in Calling Lake. They declared a state of local emergency months ago. I was in the meeting, spoke to an old Indigenous widow who told me that in the middle of the night, at 2 in the morning, she heard a loud screeching noise. Somebody drove right through her garage door, Mr. Speaker, and she was terrified, so she called 911. What the members opposite might not know about Calling Lake is that they don't have an RCMP. While the Member for Edmonton-South says that she's very concerned about the constituents of Edmonton-South and Albertans, when she calls 911 in Edmonton, the response time is within minutes. The sad part about Calling Lake is that the detachment is out of Athabasca, and it takes a long time for them to come.

When they call 911 – this lady told me that she was terrified. She said: "I'm watching them right now; they're loading all of my life's possessions into the back of a pickup truck. What do I do?" The 911 dispatcher said: go hide and wait for help to arrive. Finally, she got frustrated, and she said, "Stop it; get out of my garage; that's my stuff" and probably some other colourful language that I can't share in here. The response from one of the people, one of the gang members – because this is organized crime. This is not random. This is not kids spray painting bridges on the way home from

school. This is terrifying. With a mask over his head he held a sawed-off shotgun to her face and said: get inside, or I'm going to blow your head off. I apologize if that language is offensive or triggering, but that is exactly what this old Indigenous widowed lady told me.

So she went back inside terrified and hid inside the cupboard, I think, of her kitchen, and she waited. In Calling Lake when you call 911, they dispatch out of Athabasca. It takes 38 minutes. Those guys loaded up her entire life's possessions. In 33 minutes they were out the door because they knew they'd still have three or four minutes to spare.

When we call 911 in rural Alberta, nobody answers. When you hear the Deputy Premier, Minister Ellis, speak on this . . .

An Hon. Member: No.

Mr. Sinclair: I got you. Sorry.

. . . he says that he doesn't care about the patch on the shoulder or the name on the uniform. When you call 911, someone should answer.

And it's not just Calling Lake. That's one example. In the town of High Prairie, another small, little community in my riding, for years small-business owners have been sleeping at the front step of their businesses trying to protect them because they don't know what to do anymore. It's a combination of a lack of policing and the ridiculous Bill C-75, that has allowed lawlessness, organized crime, drug dealers to creep into our communities. The hometown that I grew up in looks nothing like it did when I grew up there, Mr. Speaker. Forgive me if I get upset and I use language that's offensive, but when you throw around words like "urban privilege," it means something to me.

When people call 911, someone should answer. Regardless of where they are in this beautiful province of ours, it shouldn't take hours for someone to come and show up. So when they say that no one asked for this, that's a complete load of something. They are asking me. They're asking me every single day to do something. My e-mail is flooded with requests for help.

We all know that Prime Minister Trudeau doubled down last week again on TV and leaned into this idea that criminals don't need jail, that they need mental health support. Mr. Speaker, I believe in recovery. I don't believe in giving up on people. I believe we have an opportunity to put them in an environment where they can recover. But they can't do that at the expense of the common-sense public safety of the citizens of Alberta that are innocent. They can't do that at the expense of small businesses or people that are trying to protect their families.

This isn't funny to me, Mr. Speaker. Again, I don't like to throw around these words like bumper sticker answers. I do have a very well-worded, well-written speech on this, but it's very frustrating to hear this level of mockery when we live in this *Mad Max* state of lawlessness in some of our rural communities. When people ask what Bill 11 is going to do, we're 400 officers short with the RCMP. Every taxpayer pays for 2,000 officers, and we're 400 short right now. I'm not against the RCMP. This is not an either/or conversation, Mr. Speaker; this is a supplement because there is nobody answering the call right now.

We deserve better in rural Alberta. It's not just the Indigenous places; all the people deserve better in the remote communities. I think that for all of the times that we stand up and use the word "Indigenous" here and pretend or not pretend to care on one day and then not the next on whether or not this is serious, we should be supporting the idea of getting supports to these communities. When Minister Ellis says that he wants the . . .

The Acting Speaker: Excuse me. The use of proper names would not be appropriate. Just apologize, withdraw, and move on.

Mr. Sinclair: The Deputy Premier, whose name I will not use again: when he says that he would like the police forces to be a reflection of the community instead of the arm of the state, he's specifically referring to Indigenous policing. I've sat in meetings, Mr. Speaker, with over 30 Indigenous communities that have expressed interest in moving to their own police model. It's not because they think that it's going to be easy or that they can afford it – there are going to be added costs, and there are concerns – it's because they really, really need help, and they're trying to find any solution right now.

The other thing, Bill 11 does, Mr. Speaker, is that it's not going to fix the problem with repeat offenders, but at least the ankle bracelets would make it more uncomfortable for them and, hopefully, a little inconvenient. But when I speak to the people where I come from, I don't tell them that this is going to fix the problem, because it's not. Until they repeal Bill C-75 and all the fake, soft-on-crime policies, it's going to continue to be like this. As long as they continue to flood the streets with safe-supply drugs – which is paradoxical because I don't believe there is safe supply. It's nonsense.

People deserve a path to recovery. We're investing in long-term treatment centres in this province, and in every meeting I have with an Indigenous community, they are real excited to hear about it. You'll be able to stay up to a year in these communities. I'm proud of the work the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction is doing, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services – sorry, I caught myself doing it again. What we're doing is real, Mr. Speaker. What we're attempting to do is stop waiting for the federal government to do the right thing; we're going to do something ourselves.

The people of Lesser Slave Lake elected me here because when I speak, they say that I don't sound like a politician. So forgive me if I'm not that eloquent sometimes, but I prefer to tell people like it is. I'm not going to say: we're going to dig into it; we're working on it. No, that's not good enough anymore; they need real action. The members opposite or the Prime Minister: they love to take pictures in headdresses and at powwows. They love to talk about all these things they're trying to do. Well, Mr. Speaker, on this side of the aisle we're going to do these things; we're not going to talk about them.

It's not going to be perfect. I'd be the first person to say that there's no silver-bullet solution for any of this. It's very complex. Homelessness, intergenerational trauma: these are all real issues, and we don't have a silver-bullet solution for any of them. But if we do have something that works, we should do it together, on both sides of the aisle. They should be recommending and standing up for us and saying that we should repeal Bill C-75 when they have one of their CEO meetings, which – I mean, when they elect their new regional leader.

Mr. Speaker, people ask me why I make jokes sometimes, but if you knew Indigenous people, sometimes you have to joke to stop from crying. That's the God's honest truth. This is real to me, and this bill, I believe, will make a difference. It's not perfect. We're going to try arming these sheriffs so that they can come in and help communities when we need it most, and right now there's a lineup around the corner of small towns, where I'm from, that would be happy if sheriffs could come and protect their communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Are any others wishing to speak to the hoist amendment? The Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Mr. Ellingson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do stand to speak on why Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, should not be read a third time. I do hear the Member for Lesser Slave Lake, and I really appreciate the personal experience that he's conveying and from his constituents.

3:20

But I do want to be clear that it was a predetermined decision long ago, and this isn't necessarily being brought forward because Albertans, all Albertans, are asking for a provincial police force. Mr. Speaker, we have heard from municipalities from across the province stating that they're not looking for or asking for a provincial police force. They are asking for additional safety and security but not a provincial police force.

The government may at times refer back to the Fair Deal Panel and say that Albertans are in fact asking for a provincial police force. I would like to take a moment, Mr. Speaker, to unpack the reference to the Fair Deal Panel and the work that was done with the Fair Deal Panel because I do think that this was kind of the precursor to Bill 11 and the movement towards an Alberta police force.

The Premier of the day asked that panel to focus on ideas that would strengthen our province's economic position, give us a bigger voice within Confederation, or increase provincial power over institutions and funding in areas of provincial jurisdiction.

He didn't ask the panel to look into how we increase security in Alberta. He didn't ask the panel to poll Albertans about whether or not we wanted a police force or how to address security. He asked the panel how the province can have additional powers and assert some more control over provincial jurisdiction. The panel was about Albertans feeling that they aren't getting their fair share from the federation, and to address that, the panel did consult with Albertans, but they had a filter on that consultation, for what matters, the Constitution states, are provincial jurisdiction or shared jurisdiction with the federal government. This filter was applied in the public engagement completed by the panel. None of this work warrants Bill 11, and Bill 11 should not be read for a third time.

The consultations of that panel resulted in questions like question 3 in the online survey:

Given what you currently know, how much would the following options help Alberta improve its place in the federation? A lot or Somewhat [please rank].

One of the 13 options presented was "Alberta establishing its own institutions, such as a tax collection agency, police force, or pension plan." Mr. Speaker, 51 per cent of the respondents selected this option 13 as an option for Alberta to improve its place in the Confederation, ranking it 11th out of the 13 options presented. So with a very slim majority of Albertans selecting this option that bucketed several things together, placing it 11th out of the 13 options to choose from, this government has already moved forward on both an Alberta pension plan and an Alberta police force. This is hardly an overwhelming cry from Albertans for either, yet here we are. Having already debated a possible referendum on a pension plan being rammed through the Chamber, now here we are debating an Alberta police force.

Mr. Speaker, we should not be. Albertans are not asking for it, and Bill 11 should not be read for a third time.

Despite not receiving resounding support . . .

Mr. Williams: Will the member accept an intervention?

Mr. Ellingson: Not at this time.

Despite not receiving resounding support for an Alberta police force through consultation, the panel did recommend creating an

Alberta police service to replace the RCMP. However, in making that recommendation, the panel stated that

Alberta should assess the long-term benefits of moving to its own [Alberta police service]. Regions and municipalities that would be significantly affected by any switch need to know how this change would impact citizens.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is: has this work been done? Have we talked to municipalities that will be significantly affected by this switch?

Mr. Speaker, this government has the habit of enacting and proposing legislation without prior consultation, and that is what has happened with Bill 11. The panel also said, "Any extra costs incurred by Alberta should not be passed on to municipalities without their consent." Has this government assessed what those costs will be? Has this government said to municipalities that they will commit to the Fair Deal Panel's suggestion that none of those costs should be pushed to municipalities?

In the report the panel acknowledged that a federal annual contribution of \$112.4 million would be lost in the creation of a provincial police force. Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that all Albertans would like to know what assessment has been done to understand the costs of an Alberta police force. We need to understand the set-up costs. We need to understand the ongoing costs. We need to understand what funding we would be losing from the federal government in moving down the path of an Alberta police service. Is this government committed to not passing those costs along to municipalities?

Mr. Speaker, the other side of the House does talk about how we on this side don't care about the safety and security of Albertans. The Alberta NDP is clear that we support the peace and security of all Albertans. We have spoken and met with Albertans from every corner of this province in understanding citizens' needs. Our questions are on whether or not the government is exploring all options before proposing an Alberta police force.

This government has made it clear, as an example, Mr. Speaker, that the south Edmonton hospital needs further consideration and more planning before we were to spend such a significant amount of money. Why does the government believe that the only solution in bringing greater security to rural Albertans is an Alberta police service? Why is further consideration needed for a south Edmonton hospital but not an Alberta police force?

It is understood that the RCMP has unfilled positions in Alberta and across this country. Would it not be more cost-effective to support existing infrastructure to face the challenges that we face? What do we understand about the challenges and the proposed solutions that we're putting forward? Are we also looking at the root causes of crime? Are we also doing all that we can to address mental health, addictions, poverty? We haven't heard in this bill about this government talking about the root causes of crime. We haven't heard in this bill about the government talking about how they would address the root causes of crime.

The Fair Deal Panel would send a message to Ottawa in charge of its own destiny. Is this really about the safety of Albertans, or is this just part of our crusade against Ottawa? [interjection] No. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, the Fair Deal Panel didn't identify how services would be improved or costs saved by creating an Alberta police service, and neither does Bill 11, because for the Fair Deal Panel, that wasn't their mandate. Their mandate was to find ways to defend Alberta against Ottawa, not against crime. Let's stop this now and say that Bill 11 doesn't need to go to a third reading.

In proposing this legislation, the government should be able to clearly articulate how this will improve services. How will this address recruiting? How do we know that we'll be more successful

in recruiting than the RCMP? How is this going to save and not spend more of Albertans' money?

3:30

Mr. Speaker, none of this work has been done or presented to us in this House. If there was consultation with Albertans, it hasn't been presented in this House. This was not included in an election promise. Why is it a priority now? Why has the government not consulted with the sheriffs and the National Police Federation? RCMP officers in Alberta are devoted to Alberta, and they are under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Justice. The minister talks about how we are less safe in Alberta. The question is: how is this legislation directly addressing that safety?

Mr. Williams: Happy to address if the member will take that intervention.

Mr. Ellingson: Perhaps another time.

The minister said they're working to support the RCMP and existing services, has talked about how on this side we don't understand . . .

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, intervention?

Mr. Ellingson: Again, not at this time.

. . . what it feels like not to receive service when you call 911. Mr. Speaker, I do want to take a moment – and, granted, it has been quite some time, but I did grow up in the same hometown as the Member for Central Peace-Notley. We went to the same high school, played in the same high school band. I'd like just to share that – you know, the minister is saying that we don't understand what it's like to call and not get help, maybe because the minister wasn't there with me and my family when our neighbour called us, my mom, who was a nurse, to come and help them because of a farming accident, where a chain had snapped, recoiled, and penetrated his skull. The only person who was there within a time to respond and to save his life was my mom. It wasn't possible – when you're 40 kilometres from town, you can't call and expect an ambulance to arrive within eight minutes, and in a moment like that, it wasn't possible for an ambulance to arrive to save our neighbour's life. The minister also wasn't there when our neighbour's house burned down, and we gave them shelter and comfort until others could arrive. Again, when you're 40 kilometres from town, a volunteer fire service doesn't arrive in eight minutes.

Mr. Speaker, I recognize that I'm not giving policing examples, but Albertans are also asking for access to health care. Why aren't we introducing a bill to support rural and all Albertans in their health care? I'd like to hear how exactly Bill 11 is going to address the fact that when you call and you're 40 kilometres away, people can't arrive in eight minutes.

How is Bill 11 going to enhance services? Mr. Speaker, the minister hasn't explained how Bill 11 is going to improve policing services and the safety and security of Albertans or how we're going to address social challenges that lead to the root causes of crime. What I would love to see from this government is an actual response to what Albertans are asking for: addressing poverty, addressing housing, addressing a mental health crisis, addressing education. On this side of the House we support addressing these issues and addressing the security of Albertans. Bill 11 doesn't address those problems, and it should not be read a third time.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak? The Member for Calgary-Edgemont has risen.

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak, I guess, in favour of this amendment on the floor, but I must say that I am very opposed to Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Bill 11 is what I think of as another UCP classic. Albertans aren't asking for it, Albertans don't want it, the UCP did not campaign on it, yet here we are. Allegedly, Bill 11 is not the Alberta force that no one wants. No. It's just an independent police agency that will take on responsibility for policelike functions currently carried out by Alberta sheriffs. So this new police force in Alberta that isn't an Alberta police force is, you know, being created to augment and support the RCMP and other municipal police services. If you're asking yourself, "Why do we need to spend money to create a new police force to do this rather than direct those resources to existing police forces?" well, then you'd be asking the same question that many others are also asking. No answer from the government, though, on that question.

When introducing this bill, the sponsor, the minister of public safety, spoke to the intent of this bill. The minister said that nothing in this bill relates to getting rid of the RCMP in Alberta. In the news conference announcing this bill for the Alberta police force that no one wants, the minister said again that the new service would not replace the RCMP in Alberta. But then in his very next breath the minister said that the provincial government was building out the sheriff services just in case the RCMP pulled out of the local policing when their contract expires in 2032.

Just to be clear, the RCMP contract that expires in 2032 isn't just an Alberta contract; that's the contract for the country. So the minister is suggesting that there's a possibility that the RCMP, the organization responsible for contracting police services to eight provinces, three territories, and 150 municipalities, might just fold up shop in 2032. The minister is suggesting that the police force responsible for policing 75 per cent of Canada's land mass and 22 per cent of its population might just say: "Hey, times are tough right now. We're having a hard time recruiting new members. I guess we should just quit." And why is it that the minister feels that it is a possibility? Unknown. He has never bothered to elaborate with information or even provide any logical reasoning on why the RCMP, who've been providing policing to this country for over 100 years, might suddenly decide to get out of the game on policing.

And then there's a very good question for why the minister can't provide anything to back up the assertion that it's so important to have the redundancy for RCMP. It's because the RCMP have no plans to stop providing contract police services to Canadian communities.

It's hard to pinpoint the beginning and the end of the circle. What is the opinion writer who penned the column, who planted the idea? Oh, yeah; that's right. Sorry; I thought I missed a page. It's hard to pinpoint the beginning and the end of a circle. What does the opinion writer who penned the column, who planted the idea for the government – or was it the government who succeeded at having an opinion columnist carry their water? The opinion column that I'm referring to could be found in the *Calgary Herald* on April 5, 2023, a column titled *A Provincial Police Force Is Inevitable but UCP Has Done a Bad Job of Selling It*. In this article Don Braid presents the argument that the federal government is keen to shed the responsibility for community policing. Braid opinions that "the Mounties are edging to exit whether Albertans want them [to] or not. Ottawa and the RCMP have been sending signals about this for two years."

Well, it turns out that what the writer thinks were two years of signals was, in fact, one signal. The entire premise of the article hinges around recommendation 10 of a 2021 House of Commons committee report, *Systemic Racism and Policing in Canada: A Report of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security*. Recommendation

10 talks about exploring the possibilities of ending contract policing services. But there are 42 recommendations of this obscure committee report, and if you take even the quickest read of this report, you'll find that half the recommendations actually address changes that could be made within the RCMP to address the focus on reporting systematic racism in policing.

Just to give a quick example of other recommendations in the report, recommendation 21:

that the Government of Canada work with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and provincial and municipal police services to encourage the use of persons specialized in victim services and mental health who would be available with first responders in situations requiring de-escalation.

Recommendation 31:

that the Government of Canada request that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police create a nationwide database of police use of force incident data disaggregated by race, colour, ethnic background, national origin, gender and other identities; regularly collect this data by implementing a mandatory reporting policy, and regularly publicize the data collected.

3:40

Just the smallest amount of critical thinking on this issue would be so very welcome. To suggest that one of 42 recommendations in a committee report is two years of signalling simply because the report was tabled two years ago is an enormous stretch. So why don't we look at what other action the federal government has been taking on policing? What concerns have the federal government actually been raising when it comes to the RCMP?

Well, it turns out that one of the key issues that has been flagged is the cost of policing, because even though policing is provincial jurisdiction, let's not forget that the federal government still foots 30 per cent for the RCMP. The government seems to have forgotten that part of the equation when it comes to the debate around rural policing here. They introduced a bill to create a police force and have no idea how much it even costs.

So we have a federal government that's flagged the costs of policing as a concern, but we don't see any follow-up to suggest that their response will be to abandon the RCMP. No. What we see them doing is engaging in consultation with communities, and advanced consultations have already begun. That's what the provincial government should be doing, consultation.

I know that may be a new concept for folks. One of the themes of this government is to table legislation, and then we're going to consult with the stakeholders later. That's not really a social media ready tagline yet, but we're working on it, because it's a pattern of behaviour of this government, and no one is calling it out. Well, we are. We've been doing that. But, you know, consultation is what should be happening. In this case it's really, really what should be doing because, you know, policing is provincial jurisdiction, so what we should be seeing happening is our provincial government working together with our federal partners to address issues in policing.

We should have seen this government consult with sheriffs, with the RCMP before rolling out this legislation. We should be seeing this government out in communities actually consulting with those communities, actually listening to those communities. You don't even need to listen that hard. Communities have been loud and clear that they don't want an Alberta police service. What they want are solutions to rural crime, and adding another service, adding more bureaucracy, adding another chief of police role to be compensated at a quarter million dollars: how is this going to address issues with crime in rural areas? The government hasn't chosen to share with us or anyone how an additional police force will help. We know

that there'll be an increase in cost of policing in Alberta, but we still don't know how much.

You know, the UCP seems to be choosing to govern based on the writings of opinion columnists, yet they don't seem to be keeping up on the actual news. The issues in police recruitment and retention are not specific to Alberta. Police forces in Ontario, B.C., and many other provinces are struggling to recruit and retain. Police forces in the United States, the U.K., and Australia are also having issues.

The UCP seems to think that they won't encounter the problem of policing services world-wide. They think that they won't have any trouble recruiting and retaining officers, I guess. Why is that? How has this government cracked that nut? Are they planning to compensate Alberta police officers at a higher rate than the RCMP? Are they proposing a police force that will balance police officers with social services providers? Have they dialed in the answer to stress and the burnout in the field? Well, if they've done that, they're keeping it to themselves. I suspect that they have not done so. I suspect that the hatred for the federal government has blinded them to the reality of the challenges facing modern-day policing. I suspect that they, just like what we are seeing in health care, are rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

The big problem is – and it's complex. Rather than leaning into finding real solutions, rather than doing the hard work of finding out the real answers to the problem in policing, they think they can distract Albertans with a big, shiny promise. Albertans, as we have seen, are not so easily fooled. Albertans don't want this extra police force, and this government certainly wasn't elected on a mandate to create it.

You know, I strongly support this motion on the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, that we stop reading it now. I support the motion by my colleague, and I continue to stand against Bill 11.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on the legislation today.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Any others wishing to speak to amendment HA1?

[Motion on amendment HA1 lost]

The Acting Speaker: We immediately move to put the question on third reading of Bill 11.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for third reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:47 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Amery	Jones	Sawhney
Armstrong-Homeniuk	LaGrange	Schow
Boitchenko	Loewen	Schulz
Bouchard	Long	Sigurdson, R.J.
Cyr	Lovely	Sinclair
de Jonge	Lundy	Singh
Dreeshen	McDougall	Smith
Dyck	McIver	Stephan
Ellis	Nally	Turton
Fir	Neudorf	van Dijken
Getson	Nicolaides	Wiebe
Glubish	Nixon	Williams
Guthrie	Petrovic	Wilson
Horner	Pitt	Wright, J.

Hunter Johnson	Rowswell	Yaseen
Against the motion:		
Al-Guneid	Eremenko	Kayande
Batten	Gray	Metz
Brar	Haji	Sigurdson, L.
Ceci	Hayter	Sweet
Ellingson	Hoyle	Tejada
Totals:	For – 46	Against – 15

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 19

Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

[Debate adjourned May 9: Mr. Kasawski speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park has 10 minutes remaining should he choose to use it.

Are there others? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Prior to providing my comments, I just want to recognize the people of Fort McMurray and reiterate our caucus's hope that the evacuation proceeds in the affected communities uneventfully, that those families, businesses, homeowners, renters, workers, and all others are well supported as they have to evacuate their homes, some for now this second time in, oh, I guess eight years, and I certainly reiterate the support from this side of the House and the whole House for all Albertans who are affected by wildfire.

Certainly, as we saw in the response from the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition today in question period, for many of us, we feel this very deeply, this evacuation, Mr. Speaker. It was a defining moment of our time in government. For me, it was a defining moment of watching the Leader of the Official Opposition's strength, resolve, her iron will to make sure that well-being was in place for as many people as possible under the conditions, insofar as it could be possible. Certainly, we are here to help make sure that we have good communication from provincial government agencies, from various institutions that have to assist in an evacuation such as this. We hope that it does not become more widespread than it already has been in the affected communities.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a few of my initial thoughts on that matter and to reflect on what it means for ordinary people who have their entire lives disrupted in this way.

Okay. As they say in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*: and now for something completely different. Madam Speaker, I'm going to turn my attention to the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act. At this stage of debate, of course, being second reading, I want to contextualize the bill and provide some thoughts on affordability and management of the electricity system for today and tomorrow.

Indeed, at first pass of this bill, when I first had a look at what it does and the legislative mechanism it employs, it occurred to me – and during the last session I used to rename the bills in my usual way. It wasn't usually complimentary, and this one will be similar. Bill 19 should be renamed Solving Yesterday's Problems Tomorrow. That should be the actual title of this bill.

This bill should be about taking the learnings of what we know about yesterday and applying them to what we think will be the best way to oversee the regulatory environment for the retail side of the electricity system and how it interacts with generation and transmission and distribution so that the system can be resilient with what we know is coming tomorrow.

What we know is coming in electricity is basically uncertainty and a very fast pace of change. In electricity things change quickly. The market is dynamic. Decarbonization via electrification means that technology, cost, business environment, all of those things, are very fast evolving.

There are tremendous opportunities in that dynamic space to reduce costs and therefore cost to consumers of all kinds: farm, residential, commercial, industrial. The context of this bill is, of course, the spike in costs of the regulated rate option, which began to spike in the summer of 2020 at an alarming rate. At that time annualized costs on the RRO went from about \$274 a year in 2017 to \$490 a year in 2020. The actual rate of the RRO spiked between 2020 and 2021. It went from about 6 cents a kilowatt hour in 2018, which was essentially the 10-year average before that: 6.8 cents, 6.9 cents per kilowatt hour. That is why up until 2019 electricity rates were capped at that 6.8 cents per kilowatt hour, because that had been the previous 10-year average.

4:10

In 2021 we saw the RRO go up to 7.96 cents per kilowatt hour, and then in 2023 we were looking at 23.89 cents per kilowatt hour. For anyone on the RRO, of course, there was an exodus in this intervening period off the RRO, and we can talk about that in a minute. When this legislation or legislation like it – maybe not exactly this legislation, because I'm not exactly sure what this accomplishes – should have come in was, rightfully, when we started to see this escalation. Anyway, the point here is that it went up considerably, and anyone who was left holding the bag on the RRO was left paying a massive bill.

I have constituents who would send me screen caps of their bill, and they just didn't understand what was going on. They were just, like, "Can you explain this to me?" And I was, like, "Okay; do you have a half an hour for the PhD dissertation?" because that's what it takes to explain how the deregulated market works. But, you know, welcome to the academic lecture on how to keep your bills low. People don't really want that, though, as it turns out, Madam Speaker. They just want an affordable electricity bill, and they shouldn't have to have an advanced degree in economics to understand how to make those choices to keep the lights on in their house.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Meanwhile the lowest cost generation continues to be pretty much between solar PV at the utility scale and gas peaking plants although solar PV at utility scale has now eclipsed the levelized cost of energy for natural gas peakers. Here I am referring to Lazard's levelized cost of energy analysis, version 16. This is the definitive source for levelized cost of energy, including capital and operations and maintenance. For many, many years now – I guess version 16 is probably 16 years old or so – Lazard has published basically a comparison between different generation sources.

You know, things range from, for example, your onshore wind at \$24 to \$75 a megawatt hour at an LCOE to a gas peaker between \$115 and \$221 per megawatt hour, so actually quite a bit more. Onshore wind is coming down every year, and natural gas is maintaining about the same. Then you have nuclear at \$141 to \$221. That's, well, a lot more than onshore wind, for example. And that cost of solar PV at utility scale is now from \$24 to \$96 per megawatt hour of energy. That has been the generation source that has come down the most rapidly and the most dramatically in the last decade.

Yeah, we often hear about the government's affection for coal. That's between \$68 and \$166 per megawatt hour although in the industrialized world there are not very many building new coal. Gas combined cycle: there are a bunch of different numbers here but basically between \$39 and \$101. You know, we would find kind of probably the mid-range of that here in Canada for when they are doing coal-to-gas conversions.

All this is to say that the lowest cost of generation – you know, when you are making the investments for generation, you want to recruit those capital investments off the rate base, which is, in fact, why the Market Surveillance Administrator in the summer of 2020 observed that companies should be allowed to do economic withholding so that they could pay off their cost of capital, which I don't love. I don't think that economic withholding is the right way in the extremes to go about this. That's sort of a side conversation, but that economic withholding does lead to price spikes for consumers. Nevertheless, your lowest cost generation is something that you want to bring onto the grid. At the end of the day, the people switching the lights on are going to pay less because the generators that have taken that risk and made those investments are going to need a lower cost pool price to be able to recover the cost of their investment.

So we have a low cost of energy that we could bring onto the grid in a responsible fashion in addition to natural gas generation in the queue and hydro pump storage and a few other ways that Alberta has some competitive advantage, but what happened to that low-cost generation, Mr. Speaker? Well, what happened is that the government interfered in the market with a Marxist flourish that would make Lenin blush. First, they told private property owners what they can do with their property. So much for the peaceful enjoyment of private property, so much for commerce, so much for estate planning and crop planning, maximizing value of one's own land. They interfered in the rule of law and in independent agencies.

Now, we know the Premier does have an affection for interfering in the Crown prosecution service and anyone who is doing something independently that she doesn't want them to do. We know she wants to break up the AESO. She wants to break them up into planning and regulatory functions. We know she has been serially disappointed in the Alberta Utilities Commission because they're a quasi-judicial body who have been pushing back on her direct political interference and regulatory processes. We know all those things.

But we also learned last week – we found out that the CEO of the system operator was forced, by pressure from the minister, to go tell the public a bunch of falsehoods about the moratorium on new low-cost generation. We know that the CEO of the system operator was asked to say things he did not believe were true. He was pressured to do so by the government-appointed board chair, who told him, in writing, that it would not be well received if he didn't agree publicly with the minister about the future of the electricity supply. Why would anyone make a final investment decision for anything, including low-cost new generation, under these circumstances?

Now, in a functioning democracy, Mr. Speaker, the minister would have had to resign. Here was clear evidence in e-mails, released under freedom of information, that the CEO of the AESO did not delete, which is interesting that he put all this in writing, that he did not agree with the minister's interference in the private sector's decision to place capital, that he did not agree with the business uncertainty he would create and the investor confidence he would undermine and the capital flight that the minister would be responsible for as companies chose a jurisdiction with a modicum of respect for the rule of law. That is the context for this bill.

It is a government that stood by during the early days of the pandemic and watched the RRO spike in the first instance – and there were some very simple things that could have been done even

without regulatory change – in the summer of 2020. The Utilities Consumer Advocate should have been empowered with an advertising campaign that made sure that people knew their options to get off the RRO, but instead the government did nothing. Instead of helping people get on those contracts, given it is that retail contracts require a credit rating that some people don't have or other requirements, for whatever reason – the government could have made some policy or other changes.

We were in the House, as I recall, in July of 2020 doing heaven knows what; I think it was a privatization of health care bill or something. The point here is that we could have gone back into any legislation to figure out how to extend credit products or make exemptions for some of these retail contracts for certain types of folks who could not access a retail contract.

There could have been some sort of public guarantee available. We could have had a policy that would help renters use rent paid on time as a way to otherwise prove good credit even though some of that's federal, could have waived the credit requirements for some types of consumers if we made regulatory change, could have worked with social agencies and housing authorities and immigration agencies to help people get on those contracts in a co-ordinated fashion, could have investigated economic withholding when the MSA reported in summer 2020 that it was A-okay, because it was clearly not, because it foreshadowed what was going to happen over the next two years, which is that spike from eight cents a kilowatt hour up to 23, 24. But instead of doing that, they let the problem get worse.

All of those were options open to the Kenney government right after the largest economic shock in recent memory, when people were feeling scared, they had just lost jobs, they were facing a tremendous amount of uncertainty. Instead of doing any of those things that may have helped, doing just simply the drumbeat of government, they did nothing, and now we have this.

4:20

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak to Bill 19?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question. The hon. Minister of Affordability and Utilities to close debate?

Mr. Neudorf: Waived.

The Acting Speaker: Waive that.

[Motion carried; Bill 19 read a second time]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I'll call the committee to order.

Bill 16 Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The Member for Calgary-North East.

Member Brar: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Before I begin talking about this bill, I would like to say that our thoughts are with the people who are being evacuated today. I hope that they get the supports they need, and I hope they get to return to their homes safely soon as it is not easy to get evacuated and leave the homes.

Mr. Chair, talking about this bill, the government that we have in Alberta at this point is heavily focused on grabbing the power

instead of governing efficiently, and we have seen this from the first day that they got elected, not only in this term but the previous one as well. They create chaos in the sectors which Albertans rely on, and then they try to fix those errors that they created, and then they pat themselves on their back to celebrate when they are fixing those errors.

That's exactly what this bill is trying to do, Mr. Chair. This bill is more about fixing UCP errors and less about red tape reduction. As my amazing and talented colleague from Calgary-Currie pointed out the other day about how this bill will impact the issues that matter to Albertans like mental health, similarly this bill impacts so many other things, which I will discuss going forward. In this bill they are repealing the ACTA regulation that they failed to proclaim for over five years to finally regulate mental health professionals. If this UCP government were focused on this issue five years ago, this issue would not have slipped their attention and we would not have been talking about this at this point. We would have been talking about so many other good things that could have helped Albertans.

But, unfortunately, Mr. Chair, you know what they were focused on five years ago? They were focused on giving billions of dollars to wealthy corporations and their corporate insiders. They were focused on cutting education funding, firing educational assistants, cutting the funding for kids with special needs. They were focused on cutting funding for health care, depriving our health care sector of the resources that they need. They were hiking tuition costs for the students going to universities, in some cases 30 per cent; in many cases they were even 100 per cent.

They were focused on lowering the wages for young Albertans who faced the double impact of their policies. One, their wages were lowered. They couldn't get enough money that they need to get the basic facilities they need. Secondly, once their wages were lowered, their tuition costs went up, which had a double impact on their lives, Mr. Chair.

Another thing that they did was that they cut AISH payments. They deindexed, which is a cut, and then they later tried to fix it, and then they tried to take credit for that. That shows that they create chaos, and then they try to fix it, and then they pat themselves on their back and they try to celebrate and they try to be the champion of the issues. That's the reality that we have seen in the past government and this current government.

These are just a few things that severely damage the social fabric of this province, that damage those departments on which Albertans heavily rely on. Currently what we are seeing is the lowest education funding per student in Canada. We are seeing that rents are going out of the roof. We are seeing utility and insurance costs skyrocketing in Alberta. We are seeing grocery prices going up, and what this government is doing is basically nothing.

All they have done so far is pick fights with the municipalities. All they have done so far is pick fights with the federal government. All they believe is that things should either go their way or the highway. Like, that's not how things work, Mr. Chair. It is the responsibility of any government to work with all other levels of government even when they don't agree based on their ideology, but unfortunately we are not seeing this happening.

As my colleague from Calgary today pointed out, when there was the NDP government, at the federal level it was the Liberal government, even before it was the Conservative government, and it was our Leader of the Official Opposition who worked hard – at that point she was Premier – to work with all those levels of government without grabbing power. She forced the federal government to buy the pipeline that had been started and will help Alberta sell its natural resources to the world.

Mr. Chair, that's what leadership is. That's how the government should work. That's how the government has worked under the

NDP. We tried to work with all levels of government when we were in government, but we are not seeing that happening at this point in Alberta, and that's unfortunate. That's not what Albertans demand from this government.

This government is heavily focused on grabbing power from municipalities. The cutting of the low-income transit pass that happened and that this government had to take back, you know, and we have seen recently the Premier and this government justifying the actions of police in the universities on a peaceful protest of students: these are just a few examples that this government is focused on instead of focusing on the issues that matter to Albertans.

Now imagine what this government could do if they have their own police force that they're trying to bring in. They are focused on getting Alberta out of the Canada pension plan, an Alberta pension plan which they never ran on, and they removed salary limits for their friends on boards. They removed the gift limits for themselves. These are just a few things that they have done that I have seen happening in this House, and unfortunately none of these things have helped Albertans.

They did this all without consulting with Albertans. Similarly, many things have been put forward in the bill without consulting with Albertans, and that's the serious issue that we need to discuss. In this bill this government is asking the College of Alberta Psychologists to regulate counsellors, but the question is: has this government or has the minister consulted with those people who are being impacted? No, Mr. Chair. We haven't seen any kind of consultation happening. CAP lacks resources at this point, and this government knows that. It's not news to them. They already know about it, but the UCP has done nothing to address the lack of resources for CAP. The UCP must step up and provide the resources they need so that they can function properly.

4:30

Why I say this, Mr. Chair, is because the UCP's track record on health care is not something that can be trusted. UCP draws their inspiration from ultra right-wing Chicago Boys ideology, the ideology of Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan, the ideology of cutting the funding and reducing health care, and then people get upset, and then they try to privatize it. That's the three-step process that they follow to privatize health care and other public institutions. They tried that with Alberta lab services in Calgary, and that failed.

Mr. Chair, the Premier promised to fix health care in 90 days. She said this about two years ago, if I'm not wrong. She didn't fix that. Instead, we have seen the Alberta health board torn up, and their insiders and their people that belong to their ideology are getting chairs on those boards. Albertans are relying at this point on hallway medicine and motel medicine. That's not what Albertans deserve. That's not what Albertans voted for.

The UCP continues to impact the Income and Employment Supports Act under this bill, and the IE act will be impacted under section 6(2)(a) and (b). Let me share some details on that as well, Mr. Chair. This is a change in the IE act where they change the definition of who is included, and it seems to me that it makes access more restrictive. The amendment takes out both the McCullough Centre and recognized shelters for people escaping abuse, leaving it more to the discretion of the minister on what organizations would qualify. The rest of the IE program has a different system which also accounts for the number of children. So there are so many things that are impacted under this bill, and unfortunately none of this has been consulted with these people.

In this bill the UCP also repealed the Rural Electrification Loan Act and the Rural Electrification Long-term Financing Act. These are the

two acts that will be impacted under this bill. Again, we have seen the record of UCP of consulting the issues that matter to rural municipalities, rural communities. They are worried about policing in those rural communities, and they try to say that people on this side of the aisle don't care about rural Alberta. That's completely not true. We do care about all Albertans. Whether they live in Calgary, whether they live in Edmonton or other big cities like Lethbridge, we care about all Albertans. It doesn't matter where their postal code is. We care because they are humans. They are the most precious asset of this province. We care about all Albertans, and any claims that the members on the other side make about rural versus urban kind of municipalities are completely not true. Their politics are based on division. Their politics are based on these kind of wedges, which on this side of the House all MLAs do not agree with, and we stand up for all Albertans.

Let me share something about small businesses, that they also claim that they care deeply about. That is also not true. They say that they care about small businesses, but when it comes to the real test, Mr. Chair, they have failed not once; they have failed many times. Beginning this year, small businesses were supposed to pay back CEBA loans, and Alberta businesses were struggling. Their sales were not at the pre-pandemic level. There were all kinds of reports that were available to this UCP government that proved that, and we met with so many small businesses in Alberta. They shared the same concern.

Unfortunately, this UCP government did nothing. On this side of the House, being the small-business critic, I also proposed to this UCP government that they could use ATB to provide the loans to small businesses that could have helped them to pay the CEBA loan and save \$20,000, Mr. Chair. But, unfortunately, this UCP government continued to pick fights with the federal government instead of helping the struggling small businesses right here in Alberta. Those small businesses were not just in Calgary and Edmonton. Those small businesses were in rural communities as well, that they claim that they care about.

In the previous four years, five years we have seen from this UCP government that they have cut health care funding, which has impacted more rural communities than urban communities. Again, that shows that the members on the other side don't care about Albertans. All they care about is the wedge between the rural communities and the urban communities. That's not true, Mr. Chair. Unfortunately, we are seeing a government that is heavily focused on a power grab.

Let me also share some stories about what small-business owners are saying, what their priorities are, and what this government is not doing to address those priorities. I met with a small-business owner in my constituency, and that small-business owner works in the construction industry. He said that folks in the construction industry are struggling to find work. Being an MLA, being the representative of that small-business owner and that individual, I met with that person and asked, "What can I do, or what can members on our side do to help those small businesses?" He said, "You can pass on a simple message to this government that they can begin building more schools in Calgary-North East." They can begin building more hospitals in Calgary-North East, and . . .

Mr. Williams: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called by the Deputy Government House Leader.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Williams: Mr. Chair, I've been listening diligently to the speech at hand, and it's fascinating though not at all related to red

tape reduction in Bill 16. As we continue to hear more and more about funding in health care and schools in Calgary-North East, I cannot wait to get back to the matter at hand, which is seizing the attention of those at home, of red tape reduction in Bill 16.

The Deputy Chair: The Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I disagree with the Deputy Government House Leader. I have also been listening intently to my colleague on the debate around Bill 16. I would note that Bill 16, as well as being the eighth red tape reduction bill, is also a relatively large omnibus bill that touches on a number of things, including income and employment supports, a number of different acts. As a wide-ranging bill it makes sense that my member's comments are also wide ranging. I do not think that there is a point of order here, and I hope that my member is allowed to continue.

The Deputy Chair: I will not consider this a point of order at this time. I do believe that the member needs to really focus on the bill at hand, but as the Opposition House Leader has referred to, it is covering many aspects in the bill, so I will concur with the Opposition House Leader and ask the member to proceed.

Debate Continued

Member Brar: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Let me tell you something relevant to this bill. The bill would double the length of the Red Tape Reduction Act from 480 words to 849 words and add 17 new regulatory requirements. I hope this satisfies the members on the other side, how this bill will impact Albertans and how this bill will impact red tape reduction. They care about red tape reduction, but they don't care about the issues that matter to Albertans.

Before I was talking about the issues that matter to Albertans, and what the members on the other side want to talk about is anything else other than the issues that impact Albertans. The reason I sit in this Assembly is because I get to represent the people that I meet on a regular basis in my constituency, so I'll share the story that I was talking about.

I met with a small-business owner in my constituency who is a construction worker, and, as I was telling, he wanted me to convey the simple message to the members on the other side that they need to build more schools instead of bringing in Bill 18, Bill 20, and all those unnecessary bills. His job and his income rely on the jobs that he's not getting because they are not building more schools, they are not building more hospitals in the community. This is something that they need to look at. He said that all the bills that the UCP is bringing do not help him. His insurance has gone up, his utilities have gone up, his fuel has gone up because of the fuel tax that this UCP government introduced, and they have all skyrocketed. He was upset that his university-going son needed to pay higher tuition costs under this UCP government.

4:40

I met with another constituent, Mr. Chair, and he shared the same kind of issues with me, that this is not the government that he voted for, this is not the government that he deserves. I request that all the members vote against bills 11, 12, 18, 20, and all the bills that have nothing to do with helping Albertans.

With that, Mr. Chair, thank you for giving me the time to share my views on this.

The Deputy Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to Bill 16, Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act? The Member for Calgary-Currie.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to be able to speak in committee today in regard to Bill 16, the Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. As my colleague just rightly pointed out, there are 17 sections of this act, touching on everything from surface rights to libraries, Commercial Tenancies Protection Act, and indeed the Mental Health Services Protection Act, and it's that particular section that I'd like to speak to today.

Since having the honour of being elected almost one year ago, Mr. Chair, I have had the opportunity to work with a really wonderful group of stakeholders on this particular file. The leadership of the Association of Counselling Therapy of Alberta has just been amazing to work with. They have been such an incredibly hard-working and diligent group of stakeholders and working for years – five years and more – on this particular issue. I really do tip my hat to the leadership, to the board, to all of the members of ACTA for their incredible work that they have done, sometimes side of desk, very much unpaid, and in good faith with the understanding that all of that effort and all of those resources and all of that time wasn't for naught, that it was being done in the belief that all of that work would culminate in a college of counselling therapy to ensure that counselling therapists would finally be regulated in the province of Alberta to ensure that the people accessing those services were guaranteed value and safety and assurance of practice with a level of oversight and commitment that both brought legitimacy to the practice and also safety to the public. My compliments to all of the work of the Association of Counselling Therapy.

Just a few months ago, Mr. Chair, there was a change announced from the minister opposite to let us know that this government would choose to take a different tack, being that the Association of Counselling Therapy would no longer be the precursor to a college of counselling therapy but, rather, that moves would be made to bring counselling therapists under the umbrella of the College of Alberta Psychologists. Now, in the last few months I have also had the opportunity to get to know the leadership at CAP. Similarly, I really do look forward to advocating where appropriate, where it is, in fact, helpful to ensure that this work can continue along, because one thing that has become abundantly clear is that the leadership of both of these very important stakeholder groups share the same objective, and that is to bring the utmost assurance of safety and practice and quality of practice to Albertans. That time and that kind of oversight and regulation is long overdue.

I want to make sure that I'm prefacing any further comments with that as a very major condition, that ACTA and CAP are both deeply committed to moving that process forward on behalf of Albertans, on behalf of the individuals that they may one day have the privilege to serve.

I've got only the very roughest numbers at the top of my head in terms of the actual membership that we're talking about here, but at latest count there were more than 4,000 counselling therapists operating in Alberta, again, with no degree of oversight or regulation for their practice. These are individuals with a great deal of education, with a great deal of expertise, and it is high time that we treat them with the legitimacy that that sector deserves. ACTA and CAP and, I think, everybody on this side of the Chamber would all agree that that time is upon us.

But, as I mentioned, up until, you know, relatively recently all of that work had taken place in good faith that the government would in fact move ahead with this gesture, but they have not. Multiple Health ministers gave their green light, gave ACTA their blessing to continue forward with engaging of members. I've already had the opportunity here and the real privilege to submit a petition with thousands of signatures supporting this move. The initial legislation was passed with unanimous consent in 2019, yet somehow 18, 24 months ago things changed, and it really did hit a bit of a wall. I

think that that's very unfortunate given the amount of resourcing and the effort that had already been applied.

Counselling therapists contributed over \$1.2 million toward building the college as well as thousands of volunteer hours, Mr. Chair. They did this work while the government kind of waffled and hemmed and hawed on whether or not this was actually something that they wanted to deal with, which ministry was going to be responsible for doing that. Ultimately, this does fall under the green light of the Health Professions Act, but there is a great deal of work to be done before that. I think that's something that is incredibly important as we move forward with this new kind of journey that the government has now, you know, set ACTA upon when it comes to identifying CAP as the regulatory college.

Bill 16 suggests, proposes to repeal the piece of legislation that can facilitate the creation of a college of counselling therapy. Now, I think, unfortunately, that this is a terribly premature decision, because we take that section of what was initially in the Health Statutes Amendment Act of 2020 off the books, and where does it leave us? Where does it leave ACTA? Where does it leave the regulation of counselling therapists? I have already stood up to say: where does it, certainly, leave addictions counsellors and child and youth care counsellors, who are not included in this transition to the college of psychologists in any way?

Certainly, this is going to be a reorientation, and it's one that stakeholders are game for. I really hope that this government is equally keen to advance this in as expedited a way as possible. But we look at some of the figures that have already been spent by the association of counselling therapists, \$1.2 million to get them to where they are now, and we see now that a new transition for ACTA to the college of psychologists has yet to be resourced by this government. This is not an undertaking to happen side of desk. It requires significant planning, staging, onboarding, some very important questions around self-regulation, around grandparenting.

On that note, I want to just add a couple of other mentions here. Again, this is not a simple thing. There is a great deal of complexity. We have a number of social workers in our caucus who were right there on the front lines when it came to forming a college of social work. They can attest to what a significant endeavour this actually is. It requires a lot of time, and it requires a lot of money.

Speaking again to the complexity, you know, it has been raised and brought to my attention that it is customary that when a new profession is regulated, the education standards set for those newly entering the field are not to be applied retroactively to the current workforce. It is essential that the public continue to receive and access counselling services with the protection provided under the HPA, the Health Professions Act, that future risk is mitigated by upholding the education and training standards set today for those entering the field, and that current risk is reduced by grandparenting counselling therapists working in the field today who have acquired a minimum level of competencies.

You know, I don't know exactly where this is going to land with the college of psychologists, but these are the very meaty and tough questions that are going to have to be kind of sorted through by the individuals responsible for that undertaking. It is not going to be fast, it is not going to be cheap, but what we certainly know is that this process can't be slowed down any further. They have already waited five years, Mr. Chair. I don't think Albertans have the patience, nor should they be asked, to wait another five years to get some basic assurances that the services that they are paying for are, in fact, what they are going to get in return.

4:50

On the self-regulation front, a simple piece here around counselling therapists regulating themselves so that it's not psychologists who are

setting the kind of standards of practice or all of those multiple facets that are required here and that, in fact, it's counselling therapists who hold equal weight around the decision-making table so that they are making decisions. The people who best understand the sector are those who are, in fact, in it, and they need to be the ones who are in fact regulating themselves, again, within the umbrella of the College of Alberta Psychologists. That is certainly a move that is being done in other jurisdictions where there are fewer colleges, not more, where colleges are in fact regulating a number of different professions, but one can imagine that the logistics, the liability undertakings that that college, then, is volunteering to take on require some due diligence, require some regimented planning, and that is certainly going to require some resourcing.

Without any further ado, Mr. Chair, I will probably leave it at that. Once again, my compliments to ACTA, my compliments to CAP on what I hope is going to be a very fruitful and expedited endeavour to ensure that counselling therapists in Alberta are in fact regulated and assured the legitimacy and the protections that everybody else working in the care industry ought to have.

I look forward to speaking with this government about how we can make sure that addictions counsellors and child and youth care counsellors come next. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak to Bill 16?

Are you ready for the question on Bill 16, Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024?

[The clauses of Bill 16 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

Bill 19

Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Deputy Chair: Are there any members wishing to make comment? I will recognize the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you. I just want to address the House that Bill 19 is one more step forward in Alberta seeking to find affordability for all Albertans. This is on top of the over \$700,000 we spent last year to inform Albertans about the rates that they're on, on top of the nearly \$1 billion we spent in 2022 for the electricity rebate program. This bill seeks to reduce costs for the local access fee and raise awareness on the RRO, now to be renamed the rate of last resort. It is the beginning of much more work that we seek to do, whether that's demand-side management, time-of-use rates, transmission regulations, or the restructuring of the energy market.

I look forward to the debate in this Chamber.

The Deputy Chair: The Member for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Premier has made it clear from the start that our government will always put Albertans first, and I'm incredibly proud of the work that this government is doing to lower the cost of utility bills for Albertans, including small businesses and farms. Bill 19 is yet another example of how our government is putting Albertans first.

Mr. Chair, it's no secret that electricity in Alberta has unique complexities. However, I would have expected the members opposite to at least have an adequate understanding of how our utility market works, but that just doesn't seem to be the case. For example, last week the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie gave a passionate but very ill-informed member's statement. It seems that that member was mistaken, because what he was asking for is exactly what we are already doing, which is ensuring that we do have dispatchable baseload capacity that's available when we need it. That's called natural gas, not wind and solar, like he suggested. He said, quote: we don't need production running at all times. Well, that member should know that renewables are not dispatchable, and in fact we do need baseload power running at all times to meet Albertans' needs. Based on how the NDP ran the province, economics is not their strong suit.

As someone passionate about ensuring folks are well informed, I'd like to take this opportunity to dispel some of the misconceptions that the members opposite have and explain to them how Alberta's electricity market actually works. To quote the members opposite, Bill 19 "is just scratching the surface." While Bill 19 addresses a few specific parts of the electricity system, everything is interconnected, and that's why we're reviewing all aspects of Alberta's electricity system as we work to help lower Albertans' utility bills.

Since the members opposite seem to be unaware, our government has already taken action to lower utility bills and protect Alberta's ratepayers through Bill 19 by lowering and stabilizing local access fees as well as ensuring Albertans are better informed about their electricity options by renaming the default electricity rate to be the rate of last resort. As well, Mr. Chair, we are restricting the practice of economic withholding through a new market power mitigation regulation, which is estimated to save Albertans over a billion dollars on their power bills over the next few years.

We are also enabling innovative solutions such as proactive distribution planning, energy storage, and on-site generation and self-supply with export by proclaiming the Electricity Statutes (Modernizing Alberta's Electricity Grid) Amendment Act, 2022. We are providing Albertans with information and support through the Utilities Consumer Advocate. We are announcing plans to restructure Alberta's electricity market to support long-term affordability, and, Mr. Chair, we have provided Albertans with nearly a billion dollars in monthly rebates directly to their power bills through the electricity rebate program. We are doing the work that the NDP failed to do.

I consistently hear from members opposite that the government is, quote, banning renewables when that's obviously not the case. There are currently over 3,300 megawatts of wind and solar projects under construction, and eight renewable generation projects have already been approved by the AUC this year. If they won't listen to members on this side of the House, perhaps they'll take it from the NDP leadership candidate that many of them have endorsed. Mr. Nenshi corrected the record just two weeks ago and said, quote: I've heard you say it many times, but you know there's no ban at the moment. He went on to say, quote: we should be honest with people and say that the ban isn't there anymore.

Mr. Chair, it's disingenuous to claim that there is a ban on renewables, and I think the members opposite know that. The NDP put renewables on a pedestal, claiming that they are some sort of silver bullet to lower utility bills while at the same time conveniently ignoring that it was the NDP government's policies for renewables that contributed massively to why utility bills have increased so drastically in the past decade. Because we went from only a few reliable coal power plants to hundreds of renewables scattered across the province and because the AESO is obligated to

connect these generators to the grid regardless of cost, transmission and distribution costs have skyrocketed on Albertans' utility bills, thanks to the NDP failing to ensure responsible development. These NDP policies caused transmission and distribution costs to increase by more than 500 per cent, which are paid almost entirely by consumers. The NDP had failed to recognize that their electricity policies were a disaster, and they continue to fail to bring forward realistic solutions.

Mr. Chair, I also regularly hear the members opposite promoting every single nonemitting generation source except for nuclear. I truly wonder why they explicitly exclude nuclear when nuclear is clearly a reliable, emission-free solution. That's interesting. Perhaps it's simply an oversight. However, I think that the obvious answer is to look once again at the fact that the NDP would rather support their corporate friends in the renewable industry than put Albertans first. That's no surprise considering that the NDP has continuously defended bad actor corporations this session, even going as far as to protest the fact that we are no longer allowing corporations to build industrial developments in front of UNESCO heritage sites. Shame.

On top of this, economic withholding only became an issue because the NDP's accelerated coal phase-out significantly reduced baseload supply. Unlike the members opposite, our government has taken action to limit economic withholding. Mr. Chair, while many of us were not in this Chamber at the time, it's astounding that the members opposite would look back at the NDP's electricity train wreck and think it's something to boast about, especially considering the fact that we're still dealing with the consequences of their poor policy to the tune of \$100 million a year. In 2023 Alberta saw 92 per cent of all renewables investment in this country, and to be clear, that is thanks to our energy-only deregulated market. In every other province renewables can only be built at the request of that government. Considering that, Alberta is effectively the only market open for business in Canada.

5:00

Mr. Chair, I heard the Member for Calgary-Glenmore claim that we are making these decisions from a place of, quote, urban privilege, which completely fails to recognize that on this side of the House we are the party that represents rural Alberta. Our constituents deserve to have their say about developments in their community just like urban Albertans. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have never seen a wind turbine the size of the Calgary Tower being developed in the backyards of Calgarians or Edmontonians. What I have seen, though, are dayslong council meetings where Calgarians line up to tell their city council that five-storey apartment complexes are too tall for the residential neighbourhoods. Let me be clear. Our government policies on renewables address the requests of Albertans, the people that we represent.

Now, the NDP point out the fact that ensuring renewable development is responsible has the potential to limit municipalities' revenues. However, just like with local access fees, it is never appropriate for a municipality to rake in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue at the expense of Albertans. To quote the reeve of the municipal district of Pincher Creek, Rick Lemire: it's important to us, the money, but it's the residents that we are looking after. Now, bear in mind that the MD of Pincher Creek is home to a significant portion of the province's renewable development and received over 30 per cent of their 2022 revenue from renewables. However, Mr. Lemire said that people in his area would rather pay higher land taxes than see more wind turbines. Now, I suppose I shouldn't have expected the NDP to actually have consulted with rural Albertans to understand their perspectives, considering the whole Bill 6 debacle, but it's astonishing how the NDP continue to

claim that they know better than rural Albertans about what our rural communities need.

The same goes for the changes to the local access fee formula. I am shocked that any member of this House would oppose changes to Calgary's local access fee formula, yet one of the members opposite did. Considering she represents Calgarians, I would expect, at a bare minimum, that she would understand that her own constituents want and deserve lower, more fair local access fees, but if she wants to continue to advocate for the city of Calgary to collect hundreds of millions of dollars off the backs of struggling Calgarians – that's \$303 million in fees for 2023 alone – then be my guest. We'll see how constituents feel about that at the ballot box.

Mr. Chair, like with every other aspect I mentioned, the members opposite don't seem to understand how our electricity market works. They claim that our policies will reduce the number of Albertans on the default electricity rate and lament the exodus of Albertans on the RRO. Well, let's be clear. Yes, we do want people to get off the RRO and should celebrate the hundreds of thousands of Albertans who have already done so. I know they didn't look at the numbers for their 2023 platforms costed budget, but I strongly encourage them to actually look at the numbers here. Alberta has seen historic population growth in the past year, which has off-set the number of people leaving the default rate.

Mr. Chair, I don't want to belabour this debate much longer, but what I do want to know is: whose side are the NDP on? It is certainly not the side of Albertans.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The Member for Calgary-Glenmore to speak.

Ms Al-Guneid: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is a pleasure to rise again and speak on Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. It was fun and interesting to listen to the passionate conversation here. I'm glad the political staffer helped in writing that.

Mr. Williams: Point of order.

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Chair, I do appreciate the intent . . .

The Deputy Chair: A point of order has been called.

Point of Order Decorum

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, I remember the Opposition House Leader rising to exactly this point when I made a similar comment earlier trying to draw staffing into the conversation. I would ask the member opposite to please withdraw. It doesn't befit decorum in this House, and I ask that going forward, we respect the words spoken by our colleagues elected to this Chamber.

Ms Al-Guneid: I apologize for that comment. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Apology accepted. You can proceed.

Debate Continued

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Chair, I do appreciate the intention of clarifying the term "regulated" in the RRO name to Albertans. For years this name has suggested that it is a stable price, that it is a regulated price, but it was anything but that. The name has always been misleading, so I do appreciate the name change.

In fact, it seems that this is not the first attempt at changing the name. I've shared this with the minister, too. Back in 2014 the PC

government of the day introduced Bill 201, the Electric Utilities (Transparency In Billing) Amendment Act. That was back in 2014. The government of the day asked the commission to provide recommendations to improve transparency in the billing of customers and the format of bills sent to customers. The bill was also going to replace the term “regulated rate” with “variable market rate,” which is probably more accurate, actually.

It’s interesting because the Minister of Municipal Affairs was part of the PC cabinet back in 2014. He could have done something about the RRO by moving this bill along, but nothing really materialized with that bill. The Minister of Municipal Affairs kept telling us multiple times that changing the RRO calculation and the local access fee is an example of why the UCP needs Bill 20. Again, it’s surprising because he was a minister when Bill 201 was introduced in 2014, passed three readings, and received royal assent on December 17, 2014. As a member of cabinet and as a former municipal councillor the current Minister of Municipal Affairs could have done something about the RRO. Bill 20 never existed back then because at least that government respected our democracy.

Now, I’m not going to hash out what happened to Bill 201 back in 2014, Mr. Chair. I want to focus on the intention of Bill 19, which will pave the way to creating regulations at some point to create default plans through hedging or procuring for two years in advance. I think it is a reasonable thing to do because many Albertans don’t look at their electricity bills often or don’t have the time or interest to shop for better rates, so having a default price can be effective.

But, again, the timing of this change is late. The UCP are essentially closing the barn door after the horses have bolted. Electricity expert Blake Shaffer wrote about this and actually said, “Making these changes now, especially in the name of affordability, is a little like showing up to a streetfight and telling your bloodied friend: ‘I’ve got your back!’ . . . The crisis has passed. The time for [these] changes was 3 years ago,” when Albertans were paying some of the highest electricity prices in the country and in Alberta’s history. As the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West called it, solving yesterday’s problems tomorrow. I think that was really accurate.

Not only that, but Albertans on the RRO are still paying the price cap that the UCP government put in place. We still don’t know what the government will do about that. I would like to understand what will happen with that debt. The UCP put a 13.5 cent cap back in early 2023. It came with a hefty price tag, around \$200 million, and that’s being repaid by all remaining RRO customers until December 2024. As the government encourages Albertans to get off the RRO, the number of customers over which that cost gets spread will dwindle. We had expected the government to pay the cap debt, but they haven’t. We need to understand whether they plan to pay that debt off or not.

Not many people have the privilege and luxury to get out of the RRO. I said this before, and I say it again: the most vulnerable will stay on the RRO rate – the ones with harder socioeconomic backgrounds, the newcomers with no credit history in our country, the ones with lower credit scores – and they will not qualify because many utility companies require credit scores.

5:10

Under the new rate, the rate of the last resort, these vulnerable Albertans will face the same challenge. They still cannot change their rate to other competitive rates. They would be stuck with that rate. This is the problem, Mr. Chair. Some Albertans who benefit from the cap can flee these rates and avoid the cost, leaving the most vulnerable covering the burden.

Another unclear part of this bill is the duration risk, Mr. Chair. We still don’t have details on how the rate of last resort will be a fixed rate for two years. We will assume that when government kicks off this new rate on day one, this two-year rate of last resort should be similar to the competitive retail rates. Now, what if the default rate is actually stuck there for two years? We have two scenarios here. The first scenario: the prices rise. The default rate of last resort remains lower than the market. Albertans will rush to lock in, leaving any floating options and new customers selecting the default. The default provider is now underhedged and loses money.

Now, the second scenario is that prices fall and the default rate now remains higher than the market. Customers leave, fleeing to floating plans or now cheaper competitive fixed rates. The default provider is overhedged and loses money. So in both cases the default provider loses money, and this is called duration risk in mortgage markets. The question remains: who will cover that loss? Will Albertans be charged to recover those losses on all bills or not? My concern is that this loss will be covered by Albertans, adding more cost to people and especially the most vulnerable, Mr. Chair.

Now, we need to zoom out of the minutiae here and talk about the challenges in the electricity sector as a whole. The electricity system will evolve to be the backbone of the future energy system. To limit global temperature increases, a range of scenarios shows that global final energy consumption must shift from 20 per cent to 50-70 per cent electricity by 2050. That’s based on many scenarios. This is a massive economy transformation and will require a fulsome reimagining of our energy systems, but this is the government that imposed a moratorium on renewables. This is the government halting new low-cost, low-emission energy supply from entering the market during that moratorium.

It is well known that increasing competition in the market is key to reducing electricity prices and addressing the affordability crisis this government has presided over in Alberta. In fact, Mr. Chair, I found this gem on the Alberta Electric System Operator’s year in review. It was just published a couple of weeks ago. I quote from the AESO’s report, that in 2023

the annual average pool price for wholesale electricity . . . fell approximately 18 per cent from 2022 to \$133.63/megawatt hour (MWh). One of the drivers for the lower price was increased competition in the energy market from new wind and solar generation.

Mr. Chair, it is unconscionable that this government has first banned renewables, then imposed vague and arbitrary rules on low-cost energy supply, causing massive uncertainty in a booming renewables sector and causing massive instability. We have known all along that the renewables moratorium was a political decision, and FOIP documents finally confirmed that this ban was not requested by the AESO, like the Premier had claimed. Last week, however, there is this new character that entered this constantly shifting story, the AESO board chair. The Premier is now telling us that she had a chat with the board chair, who was appointed by the UCP, and the next thing we know is a renewables ban with zero consultation with experts and industry and cancellations of multibillion-dollar projects in Alberta. Did the Premier unilaterally decide this ban with her senior adviser at the Premier’s office? We know that Take Back Alberta delegates voted against renewables at the UCP AGM. We wouldn’t have seen TransAlta’s project cancellation if it wasn’t for the UCP’s political interference. The loss of municipal revenue from these projects in rural Alberta would have helped pay for services and helped the rural economy and improved affordability for Albertans.

The question is: how much municipal revenue in rural Alberta is the Premier willing to sacrifice for her upcoming leadership

review? It must be the urban privilege, ruling from the comfortable chair of the Premier's office in Edmonton. Where is the minister of red tape reduction who is allowing all this red tape, the moratorium, the terrible and new red tape added to build renewable projects? Yesterday he claimed he reduced red tape by 33 per cent, but how about the 1,000 per cent increase in red tape in the renewables sector? But I digress, Mr. Chair.

Again, I do think Bill 19 is just scratching the surface, and while I do appreciate the clarity around the name and the hedging element to it to provide stability in the long term, it is still missing the forest for the trees. The damage and the policy uncertainty happening right now in our electricity sector will take years to fix. The government needs to focus on restoring investors' confidence in our province and to attract low-cost energy and low-cost technologies.

Nevertheless, I will be supporting this bill, Mr. Chair. I thank the Minister of Affordability and Utilities for his work on this bill. I do thank him for his engagement and conversations with me as well, and I encourage the government to find solutions for the questions and the unintended consequences I shared. Will the government cover the cap price debt to protect the most vulnerable, who will remain on the RRO? Will they find solutions for the duration risk, and who will be paying for that loss? I hope it's not Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any others wishing to make comments? The Minister of Municipal Affairs has risen.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this bill and just correct some of what we heard. I think the member made a comment about a bill. It was Bill 201, which the NDP repealed, I understand, when they were in government, but that's not the only mistake I heard.

Well, actually some of what the member said was correct, but it was out of context. I think the member talked about a previous government in 2014, when I was minister and made no effort to repeal RRO rules. Well, there's a reason for that, Mr. Chair. The RRO rules were fine then because back then electricity was 3 cents a kilowatt hour until the NDP put their mitts on it in 2015. And then after a couple of years of messing up the market and causing things to go through the roof by prematurely ending coal, the price was up closer to a dime. At that point, from 3 cents per kilowatt hour for electricity when they started, they actually thought they were doing Albertans a favour by capping it at about 8 cents, tripling the price. They said: what heroes we are; we tripled your price, and we capped it at that tripled price; how great are we? That's the NDP. That's how they win. That's how they say they win, anyway. That's what the member failed to mention, the fact that the NDP messed up this market so badly that was so stable and so affordable for so long, and they actually botched the job. Like most of the jobs that they had when they were in government, they messed up the electricity market that badly.

Yeah. Nobody tried to fix the RRO. The RRO wasn't a problem until the folks across the aisle got their mitts on the market and got their mitts on the government and actually made everything in Alberta work more poorly, less affordable. It didn't make sense. The Balancing Pool was in balance, and now they're still paying millions of dollars over years to make up for the mistakes that the NDP made. Mr. Chair, I'll keep it short, but let's just say that's just a small portion of the many, many mistakes they made over there during their – wait for it – one term in office, the only government that got fired after one term in office in the entire history of Alberta.

5:20

The Deputy Chair: Any other comments?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question on bill – the Minister of Affordability and Utilities has risen.

Mr. Neudorf: Sorry, Mr. Chair. I did want to add just a couple of very quick comments. Just for a little bit more context, Bill 201 was brought forward by a Wildrose member in opposition in 2014. It was passed. While being proclaimed, it was repealed in 2018. While I wish I could have done a lot more work a lot faster, the legislative sitting session doesn't always match the weather schedule, and we were moving as quickly as we could to get the legislation in place to help with that.

The members opposite did ask a little bit about the cap and deferral program. That ends at the end of this year. Currently there are somewhere just over 500,000 individuals in Alberta who are on the regulated rate option paying off the last of that deferred debt, which was at its peak just over \$220 million. It is now down to \$107 million. It is anticipated, if you do the math – we're almost halfway through the year – that we're over halfway paid off. Each individual on that only has an additional 2 and a half to 4 cents per kilowatt hour on that, so it is a minor increase on that.

Again, they are encouraged to seek out other rates that will work better for them. They have the Utilities Consumer Advocate to help them do that. That debt, if there is anything left at the end of this year before Bill 19, should it be passed, comes into effect on January 1 – it would be then up to the government, our ministry as well as Treasury Board to decide what to do with anything left, but at this point it is not anticipated that there will be any debt left.

There were comments about the length of hedging period and that someone would have to pay that difference. Right now that's how the market works anyways; retailers take that risk in the deferral product. They're only allowed to hedge up to three months, which is why they can't pass very much savings on to those rates. If the rate changes within those three months, they take that risk themselves. Right now we are actually allowing them to spread that risk over a longer period of time so they can recover that cost. People will still move in and out, so we think that will be much safer. That is part of the beauty and challenge of a private market.

One last comment that I will make as well: the generation cost of renewables is low. That is not what they're paid; that is not how our market is structured right now. They get paid the clearing house's strike price, which means that that benefit of having very, very low-cost generation isn't being passed on to consumers, particularly when it's off-set by lack of generation hours and prices peak, which we've seen, that volatility increase, which is why the average price over 2023 was almost triple what it was in previous years, because of that volatility.

Renewables have never been the enemy. Their intermittency is a unique challenge that needs to be corrected with our market design, because volatility adds cost to the consumer. We are still building renewables. In 2022 there were 16 projects approved, in 2023 there were 10, and already in 2024, only halfway through the year, there have been eight projects approved. We are still building the most renewable projects in all of Canada, and we are doing it while fixing our market structure.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Any other members wishing to make comments?

I see none. Are you ready for the question on Bill 19, Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024?

[The clauses of Bill 19 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Any opposed? That's carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Chair, I move that the committee rise and report on Bill 16 and Bill 19.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

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

Mr. Cyr: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bills: Bill 16 and Bill 19.

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

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. That is carried and so ordered.

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

(continued)

Bill 17

Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act

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

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to move third reading of Bill 17, Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act.

What I want to do in my first speech moving this legislation on third reading is to give a sense of the outline of the purpose of why we have this bill and what we hope to achieve with it.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Now, as you know, the bill would create the Canadian centre of recovery excellence, known as CORE for short. It is necessary legislation that will create an organization to conduct data analysis and research of mental health and addiction services in the province. We'll be looking at best practices and making policy recommendations and be able to evaluate current programming that is offered in the province of Alberta so that we can make improvements to our health care system specific to mental health and addiction, much like the Health Quality Council of Alberta is capable of doing within the health system.

I would argue that this is a good thing, Mr. Speaker, that can benefit Albertans as a whole as we build a health care system for mental health and addiction like no other government in Canada has ever seen. To do that we need to be reliant on the best possible evidence and data available internationally around research and academia and also the data information we see currently in our health care system but intersecting as well with Justice, intersecting as well with Seniors, Community and Social Services, intersecting as well with data across all government when it comes to dealing with what is probably one of the most challenging and contracted policy challenges that we face in the western world today.

In the past and up to this point we've relied upon recommendations made by the Mental Health and Addictions Advisory Council and by

the Recovery Expert Advisory Panel to build out Alberta's recovery-oriented system of care in the catalyst as we designed this policy. Each of these were made up of experts in the field, well-respected doctors, researchers, academics, medical professionals that looked at the evidence to advise our policy moving forward.

From this, we have committed to build out our treatment capacity at record rates, increasing publicly funded spaces by over 55 per cent since 2019. We adopted the recovery community model of care, and we'll build a total of 11 facilities of these therapeutic living communities across the province. Two of these are currently open, and I'm very pleased to share with the House that two more will be opening their doors later this year.

We have the world's best pathway for someone to access evidence-based medication for opioid addiction through the virtual opioid dependency program, a program that has been spearheaded here in Alberta, the envy of every other jurisdiction in Canada and the western world when it comes to access to opioid agonist therapy. The program has been expanded under our government to provide immediate, same-day access, evidence-based treatment, medication at no cost, no wait-lists, anywhere in Alberta.

Of course, this program and others are the sort of thing that we can do with good data and evidence as would be collected from CORE and its ability to look at research internationally. Of course, I want to highlight the removal of the \$1,240-a-month user fee for accessing addiction treatment, making services free and accessible to every Albertan no matter who you are or the state of life you find yourself in when you're suffering from that addiction.

Mr. Speaker, these are evidence-based policies that are making a difference in the lives of Albertans. The VODP, for example, is working with 8,000 Albertans currently on any given day to deliver its programming for evidence-based medication; 125 Albertans at any one given time are being treated in recovery communities in Red Deer and Lethbridge, not to mention the hundreds that passed through their doors and received treatment and graduated from the program. Thousands more are addressing detox and treatment in other facilities across the province.

To be clear, Mr. Speaker, the alternative to CORE, the alternative to an evidence-based, policy-making regime, the alternative to the Alberta recovery model is one that leaves in place what we've inherited as a society, a model that is not thoroughly based in evidence and one that does not truly appreciate the pain and suffering of leaving someone to stagnate in addiction instead of pulling them out or to leave them in a mental health challenge without the ability to have them live a fulfilled life in spite of those symptoms.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I'd like to close my opening speech, and I'm happy to respond in my closing speech to any other points brought up by members in the debate.

5:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Minister of Mental Health and Addiction has moved third reading of Bill 17, Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Member Ceci: Thank you very much. I, too, want to address – this is my first time addressing this in third reading. I do not share the optimism of the minister. I do not share that the alternative to treatment, as he has proposed, is disorganization and, it sounds like, ultimate death for people. That's not what we have, Mr. Speaker. We have a collection of approaches that we are learning from all the time, and the minister is talking about the recovery model that they're proposing that CORE will research and do more evidence-based work around. Well, there's more than the recovery model out there. I know that we have excellent service providers across this

province, across this nation, and we are in a process of trying to figure out what the best approach is.

In this 21-page act there are a number of issues I have with it going through, and I'll take some time to identify those now, Mr. Speaker. I think that this bill gives too much total power to the minister. He can direct the CEO and the chief science officer and the board, in fact – and I'll point those parts out in this bill – the way he wishes. He can dictate what they do, how they do it, and, frankly, that's not a best practice.

Mr. Speaker, when I was the Minister of Finance, under AGLC, which was under the ministry, there was research conducted around addictions and alcoholism in particular and probably now cannabis, but that was done by giving grant money to academics across the province, who worked to find out the actual situation with regard to alcoholism. They would propose policy, they would conduct research, and they would share that information with AGLC, and then AGLC would use that information to better enhance the service provision to the people who are providing, selling alcohol across the province.

What I'm suggesting is that there's another way to do this, and it doesn't have to be the creation of this CORE, which reminds me very much like the – I think it's called the Canadian Energy Centre, but most people know it by its more familiar name, the energy war room. Mr. Speaker, the blatant missteps that that centre has taken in the number of years they've existed, you know, would be numerous. Out of the gate they had numerous problems, and they continue to have problems. The \$30 million annually that go towards that, many people see as a significant, huge waste. The Canadian Energy Centre and this Canadian centre of recovery excellence: they mimic each other in that regard, the Canadian centres and all that.

I would like to focus on many things that are problematic here. For instance, just on page 5 of this mandate and activities:

- (d) providing provincial, national and international leadership on
 - (ii) recovery-oriented systems for providing services to individuals with mental health and addiction issues.

As I said, research and evaluating the outcomes and publishing that and having it peer evaluated in journals is important, but that doesn't require a centre, Mr. Speaker. As I said, the academics that were given grants to research alcoholism did all of that on their own, and they stayed in their own institutions at the University of Alberta and the University of Lethbridge and other places. They convinced their peers across the world that they were policy experts, and they understood both what should be done to have effective approaches to dealing with alcoholism. As I said, AGLC funded that research, and it didn't require setting up of a centre like we're seeing right now.

Mr. Speaker, I'll just go on to talk about how – it's under, I guess, 3(2)(d), "supporting the development of evidence-based clinical practice guidelines and documents for use by persons providing services to individuals with mental health and addiction issues." We know that's within the narrow scope of what this minister just talked about, and that narrow scope is within the recovery-oriented program delivery approaches. There are more approaches to dealing with addictions and mental health than the narrow scope that this minister has talked about, and having evidence-based clinical practice guidelines developed on that narrow scope alone is not helpful at all.

On to page 9: "The Minister may make an order requiring the board to exercise any . . . powers or perform any other duties or functions relating to the mandate and activities of the Centre identified by the Minister." So the minister can essentially get involved with the whole of this centre, and the powers and duties and functions of the board can be usurped by the minister at any point. It's ironic, Mr. Speaker, that that's in the section called Powers, Duties and Functions of the Board when the kicker is that

anything identified by the minister can change anything that the board or the executive leadership have put in place.

Approval of the budget. Again, you can see where the board's work can be amended by instructions from the minister within a time set by the minister. It seems to be, again, problematic. I don't think it's normal activity, within the kind of boards that I understand, that a minister can reach in and change everything, you know, presumably on a whim.

Again, under plans we see that the minister can submit plans for research, change those plans for research. I just want to take a moment to talk about what I see here as a potential problem, that being confirmation bias, Mr. Speaker. Confirmation bias is a phrase that talks about a tendency for people to favour information that confirms or strengthens their belief or values and is difficult to dislodge once it's affirmed. The simplest way to avoid that confirmation bias is to look at a belief you hold and search out ways in which you could be wrong rather than in ways in which you could be right.

I don't know how many times I've stood here in this House and heard people from the other side talk about how right they are about the Alberta recovery model and how everything else done by doctors, by professional therapists, by others across this province and elsewhere in, you know, provinces like B.C. and Ontario or at the federal level are wrong, that, really, the Alberta recovery model is the one that will be best practice for the entire country. You know, the bias that's in that statement is, obviously, quite bold and easy to identify.

5:40

I think, Mr. Speaker, that what is in the best interests of all people is that we look at all sorts of approaches, try and understand and evaluate them to see what has greater efficacy, and then follow that as opposed to being told over and over again that the Alberta recovery model is the one that all people need to follow. In fact, one young woman named Ophelia did not follow the Alberta recovery model. She challenged it and took through legal counsel the province or AHS – I'm not sure – to court and said that the services she was getting from her doctor would keep her alive and that if she were required to follow the direction that was given to addictions counsellors through medication that she would be dead today.

There are different approaches, is what I'm trying to say, that have efficacy and not just one, and I'm concerned that CORE is only going to use the one approach in dealing with Albertans who have addictions and mental health issues. Mr. Speaker, from my previous life as a social worker I know that people can't be fit into one box. They deserve a unique approach each and every time, certainly with methods and abilities to work with that person's strengths, but also to understand that they're coming to addictions professionals for assistance, and to be told that there's only one way that they can move through that program is a disservice to them.

I want to point out a few other problems I have with this act that's before us. The chief executive officer – and I don't know specifically about the science officer; I think it's the case as well. Both those individuals have been appointed. The information here under page 12 says, "after considering any recommendations of the board" they may be appointed by the minister. I think they're already there, and I'm not sure there's a board at this time. Perhaps the minister can tell me if he's jumped the gun or not in that regard.

Continuing to go through a few more things. It just looks like if you go under page 14, orders, and then under (2)(c), the minister can request any records, make copies of records of individuals and their personal information. It just sounds unusual to me, Mr. Speaker. Not something I've seen in other acts and is a concern to me and should be a concern to individuals who are getting treatment and providing their information to entities connected to CORE.

Lastly, I will say that this has been a highly difficult area for Albertans to get their heads around in terms of the issues affecting those with addictions problems, but I think the most important thing we have to remember is the goal of keeping people alive until they can get better.

Part of that keeping people alive, of course, is the supervised consumption services on a bricks-and-mortar basis that – I understand that across this country since 2017 to late 2023 these sites have received 4.5 million visits, Mr. Speaker, from almost 400,000 people. There have been 53,000 overdoses, but not one person in a bricks-and-mortar facility for supervised consumption has died. That's not the case with people who don't have access. Even though the minister has talked about VODP, there are many people who have perished in this province, in this country, and still today five Albertans die each day of opioid poisoning. We need to correct that, and stand-alone facilities like the ones I mentioned are part of that solution.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak on a topic that is very near and dear and close to my heart as well as to many other Albertans. That's mental health and addiction. Bill 17, the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act, holds a deeply personal connection for me as I've witnessed first-hand the devastating impact of mental health struggles on individuals and their families. I've watched as close family members and friends struggled with the challenges of mental illness. I saw the toll it took and continues to take on my family, my friends, the relationships, and the everyday lives of Albertans. Mental health and addiction issues can deeply impact Alberta families and affect many of us in profound ways, whether it's dealing with the trauma of loss, of losing someone to suicide, or seeing a family torn apart while one of the members is in the thralls of addiction.

Mr. Speaker, oftentimes people who are struggling with mental health and addiction feel isolated, but we know that no Albertan is an island. No Albertan is alone, and our government is committed to providing the resources necessary to help make sure that everyone has the help and resources they need when and where they need it. Along with this, there are struggles that we can only reach by working together. They're affecting every aspect of people's lives, and they don't know where to turn.

While helping friends and family members with their struggles to understand the immense importance of access to quality mental health care and supportive services, it's become all too real in my life. Mr. Speaker, I've never been shy of sharing my family's experience with the loss of my aunt and with the struggles my grandfather had with alcoholism, but it goes farther, with friends who had their families absolutely torn apart, kicked out of their own house because of the way they got, because they felt they had nowhere to turn to for real help with their alcoholism. There would be times when I would have to, at 2 o'clock in the morning, go to my friend's house to pick up his wife and child because he went on an absolute alcohol-infused rage and trashed their house. They had no one to turn to, and he had no help that was available to him.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, in someone's life can be the difference between despair and hope, between isolation and connection, between darkness and light. That's why even in my own riding I continue to hold mental health summits to make sure that we're building a community support network around those that are hurting, ensuring that we close and address gaps of service that are needed. I look to some success that's come from this with the Medicine Hat Family Service. It's a great example of an organization who identified

a gap from the feedback of these summits, and they actually came up with a program and are now funded to address suicide prevention in Medicine Hat.

5:50

That is why I'm so passionate about supporting initiatives like Bill 17. This legislation represents a beacon of hope for those that are struggling, offering a lifeline to recovery and healing. CORE would be Canada's first research centre focused on recovery, which is why it's needed on a local, provincial, and national level. The centre would be an expert resource on recovery with access to new and expanded evidence that will advance the Alberta recovery model. Alberta is a leader in recovery-orientated care in Canada and much of North America, and the Alberta recovery model is gaining international recognition.

Our government has been working tirelessly to develop a model that is not only effective but also compassionate and available to all Albertans. Mr. Speaker, our government's commitment to mental health and addiction services is unwavering. Budget 2024 included significant investments in mental health care, including initiatives like the \$5 million to establish the Canadian centre for recovery excellence, which would be established if Bill 17 is passed.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, we've made significant strides over the past five years to expand and improve mental health and addiction care in our province, and it's vitally important. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health shows that 50 per cent of Canadians under the age of 40 have struggled with or will struggle with mental health by the time they reach 40; 1 in 5 Canadians currently are struggling with mental health issues and addiction. By adding more than 10,000 publicly funded addiction treatment spaces throughout the province, we can take steps to address this.

We can also take steps by removing the financial barriers to recovery, including the \$40-a-day user fee. We can do it by building 11 recovery communities throughout the province, two of which are already open and treating clients. We can do it by providing same-day access to evidence-based medications through the virtual opioid dependency program, no matter where someone is located in Alberta, and expanding options for counselling and mental health supports throughout the province.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of this Chamber to join in supporting Bill 17. The stories that I share of my family and friends' struggles can be heard echoing through our communities across Alberta as this is something that does not affect one select group of people but our entire communities as a whole. Let us stand together with those who are struggling and offer them the support and compassion they deserve. Together we can build a future where no one is left behind and where every Albertan has the opportunity to live a life of dignity, fulfillment, recovery, and wholeness, where families are reunited and built together and not left with the holes of loss.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others?

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

Mr. Williams: No, thanks.

[Motion carried; Bill 17 read a third time]

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, I move that we adjourn the Assembly until tomorrow, Wednesday, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:54 p.m.]

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