



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, May 7, 2024

Day 47

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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Party standings:

United Conservative: 48

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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Al-Guneid
Armstrong-Homeniuk
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Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, May 7, 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 Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's my great pleasure to introduce a couple of guests who are joining us in the Speaker's gallery today. They are in Edmonton to attend the Private Bills Committee meeting held earlier this morning, which was discussing amendments to the Rosebud School of the Arts Act. The Rosebud School of the Arts is located in the beautiful Rosebud valley in the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. It's my great pleasure to introduce to members of the Assembly Mr. Paul Muir, the executive director of Rosebud School of the Arts, and Yvonne Chenier, the legal counsel for Rosebud School of the Arts. I invite you to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to rise and welcome students from Connect Charter School in my beautiful riding of Calgary-Glenmore. Please rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, with great pleasure I would like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly grade 6 students from Florence Hallock school. I ask students to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Stephan: Mr. Speaker, I introduce Alberta leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, of which about four of our members are also church members. Like many Albertans, members of the church seek to follow Jesus Christ. Please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all Assembly members Dr. Kamaljeet Gill and her husband, Jagroop Gill. Dr. Gill has a PhD in Indian classical vocal music. She has taught at the U of A. She offers workshops, mentorship, and hosts the Samarpan festival, promoting Indian classical music, in Edmonton. Please rise to receive the traditional and warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod is next.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to introduce to you and through you my good friend Trevor. Trevor is a rural acute nurse in southern Alberta, and he is the guy you want on your side when things are a bit more critical than first anticipated. Trevor, I ask that you please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you Assist Community Services, an organization that has

served newcomers in Edmonton for over 40 years. With us are John Yee, board member; Ishrat Jahan, program manager; and Fion Lee, executive director. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

Government Policies

Member Irwin: Where do you find hope? What keeps you going? What can we do? These are just some of the questions I get a lot. It's not always easy, to be honest. Sometimes I think about all the damage that's been done by this UCP government even since the last election, which was just one year ago. Not sure about you, but I know my memory sucks these days, so perhaps we could all use a refresher on just what they've done.

I can tell you this. One thing this government is hoping for is that Albertans will forget, that they can do a whole lot of damage right now and then, when we get closer to the next election, bribe us with a few nice things – a shiny budget, hey, maybe a pony, too – and hope we'll give them one more chance. That's the Conservative playbook.

But, friends, they've had their chance, and here are just a few of the lowlights in the past year: banning renewables and, in turn, hurting climate action and turning away investment; refusing to address skyrocketing rents or build the affordable housing we desperately need; attacking trans rights – and who knows what they have planned for reproductive rights? – picking on vulnerable Albertans by threatening to take away their transit passes; assaulting democracy through Bill 20, giving themselves unprecedented powers; using overheated rhetoric about our unhoused neighbours; decimating research and academic integrity at the incredible postsecondary institutions across our province; bringing big corporate money back into politics; making voting harder for anyone without valid ID. I could go on. That is far from an exhaustive list.

I know, friends, it seems daunting, disheartening in fact, but there's hope. There really is. Our party has momentum. Thousands and thousands of you have joined the Alberta NDP. Most of you have never been this involved before. So many of you are standing up. You're speaking out. You're louder than you've ever been, not just for you and for those you love but for those not yet here, too. A better Alberta is possible, and it's closer than it's ever been, so let's build a better Alberta together.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod has a statement to make.

Women's Health Care

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government strongly supports women and children's health initiatives, and we will continue to prioritize the wellness of women and children in our province. Last week we announced a key investment of \$26 million to expand the Alberta newborn screening program and advance women's health research here in Alberta. This critical investment will help support, encourage, and improve women's health and newborn screening programs across the province.

Mr. Speaker, over the next two years two organizations will be given \$20 million to help advance women's health research and create opportunities for women to receive tailored clinical care that addresses their unique health challenges and concerns. This investment is in addition to the Alberta Women's Health Foundation legacy grant, to which our government committed \$10 million towards operation expansion and investing in women's health research and advocacy.

Our government has also committed \$10 million to the Calgary Health Foundation towards advancing women's health research, attracting health innovators and researchers to the province, and advancing clinical care outcomes for women. Other initiatives include our government and AHS collaborating to prioritize access to reproductive health and maternity services for Indigenous, vulnerable, and rural populations. AHS also continues to support cancer care initiatives such as screening and prevention for women and increased access to immunization and preventative health care measures.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is on track to have one of the most comprehensive newborn screening programs in the country. Currently the program effectively screens for 22 conditions, enabling early diagnosis and treatment to prevent ongoing future health problems. However, with our most recent \$6 million investment, we are adding four more conditions to this screening program, making Alberta the only province that screens for those new, additional conditions. As the mother of a young daughter I'm delighted with how far Alberta has come for women and children's health care, and I look forward to our province becoming a national leader on these topics.

Thank you.

Mental Health Week

Member Eremenko: May 6 to May 12 is Mental Health Week across Canada. Though the occasion has been around since 1951, mental health has long been considered an afterthought or something that only warranted our attention in times of crisis. But times have changed, and everyday stressors, large and small, are having an impact on the mental health of Albertans.

In a recent release the Canadian Institute for Health Information revealed that in 2023 29 per cent of Canadians age 18 and older said that they'd experienced depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition, up from just 20 per cent in 2016. This same report found that a large number of Canadians reported worry or stress related to paying for housing, having enough food, and having a safe, clean place to sleep compared with their peers in other high-income countries surveyed.

The cost to access care to address one's mental health is becoming increasingly prohibitive. According to the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, compared to other developed countries like France and the U.K., Canada has the lowest proportional spending on mental health.

This year's theme for Mental Health Week is that of compassion. It's not lost on me, Mr. Speaker, that sometimes in these Chambers we could all use a little bit more of that, more for each other and more for ourselves. Politics isn't exactly a space for compassion. While we're here in these Chambers, we antagonize, we goad, and we go out of our way to stoke conflict. It can quickly veer into territory that undermines our well-being.

So this week I hope we consider #CompassionConnects and that we make an effort to extend compassion to those who might look or think differently than we do and to those we may not agree with. As a colleague said just yesterday, we never really know what else is happening in a person's life while we fulfill an always interesting, frequently stressful job of being a member of the Legislature.

I hope we can encourage one another, those in the gallery, and in little ways throughout Mental Health Week and beyond that a bit of compassion can go a long way. It's a generous thing to give and a wonderful thing to receive.

1:40

CPR Demonstration and Supply Farm

Ms de Jonge: Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today with immense pride as the representative for Chestermere-Strathmore, a constituency deeply rooted in rich agricultural heritage. My personal connection to farming runs deep, and it's an honour to celebrate this heritage with you all.

Today I wish to shine a light on a remarkable historical landmark in our region, one that played a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of Alberta, the Strathmore demonstration farm. Established in 1908 by the Canadian Pacific Railway, the farm was a cornerstone of a larger initiative aimed at showcasing innovative farming techniques in Alberta. Its establishment was crucial not only for attracting farmers to the region but also for promoting sustainable agricultural practices, particularly in the face of Alberta's arid landscape. Central to the farm's success was its dedication to mixed farming, and among its many accomplishments the Strathmore farm gained renown for its Holstein herd, which set unprecedented standards in dairy production. These cows were in such high demand that sales reached as far as Japan.

One notable mention is Sylvia, a legendary cow whose remarkable output of nearly 30,000 pounds of milk in a single year, which was as much as about seven average Alberta dairy cows at the time, symbolized the farm's commitment to excellence. But even with the help of cows like Sylvia, the farm was not able to beat the trials of the Great Depression, and economic hardship led to its eventual sale in 1944.

However, that is not the end of the story. The spirit of the Strathmore demonstration farm lives on through initiatives like the legacy farm project, which seeks to preserve our agricultural heritage while paving the way for innovative agricultural tourism, education, and business ventures.

I take pride in being part of a government that values and supports our farming community, and I invite all members of this Assembly to experience first-hand the legacy of Alberta's agricultural past at this remarkable site in Strathmore.

Thank you.

Low-income Transit Pass Program

Mr. Dach: This last week we saw a significant victory for the people of Alberta, particularly those who rely on low-income transit passes to access essential services. The UCP's decision to backtrack on its plan to discontinue funding for the low-income transit pass program in Calgary and Edmonton is a testament to Alberta's collective advocacy and unwavering commitment to protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

The initial decision to withdraw funding for the low-income transit pass program was met with rightful outrage as it threatened the livelihoods of countless individuals and families who depend on affordable transportation options. The data speaks volumes: over 119,000 low-income passes were issued in Calgary alone this year. That's a 35 per cent increase compared to the previous year. These numbers not only underscore the indispensable role that the LITP program plays in ensuring equitable access to transportation, education, employment, and essential services for our fellow Albertans but also the challenges Albertans are facing due to the UCP's affordability crisis.

It's clear that the UCP government's initial decision was not just a policy misstep. It was evidence of their alarming disconnect from the needs and struggles of everyday Albertans. Instead of prioritizing the well-being of our communities, they seem more interested in lining the pockets of their wealthy friends.

This episode serves as yet another reminder that the UCP cannot be trusted to prioritize the needs of Albertans. While they were willing to deprive the most vulnerable of essential transportation, they have been content in simultaneously spending thousands of dollars renting vehicles for their friends. They've repeatedly shown that they're out of touch with the realities faced by ordinary people and are more concerned with serving their own interests and those of their well-connected allies.

As we celebrate this victory, we must remain vigilant. We cannot afford to become complacent. The Alberta NDP stands firm in our commitment to safeguarding essential services.

Asian Heritage Month

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, the month of May marks Asian Heritage Month. Not only is this an occasion to celebrate the diverse and rich cultural heritage of Asian Albertans, it is also an opportunity to recognize the important legacy and the contributions that generations of Asian Albertans have made and continue to make to Alberta and Canada.

Indeed, Asian Albertans have been a vital part of Alberta's journey since the birth of this province, with over 100 years of cross migration, with each generation shaping the story and trajectory of this province. One in 5 people in Alberta are of Asian descent. With more than 900,000 people, Alberta, in fact, has the largest Asian population on the prairies. Albertans of Asian heritage have made significant achievements and contributions to all aspects of our society, from sports to business, innovation, arts, entertainment, philanthropy, medicine, and politics. They have helped make Alberta the vibrant and diverse province we all benefit from today.

The theme for this year's Asian Heritage Month is Preserving the Past, Embracing the Future, a call to action to amplify the Asian-Canadian legacy with optimism and hopefulness. It is with this hopefulness that Asian-Albertan trailblazers like Annie Lee, the first female pilot of Chinese-Canadian heritage in Canada, and Judi Singh, one of Alberta's first successful BIPOC musicians, have paved the way for Asian Albertans and all Albertans to thrive in this great province. These pioneering Albertans, like many others, overcame hardship and discrimination and provided for their families, built businesses, created communities, and fought for a more just, more inclusive Alberta.

Asian Albertans have always been and will continue to be an integral part of the fabric of this province. I invite my colleagues to join me in recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of Asian Albertans.

Notices of Motions

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

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of a bill to be introduced, which I will be sponsoring, that being Bill 208, the Psycho-Educational Assessment Access Act.

Thank you.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five requisite copies of an article from today's *Edmonton Journal* by Rob Breakenridge, of all people, titled Amending Bill 20 Doesn't Cut It, So Just Withdraw It. Our message loud and clear.

Thank you.

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

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From Claire O'Gorman, a constituent of mine, to the Minister of Forestry and Parks, expressing her dismay for plans for logging West Bragg Creek and Moose Mountain forest by the West Fraser Timber Co.

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

Ms Phillips: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of an article wherein Pierre Poilievre spoke to Canada's Building Trades Unions. I spoke of this in bill debate yesterday. He talked about carpenters at that meeting. Carpenters are not affiliated to the CBTU.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Bill 20

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, firing councillors, rewriting bylaws, and many other acts of overreach too numerous to list are all in Bill 20. Municipal leaders are lining up to oppose the draconian powers this Premier is giving herself to control municipalities from behind closed doors. But don't listen to them; she should listen instead to the 2022 version of herself. She said that the big problem was that, quote, we've centralized all the power in the hands of a leader, end quote. To the Premier. Why the 180 degree turn? Does everything change when it's her that's the leader?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I might ask the member of the opposition the same. I'm reading a tweet from her account on November 16, 2022: Sean Chu must resign or the UCP must remove him. It does seem to me that 18 months ago everyone was asking for us to modify the Municipal Government Act to be able to . . . [interjection]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood will come to order.

The Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Eighteen months ago the members opposite were asking for the Municipal Government Act to be modified in order to create a mechanism to remove council members. That's one of the things we're doing.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, using Sean Chu as a reason to give themselves unlimited power over municipalities is quite the move.

As the mayor of Red Deer said, Bill 20 would, quote, take away the public's right to exercise their own decisions over council and mayor. The Premier wants to give herself the power to fire mayors she disagrees with. Well, a whole lot of them currently disagree with her. So to the Premier: is she going to go after all of them, or will she listen to her 2022 self and scrap this ridiculous overreach of a bill?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will only use this new authority in extreme situations, and I can give a few examples. One, for instance, was when we observed that the city of Calgary was

charging their local access fee completely differently than anyone else and benefiting with \$200 million in excess taxes at a time of an affordability crisis. We said that we're not going to allow that to happen anymore.

And then, of course, Edmonton city council, after we had made the decision to end vaccine mandates and mask bylaws, wanted to institute their own. That was another example, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, "just trust us" is not a statute used by democratic leaders. No amount of tweaking will fix this bill. It takes a rarely used, rightfully complicated, and public process and turns it into a decision by the Premier behind closed doors. So to the Premier. In 2022 she said that she admired the grassroots democracy inherent in municipal politics. Was she just pandering at the time, or has she always believed that it's her right to impose her opinions on other democracies?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, the member opposite is correct. Sometimes councils do a reversal like Calgary just did today when they ended their single-use plastics ban to, I think, a lot of accolades from the citizens of Calgary who saw that as an overreach, especially after the federal court determined that plastics were not toxic and that it was a federal overreach to try to regulate them in that way. So I'm glad to see that the city is now observing the kinds of laws that they are passing, doing an assessment of whether or not it falls within their mandate. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

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

Ms Notley: And as such, there is no need for this Premier to have the kind of authority she's looking for.

But the minister has been doing an even worse job of defending Bill 20 than the Premier. He's claimed that he's consulted municipalities, but they disagree. The president of AM said that he got a call with a heads-up but no real consultations have been arranged. So to the Premier: will she tell her minister to apologize for claiming there were consultations, or is it her position that the president of Alberta Municipalities is lying?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We introduced the bill, and then we had an entire week to go back to our constituencies. I know that I met with my council members, my colleagues met with their council members. The Minister of Municipal Affairs has been in touch with the heads of the different municipal associations. We are going to be bringing forward amendments to address a couple of the sections of the act, so the members opposite can stay tuned to see what our response to that is. We always are interested in getting feedback from those who are impacted by our legislation and need to make modifications as necessary.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, the president of AM isn't alone. When asked on a radio show if he had been consulted before Bill 20 was tabled, the president of the rural municipalities association was unequivocal, and I quote: no. So again to the Premier: will she ask her minister to publicly apologize, or is it everyone else that is misrepresenting what has happened around this ridiculous, draconian bill?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has the call.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know the member opposite has been here a very long time, so she understands how the legislative process works. You introduce a bill so people can see how it's written. You go through and you do second reading so that you can talk about the intent . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Smith: In second reading you talk about the intent, and then you go through Committee of the Whole, where you can make amendments. From time to time issues emerge about language that needs to be clarified, and we'll bring forward amendments. That's what we're going to do in this case, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Notley: Actually, I've been around for a while, Mr. Speaker. We've amended that bill twice, and when we did, we literally had hundreds of meetings with municipal leaders over and over again before either of those amendments were introduced. Mayors, reeves, councillors are speaking out. Bonnyville, Calgary, Cold Lake, Diamond Valley, Didsbury, Edmonton, Foothills, Grande Prairie, High River, Red Deer: none of them have been consulted; they're all opposed. There are two choices. Will she scrap the bill, or will she admit she simply has zero respect for the democratic choices of Alberta voters?

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 1:55.

The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The entirety of rural Alberta must have missed the consultations on Bill 6. The entirety of Alberta must have missed the consultations on the carbon tax, which they didn't run on. Look, we respect municipal government, but what we do demand is that municipal government make sure that they are passing laws that fall within their delegated authority under the Municipal Government Act. If they go beyond that and they're working directly with the federal government on areas of policy that go against provincial policy, we're going to step in. You bet.

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

Ms Notley: Whether it's municipalities or the federal government, this Premier has been trying to take all the power for herself. That's what she's really going after.

Children's Pain Medication Purchase

Ms Notley: Her scheme to go it alone to get children's medication is another example of a disaster that happens; \$80 million and counting. We still haven't received 3 million bottles. No other province will touch it. Hospitals in Alberta won't use it, and it's close to expiring. To the Premier: will she admit that she was wrong and her desperate pre-election scheme was an embarrassing waste of money for Albertans?

Ms Smith: I remember the desperation of members opposite as they were going around pharmacy to pharmacy trying to find medication for mothers who were looking for it. I remember the posts of people online talking about how mothers were trying to trade it, talking about mothers going down to America or . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: . . . Mexico to bring back quantities of this medication so it could be shared, talking about taking adult medication and crushing it into yogourt so that kids would be able to eat it. I remember, Mr. Speaker, what those days were like. People looked to us to find solutions, and we found a solution. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Notley: The answer, Mr. Speaker, was not to pretend to have a solution and spend \$80 million telling Alberta something that wasn't true. We've now learned that before the decision was taken, she received a memo entitled urgent bullets for financial risk. It warned that receipt of this order would be so delayed that demand would likely be gone before it arrived, and it, therefore, posed significant financial risk. In fact, this is exactly what happened. So to the Premier: why did she ignore these warnings of experts, and what will it take for her to accept that she rarely knows what's best?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We listened to the warnings of experts from the Pharmacists' Association, who told us that we might face years' worth of delay because of supply chain issues. Look, we run a publicly funded health care system. People look to us to make sure that their needed supplies and medical treatment are available. We agreed to work with the federal government, obviously, on making sure that the product being brought in met their standards. It took a little bit longer than we had hoped, it probably took a little bit longer than they had hoped as well, but we couldn't foresee the future, and we may yet still have supply chain issues, but we know that we've got the supply we need.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, you don't pretend the supply is there when you know it's not. The Minister of Health tried to justify this scheme, arguing it was designed to provide long-term reassurance to Albertans. Ironically, they knew they wouldn't get the medication in time. Now, another form of reassurance is to be competent. It's less expensive and more honest. To the Premier: will she admit that she was wrong to ignore expert advice and create false hope knowingly and apologize to Albertans for . . .

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Ms Notley: . . . knowingly wasting their money?

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 1:59.
The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our job was to create hope for parents who were very concerned as the fever of their children was increasing, not knowing where they were going to get that supply. Absolutely. We knew that . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. The Leader of the Opposition had her opportunity to ask a question. Now it's the Premier's opportunity to answer it.

Ms Smith: Absolutely. We needed to act. People will know that if there was ever a circumstance where the health of children was at risk, we absolutely will look for answers. The members opposite have already demonstrated that they wouldn't. They would just throw up their hands and give up and, I guess, hope that the federal government comes in and bails them out. It is our job to make sure

that vital medications are available to children, and that's what we did.

2:00 Ombudsman's Report on PDD Program

Ms Renaud: Evan Zenari has a developmental disability and autism. Evan applied for PDD once he turned 18. Evan was refused PDD supports because he has an IQ of 79, and PDD currently has an IQ cut-off of 70. Ministry experts opined that Evan's IQ score is not indicative of ability to function in the real world. Three years later the Alberta Ombudsman just released a report about Evan called Denied by Design. Will the minister accept the Ombudsman's recommendation and reconsider Evan's application?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to our PDD program, running the same process that was run by the NDP . . .

Ms Notley: Not true.

Mr. Nixon: . . . when they were on this side of the House, and we are going to continue to make sure that we do that. We're investing this year almost \$1.6 billion in our PDD program, also about \$1.6 billion in our AISH program, and about a half a billion dollars that goes towards children with disabilities. That's, like, 3 and a half billion dollars, which shows this government's long-term commitment to be able to make sure that we have the best services for the disabled anywhere in this country.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:01.

Ms Renaud: Today's Ombudsman report focuses on one person in his struggles to obtain PDD, but in 2013 Justice Ouellette noted that the limitations of questionable IQ scores to deny access to PDD supports is a clear indication that the current PDD legislation is flawed. Moreover, the court said it was never the intent of the PDD legislation that passed for the IQ score to be the sole determination of eligibility for PDD. Disabled Albertans who have been denied PDD because of discriminatory criteria deserve far better. What is going to happen?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, other criteria besides just IQ are taken into consideration when making determinations around PDD, but IQ is part of that process. It is not done by the government or the minister or the minister's office; it is done elsewhere within the department. Again, we're committed to the same system that has been in place for decades, the exact same system that was in place under when that member was on the government side of the aisle. [interjection]

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

Mr. Nixon: Our government continues to increase investment in PDD, and we intend to continue to go forward with our world-class program.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:02.

Ms Renaud: IQ scores do not accurately reflect the real-world abilities of people with developmental disabilities. People with autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder are vulnerable to having IQ scores that don't reflect their deficits in daily living and employment. To address the systemic denial by design, PDD legislation and regulation for eligibility IQ must align with current psychological standards for assessing intellectual capacity.

Changes to PDD are needed immediately. When will the minister address these Ombudsman recommendations? I don't want to hear about the funding. We need to hear about the recommendations. There are . . .

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

Mr. Nixon: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, I've been very clear in each answer. We intend to continue with our PDD program, the exact same program that was in place when that member was in government. We're going to continue to invest heavily in these important areas. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Nixon: In fact, Mr. Speaker, we have increased the budget of both PDD, children with disabilities, and AISH, and we are very satisfied with the process that we have in place and intend to continue with this program long term.

Bill 20 (continued)

Ms Pancholi: In the Frankenstein's monster of a party created when the Wildrose and PCs joined to form the UCP, we knew there would be some differences of opinion. On the one side, the Wildrose Premier was resolutely opposed to corporate donations; on the other side, the PC now Minister of Municipal Affairs has always been a huge fan of corporate donations. Well, with Bill 20 bringing back corporate donations to municipal elections, I guess we know which side won the debate. Can the Premier explain why, after decades of opposition to corporate donations, she's caving to the Tory land faction of the UCP?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, the question might be: why was the NDP so very wrong when they said their legislation would take the big money out of politics and the dark money out of politics? After their legislation the money just got bigger and darker. Under this bill you'll know who gave the money and who they gave it to, whether it's a union, whether it's a corporation. The corporation and the union are still given the money; we just don't know who. It can't be tracked. This will change that. That transparency matters to Alberta. It supports democracy. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Pancholi: Given that back in 2015 the Minister of Municipal Affairs described the NDP's removal of corporate donations as partisan legislation designed to make it harder for the PCs to raise money and given that I challenge any UCP MLA here to table the e-mails they've received from constituents demanding the UCP go back to their PC roots and bring corporate money back into elections, will the Premier disregard her minister's long-standing PC passion for corporate donations, return to her previously held principles, and scrap Bill 20?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, in fact, what has happened is that the NDP just started raising more and more money because it was partisan legislation. I stand by what I said because it was right then, and it's right today. The fact is that they put in . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. I had no problem hearing the question; I think it's reasonable that the Speaker can hear the answer.

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, the folks passed legislation when they were in government to give themselves a partisan leg up. We're releveling the playing field. That's what needs to happen. Transparency is gone. Accountability is gone. Bill 20 will bring back that transparency. It will bring back the accountability, which is desperately needed. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Pancholi: Given that the Premier, who once demanded corporate donations be taken out of politics when she was Wildrose leader, has now said that she's also considering bringing corporate donations back into provincial politics, again, something she didn't campaign on or consult on and Albertans are not asking for – sound familiar? – and given that Albertans deserve a government that listens to them not to the numbered company that cuts them the largest cheque, for the third time: will the Premier go back and listen to her Wildrose 2012 self and commit today to scrap Bill 20? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's face it. There's over a million and a half dollars that went into Calgary to nine candidates. Lots of donations to candidates in Calgary and Edmonton. The folks across have no ability to ask this when they didn't talk about Bill 6. They didn't talk about the carbon tax. There are so many things that they did wrong. They shouldn't be giving . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. It's only the Minister of Municipal Affairs that has the call.

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, that's why since 1905, when Alberta was formed, the only government to get fired after one term was the NDP government. They're gone.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville has a question to ask.

Support for Survivors of Gender-based Violence

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nearly half of Albertans have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime, which means every Albertan is either dealing with its traumatizing impacts themselves or knows somebody who is. That's why the UCP made a promise a year ago to bolster investment into sexual assault centres and help support and empower survivors. Can the Minister of Children and Family Services update the Assembly on how our government is delivering on this promise?

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 great question, who has been just a tremendous advocate for vulnerable Albertans. Whether someone has experienced sexual violence hours ago or many years ago, they should have access to the help and support they need when they need it. That's why our sexual assault centres are so important in making sure that this happens, and that's why last week I was so proud to announce that we're providing them with an additional \$10 million over three years to help more survivors. I look forward to working with the centres at our upcoming round-table here in a couple of weeks to look for ways that this money will have the highest impact for survivors.

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

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the minister for that update. Given that this investment aligns with Sexual Violence Awareness Month and given that during this month we recognize that sexual violence can take many forms and affect survivors of all ages in different ways, can the Minister of Children and Family Services explain what other measures our government is taking to support young survivors no matter where they may be on their healing journey?

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

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. It's important to make sure that young survivors know that it's not their fault and empower them to reach out for help so that they can begin the healing journey. That's why we're proud to support child and youth advocacy centres across the province with \$3.4 million annually to help young survivors heal and find success. I also just want to highlight to the Chamber that Alberta is also home to Little Warriors. They work with sexual abuse survivors, and I look forward to sharing some exciting news about how we're supporting their work at the end of this month.

2:10

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

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there is a comprehensive and survivorcentric approach being taken to address sexual violence and further given that the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women has been hard at work engaging with Albertans to create a made-in-Alberta, 10-year action plan to end gender-based violence and further given that Alberta's government is dedicated to securing a future where all Albertans can live free from violence, to the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women: are you able to provide an update on the creation of the action plan to end gender-based violence in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of the status of women.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for that important question. Currently we're consulting with hundreds of community leaders to create a made-in-Alberta action plan to end gender-based violence. We're engaging with survivors, Indigenous communities, 2SLGBTQI-plus organizations, men and boys, and more to ensure we create a survivorcentric action plan. We need to ensure this action plan is well rounded and addresses root causes and identifies critical gaps in already established services. No Albertan deserves to be subjected to the terrible reality of gender-based violence, and Alberta's government will work tirelessly to secure a safer future for all Albertans.

Bill 18

Mr. Ellingson: Mr. Speaker, last week we had the opportunity to meet with the University of Calgary graduate students' association and share their Bill 18 concerns with Albertans. A large share of the research conducted in our postsecondaries is conducted by graduate students. Many count on being listed as an author in peer-reviewed research papers to later secure work in the not-for-profit, private, government, or academic sectors. Why is the Minister of Advanced Education in support of this legislation that so clearly places our Alberta students at a disadvantage to students across the country and around the world?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I think Bill 18 is important legislation to make sure that we collect all the information we need to understand exactly what federal funding is coming to our universities. I have mentioned this before in this House. When we look at the consolidated financial statements for the University of Calgary, for example, the publicly available data is not matched to what's on our financial statement. So we need to collect this information. It is going to help us leverage the federal funding that's coming into our postsecondaries so we can more appropriately align with those projects that we actually believe in, that support provincial priorities. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Ellingson: Given that the government has cut the operating budgets of postsecondaries by hundreds of millions in the last five years, forcing tuition to escalate by 30 per cent or more and given that the government is making the collective bargaining process for graduate students progressively more difficult, holding wages to graduate students below a living wage when inflation is making life more difficult for everyone, why is the Minister of Advanced Education in support of a bill that threatens research funding and therefore the very livelihoods of our graduate students?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, we have invested in targeted enrolment expansion in the range of \$225 million, so there is significant investment in the postsecondary sector. I have said this many times in the House, and I'll say it again to all Albertans who are listening, particularly those in the postsecondary sector: we are going to work with you, we are going to talk about possible exemptions, we are going to design these regulations and policies together, and we are going to bring more federal funding back into the province.

Mr. Ellingson: Given that Alberta and our technology companies and industries are in a war for talent, competing with jurisdictions from around the world like Texas and Singapore and given that having world-leading researchers on the cutting edge of research projects is a key decision-making factor for students in choosing where they pursue their postgraduate studies, why is the Minister of Advanced Education in support of a bill that sends a clear message that our government will obstruct research funding and threaten our ability to retain and attract the best and brightest to grow our economy?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, that is not the message at all. Look, Quebec has its legislation. They are number three in terms of getting federal funding. So if Quebec can do it, we can definitely do it. Certainly, I've had many conversations across the country with people in the postsecondary space, and there is a lot of support for this bill. We are going to gather some more information, and we will share that with Albertans. We will partner with the postsecondaries, where we can bring in some more federal funding and look at research that supports our provincial priorities. Lots of support. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Renewable Energy Development

Member Kayande: Last August the Premier, when announcing her renewables ban, stated that, quote, the Alberta Electric System Operator asked us to do a pause. The AESO did no such thing. The AESO CEO expressed concern about the impact that that pause would create and stated it would send a closed-for-business

message. And now we see the impact of TransAlta cancelling a large wind power project and suspending a natural gas backup generation. Will the minister please enlighten this House on how many more jobs and investment are at risk because of this Premier?

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to bring to the House the Alberta Electric System Operator's Reliability Requirements Roadmap, which they published in March 2023, and I'll quote from this. It says that "an increasing proportion of electricity is coming from renewable and other low-carbon sources." It goes on to say that this presents a significant operational challenge. To interpret for the members opposite, this means reliability was at risk, which we've seen in increasing events throughout last year and this year. We needed to make changes. We needed to do the work the NDP failed to do, and we're doing that.

Member Kayande: Given that the reeve of Cardston county stated that the cancelled TransAlta wind project would have contributed millions of dollars to the county, given that he stated that the cancellation of this project was, quote, a pretty big blow, given that the reeve stated that it was getting hard to find money to fund his projects without imposing major tax burdens on area residents, given that the minister of utilities represents a seat in southern Alberta and given that one of the projects TransAlta suspended was backup generation, will the minister today apologize to the reeve, the council, and the residents whose lives have been made harder as a direct result of this government's incompetence?

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've heard from many residents in that area that actually thanked us for taking a responsible path forward to protect tourism, another thriving industry in that area. We wanted to make sure we listened to the landowners who live there, that we listened to the people who vote there. We're doing the work that the NDP failed to do. In fact, what we've done under our new policies is give municipalities a voice before the Alberta Utilities Commission, something they've never had before. On top of that, we've offered funding for them so they can provide those arguments, something the NDP failed to do. We are providing a responsible path forward for renewable generation and all . . .

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

Member Kayande: Given that the government stated that the AESO requested the ban, which is untrue, and given that the government stated that Rural Municipalities requested this ban – and this is also untrue – and given that the government claimed there would be no impact to Albertans as a result of their ban and that this is definitely untrue and given that Albertans are now facing the lowest wage growth in Canada because of this government's ideological meddling, crushing the business environment, rather than delivering the same talking points we've heard all week, can the minister look up from his notes and just admit that this whole misadventure was cooked up in the Premier's office and stop trying to pass the buck?

Mr. Neudorf: Mr. Speaker, given that we know the NDP drove out more jobs and more investment in Alberta than any other government in the history of Alberta and given the fact that we have over 3,000 megawatts of wind projects . . . [interjections]

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

Mr. Neudorf: Given that we have over 3,000 megawatts of wind projects under construction right now, over 2,000 megawatts of solar, and over 2,000 megawatts of natural gas, we are making sure that we have the most generation that works effectively for Albertans. We are seeing generation costs come down. We are working on transmission, distribution. We are providing a reliable, dependable, and sustainable electricity grid for all Albertans. We're doing the work that the NDP failed to do.

Life Lease Regulation

Mr. Cyr: Mr. Speaker, last week the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction indicated that he found 27 letters addressed to the former NDP minister asking for life lease protection legislation in 2017 and that the NDP did nothing. Given that the NDP could have prevented the life lease scandal that is rocking the development industry, to the minister of service Alberta. Please share with the Assembly: what are life leases, why are they so critical to so many Albertans, and what protections does Bill 12 contain? [interjections]

2:20

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Nally: Thank you to the member for that question, Mr. Speaker. A life lease is a contract where the resident pays an entrance fee to take advantage of below-market rates, with the assurance that part or all of that deposit will later be returned to the life lease holder. That's why we proposed Bill 12, which will include minimum disclosure requirements for what life lease contracts must contain, the return of entrance fees within 180 days as well as a cooling-off period for life lease holders. We told Albertans that we're going to protect life lease holders, and that's what we're doing.

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

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction knows that the former NDP government was asked to protect life lease holders and did nothing and given that the NDP has never met a social cause that they did not exploit, to the minister of service Alberta: was there anyone in the former NDP caucus who championed life lease protections, and how did the NDP government do during their reign of economic terror?

Mr. Nally: Thank you to that member for the question, Mr. Speaker. In fact, there was an advocate for life lease holders when the NDP were in government. In fact, on April 11, 2017, Dr. Bob Turner stood in this House and asked the NDP minister of service Alberta about life lease protections. Do you know what the minister said? Do you know how the minister responded? The minister said that life lease holders should read their contracts and consult a lawyer. Read their contracts and consult a lawyer: that's the extent to which they were willing to go. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister for the answer. Given that life leases are an affordability option and given that one developer is converting life leases to rentals, to the

Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction: can you let this House know how much is being saved by Albertans under life leases versus renting in the same facility, and are the prices reflective of the results of the buy-in deposits that are held in trust?

Mr. Nally: Thank you to the member for that question. Mr. Speaker, the life lease rent ranges from \$800 to \$1,200, which are well below market rates, which could be \$3,500 or even higher. Now, we've heard from the nonprofits in the industry that requiring the fees to be locked up in trusts would force operators to increase costs for their residents. This would essentially make life leases no longer an affordable option for seniors. With affordability being the number one issue for Albertans, we took other steps to ensure that we protect their cost of living, and that includes allowing for surety bonds in life leases.

Bill 20 (continued)

Ms Goehring: The Minister of Municipal Affairs said yesterday that he had consulted with the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary on Bill 20. Let me be clear. Speaking with mayors after releasing the most disastrous bill in recent history is not consultation; it's damage control. The minister met with the mayors because he wanted them to quit their criticism and make it look like he cared about what they had to say. If he really did care, he never would have introduced Bill 20. Why did the government refuse to consult with the mayors of Alberta's biggest cities?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, when the bill was introduced, I made it very clear that there was a short time to consult. There were two public consultations, very much on the bill, but we didn't do as much as we wanted to. We committed to consulting with municipalities before the regulations are in place, and that commitment stands. I did talk to the mayors and other municipal leaders because they expressed unhappiness. We have a very good working relationship, and when they expressed unhappiness, I asked what it was about. As a result of that, we're working on some amendments that I hope will make them either more happy or less unhappy.

Ms Goehring: Given that St. Albert's mayor, Edmonton's mayor, Calgary's mayor, the president of Rural Municipalities, and the president of Alberta Municipalities have all come out against Bill 20 and given that the government should have consulted with them before the bill was introduced, not phoned them after to beg for forgiveness, why does the minister think that after-the-fact phone chats can make an attack on democracy okay? Did the minister ever try to consult with municipalities beforehand? Perhaps he can table the meeting invites.

Mr. McIver: Well, actually, Mr. Speaker, it's on the record. We did two public consultations on many parts of Bill 20. It's a matter of public record. It's easily findable, searchable on the Municipal Affairs website. But the fact is that I'm always open to hear from municipalities. They feel like they can call me. I've heard from a number of them. I've spoken with the president of Rural Municipalities of Alberta and Alberta Munis. They're well aware that we're working on some amendments. They have an idea of what we want to put in place. Again, we hope they'll either be more happy or less unhappy when that happens.

Ms Goehring: Given that the minister continuously says that they are working with stakeholders on amendments but stakeholders are saying that they have not been consulted and given that the minister

has been an MLA for 12 years, long enough to know that consultation involves sitting down with people and having open, thoughtful, evidence-based discussions, and given that Bill 20 fails to uphold and protect local democracy, that it fails Albertans who trusted this government, and that it fails municipalities, who should have been consulted every step of the way, will the minister give up his power trip and scrap this bill?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is an important bill. It corrects some damaging legislation that the NDP put in place that creates more dark money. It makes it less transparent. It creates more big money. The problem isn't the money. The fact is that there's more big money, and it's darker than ever due to the NDP's legislation. This will add more transparency, more accountability. That's something that we campaigned on, it's something we believe in, and we actually think municipalities believe in that, too. We have a couple of amendments to put in place that we think will improve the legislation, and we feel good about that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont has a question.

French Policy Action Plan

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm fortunate to have a significant and thriving francophone community in my riding of Leduc-Beaumont. Members of this community often ask me how Alberta's government is supporting French-speaking Albertans. Today I'm proud to tell them that our government has released the new French policy 2024-2028 action plan. This action plan is a comprehensive road map that will help support and promote Alberta's francophone culture and language. To the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women: can she please tell Albertans, especially French-speaking Albertans, how Alberta's government created the French policy action plan?

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

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're so proud of our new French policy 2024-2028 action plan, created in partnership with over 30 francophone community leaders across the province. This comprehensive and robust plan is well rounded and was completed with one goal, to support and promote the French language and culture in Alberta. Alberta's Francophonie provides immense value to our province's culture and economy. French is the second most spoken language, after English, and Alberta is home to the third-largest francophone population outside Quebec. The new action plan, revealed today, will ensure we continue to support French-speaking Albertans. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there was extensive consultation done to create this new action plan and given that this action plan involves 17 other ministries across Alberta's government and given that French-speaking Albertans require unique services to help protect and promote the French language and culture within Alberta, to the same minister: can she please tell the Chamber . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont can go from the top for the robust level of interjections. The Member for Leduc-Beaumont, from the top.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there was extensive consultation done to create this new action plan and given that this action plan involves 17 other ministries across Alberta's government and given that French-speaking Albertans require unique services to help protect and promote the French language and culture within Alberta, to the same minister: can she please tell the Chamber some examples of how this action plan will support French-speaking Albertans through other ministries?

Ms Fir: Mr. Speaker, this action plan is wide reaching and supports French-speaking Albertans in all areas of their lives. It builds on the success of our previous 2020-2023 French policy action plan, which saw Alberta's government complete the vast majority of its 70 recommendations. The 2024 action plan has objectives across all ministries, including but not limited to Education and Advanced Education, Health, Justice, and supporting programs and resources for francophone entrepreneurs and small businesses. I'll be working closely with my colleagues across cabinet to ensure the action plan is implemented across government services.

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

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the new action plan is addressing various areas where French-speaking Albertans need expanded services and given that there's always more to be done to support and promote Alberta's Francophonie community as they play an important role in Alberta's unique culture and economy and given that the minister has been hard at work engaging with Alberta's francophone communities, to the same minister: can she please tell Albertans what else she has been doing to promote and support Alberta's French-speaking communities?

2:30

Ms Fir: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's government has been proud to raise the Franco-Alberta flag in March to celebrate our province's vibrant francophone communities. I've been able to attend multiple Franco-Alberta events, and I was able to see just how strong and connected this community is. Through Budget 2024 we more than doubled funding to the Francophone Secretariat, and I've been negotiating with the federal government for Alberta's fair share of federal funding for French language funding. Stay tuned for an update on that. Alberta's Francophonie are vital to our province's cultural fabric, and they are also a crucial part of our province's economy. Our government is proud to support French-speaking Albertans, and I cannot wait to continue working on the objectives in this new plan.

Bill 20 (continued)

Mr. Deol: Mr. Speaker, from urban centres to rural municipalities the alarm bells are ringing loud and clear. The mayor of High River issued a stark warning, declaring this legislation as brutal for everyone, and the mayor of Okotoks sounded the alarm on what she sees as nothing short of an attack on democracy. Municipal leaders all across the province are against Bill 20, fearing that Bill 20's undemocratic elements will reshape the very essence of local governance. To the minister: why is the UCP ignoring the concerns about undemocratic provincial overreach from municipalities of all sizes and demographics?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, here's the interesting thing: Bill 20 actually doesn't give the government any new authority at all. The ability to dismiss councillors has been used in the last year. We

have all talked about it in here. The ability to overturn... [interjections]

The Speaker: The Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: ... legislation, I think, was demonstrated last week by our affordability minister when he overturned Calgary's terrible policy on high electricity costs. It's not new authority. It is a shorter distance between government thinking about it and government doing it – that's true – but all the authorities were already there.

Mr. Deol: Given that despite the widespread condemnation from municipalities all over Alberta, from Diamond Valley to Didsbury, the UCP remains steadfast in their push for voter ID restrictions through Bill 20 and given that a Grande Prairie councillor states that this government doesn't appear to see municipal government as a legitimate, fully elected order of government, why do the UCP continue to turn a blind eye to the concerns raised by municipalities? Is disenfranchisement their goal?

Mr. McIver: If you're talking about enfranchisement, this legislation makes special ballots easier to get than they've ever been, Mr. Speaker. Before Albertans would have had to go and give three or four reasons and no other reason was acceptable. Now any Albertan could get a special ballot to vote just because they would like one. Nothing speaks to enfranchisement more than making it easy for Albertans to vote in the election. I don't know why the folks on the other side don't want that to happen, but on this side we want all Albertans to be able to vote. We want them all to know who they're voting for. We want the money put into the election to be more apparent, more transparent, more accountable. They don't.

Mr. Deol: Given Edmonton mayor Amarjeet Sohi's condemnation of the government's authoritarian approach and given that the mayor of Cold Lake was concerned about overruling councils and that the mayor of St. Paul made it clear, "Quit meddling in our business," and given that a Bonnyville councillor rightly said that across the board no one wanted to see Bill 20, will the minister finally commit to listening to the municipalities and cease their intrusive interference and put an end to this unwelcomed overreach?

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, I think what municipalities will admit, if we talk to them, is that they don't like it when the government of Alberta exerts their constitutionally guaranteed authority. But that doesn't change the fact that pretty much every week I get somewhere between 10 and 100 letters from municipalities asking me to reach into their municipality and do something. We don't want to do that. I almost always say: no; take it up with your municipality. But the fact is that we do have a responsibility to make sure municipalities run in a responsible way. We certainly have the authority. We want to use that authority in a responsible way that will be good for everyone.

Presumptive WCB Coverage for Wildland Firefighters

Ms Wright: Mr. Speaker, this week is Safety and Health Week, a week dedicated to the prevention of workplace illness and injury. On Saturday I spent some time with folks from Steps for Life, an event led by the Threads of Life Association. They shared stories, statistics, and hopes for a future where all workers make it home. We should spare no effort or opportunity to support workers, including those who are right now preparing to protect Alberta from wildfires. We have asked this before. Wildland firefighters deserve

the same presumptive coverage all firefighters have. Will the minister agree and commit to making this change?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, it's a great question from the member opposite. We continue to meet with our firefighters, we recently met with the fire chiefs, and we continue to evaluate the appropriateness of our coverages, presumptions, and supports. In fact, I'm happy to report that just last week we expanded the heroes fund coverage to our wildland firefighters, so if in the unfortunate circumstance they lose their lives, their families will receive a \$100,000 tax-free cash reward in recognition of their service to the province.

Ms Wright: Given that only last week the government of Ontario expanded coverage for occupational cancer, heart injury, and PTSD to help protect the health and safety of wildland firefighters and given that the Ontario Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development stated, "These frontline heroes deserve a government that values their service and sacrifice – they have earned stronger, more expansive coverage," and given that on this side of the House we completely agree, does the minister? If he does, when will he expand the presumptive coverage for wildland firefighters? When?

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

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are paying close attention to what's occurring in Ontario. We are going to review the research that led them to change their presumptions, and I'll point out that Alberta expanded our presumptions just last year to 20 presumptions, some of the highest in Canada, and of course we're looking at how those presumptions may be appropriately placed on wildland firefighters as well. We're going to continue meeting with firefighters, we're going to review the science, and we're going to calibrate our benefits appropriately.

Ms Wright: I'll try this again. Given the heroic efforts during every fire season in Alberta by wildland firefighters to protect homes, lives, and communities, there should not be a single reason why this government wouldn't give presumptive coverage and given that if Ontario can do it, Mr. Speaker, there is no reason why Alberta can't and given that on this side of the House we stand with these heroes and will not stop advocating until this change is made, to the minister. We will be asking every single day why this government will not expand presumptive coverage to wildland firefighters until that change is made. How many days will we have to ask until the minister does the right thing?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, again, our government expanded coverage last year, expanded presumptions. Just last week we expanded the heroes fund to include wildland firefighters. We are continually reviewing the science, the research, and we're continually adding more supports, including on mental health, and we're happy to engage every day on this issue because it's an important issue, and we're happy to help.

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

Hon. members, we concluded the daily Routine prior to the start of question period, so that brings us to points of order. At 1:55 the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, I did. I rise under 23(h), (i), and (j), particularly "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." At the time noted, the Leader of the Opposition was posing a question to the Premier and at the end of the question said, without the benefit of the official Blues but with an unofficial record of my own, "She simply has zero respect for the democratic choices of Alberta voters." This language certainly is not becoming of a member of the Chamber. There are matters of debate that we are elected to review here in this Chamber, but to make a personal attack suggesting that the hon. Premier, who serves all Albertans, "has zero respect for the democratic choices of Alberta voters" is out of order. Now, to suggest that the policy doesn't respect democratic choice would be different. That would not be a point of order. This is a personal attack and likely to create disorder. I suggest that it is, in fact, a point of order.

2:40

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I disagree with the Government House Leader. This is not a point of order but is, in fact, a matter of debate. I think you will find, upon reviewing the Blues, which I do not have a copy of, that the Leader of the Official Opposition very specifically asked her question to the Premier, and the question she posed had two choices: will the Premier scrap the bill or admit that she doesn't respect the democratic choices of Albertans?

To be clear, Mr. Speaker, this is a matter of debate because we were talking about the government's claim that they consulted on Bill 20, and the Leader of the Official Opposition certainly brought into the record that both the president of the Alberta Municipalities and the president of the Rural Municipalities of Alberta and countless mayors, reeves, and councillors have all stated that they have not. Each of these mayors, councillors, reeves, and presidents of the related associations has raised the issue that Bill 20 is not a democratic bill. This is a highly, highly concerning piece of legislation, and debate on this will likely continue for many, many more days through question period unless the government does choose to scrap this bill.

But in this case the question was made to the Premier. It was posed in the form of a question with two different options. I believe that it follows the form that we have seen in this place across many, many question periods. I believe it is a continuation of debate and not a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? I do have the benefit of the Blues, and I am prepared to rule if there are no additional submissions.

Hon. members, at approximately 1:55 the hon. the Official Opposition leader said the following: have they been consulted? "They're all opposed. There are two choices. Will she scrap the bill, or will she admit she simply has zero respect for the democratic choices" of Albertans? [interjection]

I feel like I offered the opportunity to provide submissions earlier. I don't know if perhaps there's somebody else that wanted to make them.

Mr. McIver: I was coughing. Sorry.

The Speaker: While I'm not convinced that these comments specifically rise to the level of a point of order, my sense is that in subsequent points of order they may, in fact, in light of the other information that I have. I would just like to provide some comments

to members that as recently as April 23 I provided a caution where I said:

I do agree that while the language is unhelpful, it probably doesn't rise to the level of a point of order as the Deputy Government House Leader has eloquently explained for the Assembly. But, again, I . . . provide a caution . . . who largely did the same thing although in significantly different language, that this type of race to tit-for-tat, if you will, rarely creates order, and I encourage members to heed such advice.

I firmly believe that that was good advice on the 23rd of April. It's also good advice on the 7th of May, and perhaps a day will come where that advice will be heeded. This is not a point of order as it doesn't rise to the level of a point of order. I consider that matter dealt with and concluded.

On the second point of order, which was raised at 1:59.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the time noted, I did rise on another point of order in a similar vein, using language that would create disorder but also under 23(i), "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member." In the instance that I've noted, the Leader of the Opposition said in her question, with my unofficial records, "Will she admit," referring to the Premier, "that she was wrong to ignore expert advice and create false hope knowingly?"

Mr. Speaker, at no point would the hon. Premier ever intentionally mislead the public. That is a gross character assassination by the Leader of the Opposition. She's been here a very long time. She knows better than that and would not appreciate if such a claim was levied against her. So, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that this is, in fact, a point of order under 23(h), (i), and (j) and ask for an apology because, again, this is language that is just not going to help create order in this Chamber.

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do not believe this is a point of order. I disagree with the Government House Leader. Without the benefit of the Blues my understanding of what was said by the Leader of the Official Opposition to the Premier was, "To the Premier: will she admit that she was wrong to ignore expert advice and create false hope . . . and apologize to Albertans for knowingly wasting their money?" The context is incredibly important here because we are talking about an \$80 million boondoggle, where we now know that the government was specifically told in a memo, titled urgent bullets for financial risk, that the purchase that they were about to make of children's medication, that those advising them, the experts, knew that the order would be considered so delayed that the demand would be gone before it arrived, and then that is exactly what happened. The government was told: this isn't going to work. The government ignored that advice, went out and gave Albertans false hope about something, and then we now have 3 million bottles of an order that have not been delivered, hospitals will not use it, and it's all close to expiring.

I believe this is a matter of debate. I believe the government choosing to tell Albertans that help was on the way when they had a memo titled urgent bullet for financial risk, knowing that it was unlikely to provide help and knowing that the Minister of Health has specifically said that they went out on this as a form of reassurance – I believe this is a matter of debate. I don't believe that this raises to a point of order, and I look forward to your ruling.

The Speaker: I do have the benefit of the Blues. I am prepared to rule. However, if there's anyone else that has additional information that they would like to provide, now would be the time to do that.

Seeing none, with the benefit of the Blues, the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition said the following at 1:59: "Now, another form of reassurance is to be competent. It's less expensive and more honest. To the Premier: will she admit that she was wrong to ignore expert advice and create false hope knowingly and apologize to Albertans for knowingly wasting their money?" Hon. members, *Beauchesne's* page 121, section 409(7): "A question must adhere to the proprieties of the House, in terms of inferences, imputing motives or casting aspersions upon persons within the House or out of it." I would suggest that implying that the hon. the Premier knowingly created false hope for Albertans certainly comes very, very close, and in fact I'm of the opinion that it crosses the line and imputes false motives, in which case the Leader of the Opposition can apologize.

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

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

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

The Speaker: At 2:01 and again, I believe, at 2:02 the Government House Leader rose, and perhaps he might consider combining those two points of order.

Mr. Schow: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I will. It is a long-standing tradition in this Chamber now that you cannot suggest that a member is lying. While the hon. minister of community and social services was answering a question, at the time noted, the Leader of the Opposition said, on both points of order, very loud – but I suspect the ambient microphones in here caught it – "Not true." That would be the equivalent of saying: you are lying. That is unparliamentary in this Chamber.

I will note as well that it is interesting that, as I stand and call points of order throughout my time as a Government House Leader, even as deputy whip and Deputy Government House Leader, the majority of these points of order end up being on the Leader of the Opposition. I wish that there would be a time when the Leader of the Opposition would raise the level of decorum from herself and from members on the other side of the House. As you even heard today, you stood on multiple occasions to call this Chamber to order, to point out the lack of decorum of members opposite. This is a perfect example of that, Mr. Speaker. Yelling out at random times "not true," suggesting that we are lying in this Chamber is inappropriate. You can't do indirectly what you can't do directly.

Mr. Speaker, I believe this is a point of order, but I'll leave it in your very capable hands.

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I disagree with the Government House Leader. This is not a point of order. In fact, using the language "not true" is frequently found both in *Hansard* and in reviewing previous points of order. As an example, on June 2, 2021, when the then Minister of Justice used the language "not true, not true, not true" and the Official Opposition called a point of order, in that case it was found to not be a point of order.

2:50

In this case, the reason that this is not a point of order is because we are not calling someone a liar. We are in fact debating facts in

this place, and there is a serious disagreement of the facts. I believe the context matters, Mr. Speaker. At this point in the conversation during question period the Member for St. Albert was asking questions to the minister of community and social services about the PDD program, and the minister said multiple times that today's PDD program is, quote, the exact same program that was in place under the NDP government. The reason this heckle becomes a matter of debate is because we completely disagree, and we know, from talking to people within the system, from the statistics and information available through the SCSS Appeals Secretariat, that the adjudication has changed under the current government. They are sticking to outdated eligibility requirements like IQ testing to the result that fewer people are being approved. In fact, today a report was released with the title that Albertans are being Denied by Design.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, and I appreciate that the Official Opposition House Leader may be intending to make her point. I certainly am not here to determine whether or not someone said something that was or wasn't true, because I don't have the ability to have all of the facts. I hope that the Official Opposition House Leader also isn't trying to prove what they did or did not say was true or not true in her defence of the point of order.

If that's the case, let's move on. If it's not the case, then please conclude your point.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In making my case that this is a matter of debate, the facts that were under discussion I thought were relevant, but I have made my point that the minister was saying something that was not true, that the language "not true" has been found to be not a point of order here. We were not accusing an individual member of being a liar. This was a dispute of the facts. I don't believe that this was a point of order.

The Speaker: Excellent.

The hon. the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, just to add one point of reference for you in your decision. Understanding that, obviously, language that is deemed to be unparliamentary isn't necessarily parliamentary the following week, I will cite Deputy Speaker Johnson's decision on March 6, 1990, that "that's not true" was ruled to be out of order when referencing an individual statement.

The Speaker: Are there others? I am prepared to rule, and I do have the benefit of the Blues if there are no other submissions.

Hon. members, while I appreciate both the submissions from the Government House Leader and the Deputy Government House Leader, I think there are lots of occasions in which we can find certain statements that have been ruled parliamentary on one occasion and not another. I think that in this case I would suggest that that is also going to be the case today. Of course, the Speaker always is reluctant when ruling that something isn't a point of order, that members will take that as some sort of licence to come here tomorrow and incessantly call out while members are speaking that "that's not true," in which case it's very possible that it would be a point of order.

In today's context, other than the very, very voluminous and high audibility, or loudness, of certain people heckling from certain benches, I'm not convinced in this case that this is a point of order. As all members saw in the Chamber today and at some risk of belabouring the point, certain members in the Assembly weren't afforded the opportunity to ask questions because the decorum required the Speaker to interject on numerous occasions. I think that

if we're all self-reflective, we know exactly the reason why that is the case.

This is not a point of order. I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

I'm not sure if the hon. the Government House Leader had any additional points of order.

Mr. Schow: No. I combined the two, Mr. Speaker. Sorry.

The Speaker: Okay. Excellent.

I consider these matters dealt with and concluded.

Prior to moving to Orders of the Day and at some risk, because the Speaker is a little bit frustrated with decorum today, I do on occasion like to highlight important events that have taken place in the Assembly in our history, so I'd like to take about 30 seconds to do that.

Statement by the Speaker

Speaker Casting Votes

The Speaker: Today may possibly be my favourite opportunity to raise an important date in our Chamber's history because it's recognizing the anniversary of a Speaker casting a vote in the Chamber. This has only been exercised twice in Alberta's history of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. According to the Legislative Assembly's centennial series, the first time was 101 years ago, on April 14, 1923, when Speaker McPherson voted to break a tie on an amendment that required a special act of the Legislature for the leasing of water power for the development of hydroelectricity. Speaker McPherson voted against the amendment.

Then 50 years later, on May 3, 1973, Speaker Amerongen became the second Speaker in Alberta to exercise the casting vote when a motion was put forward to adjourn debate on the proposed legislation during the declining elk and moose population in Alberta. Speaker Amerongen voted against the motion so that debate could continue.

Those following along may have noticed a bit of a pattern here, that Speakers cast a vote to break a tie approximately every 50 years. If the trend had continued, I would have been put in a position last spring where I would have had to vote. Thankfully, I did not, but I want to offer all members of this place some comfort that I was prepared. My team had held spring training, or, as they referred to it, voting for dummies. I practised standing silently, and frankly it gave me a new appreciation for my colleagues to understand just how difficult it can be for some members. I look forward to not having to vote in any of the upcoming spring session, and I always encourage the Assembly to decide for itself.

Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 18 Provincial Priorities Act

[Debate adjourned April 24: Mr. Shepherd speaking]

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

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 18, that impacts a number of ministries from Advanced Education, Education, to agriculture, forestry, pretty much every ministry.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Again, it's one of those pieces of legislation that nobody was asking for and, in fact, was brought forward by the UCP, I guess, so they can continue fighting with Ottawa and ignoring their main role of governing for this province.

This bill gives them the ability to essentially restrict any provincial entity from entering into any agreement with the federal government without getting permission from the provincial government. So many issues with this piece of legislation, and many of them have been highlighted by the stakeholders. The government doesn't have to take our word for it. They should simply listen to what some of the people in academia have to say about it because it will also give the government the ability to interfere into the research grants that universities are getting.

Some of the arguments that were put forward by the government in defence were indefensible. At one point the Minister of Advanced Education said initially that they don't know about these agreements and that they need to know whether they align with their priorities. Then they later found out that no, they actually know about these agreements, because they can be googled and information can be found quite easily, what every university is getting from the federal government in terms of research grants.

3:00

Then they wanted Albertans to believe that somehow these agreements are signed off by the Trudeau-Singh alliance. They sit somewhere and sign off these university grants. I can assure them that they don't. There is a process, and many of my colleagues, in particular my colleague from Calgary-Varsity, who was a professor at the university, who has applied for that funding – she did actually talk about the process that universities use, that federal institutions use to allocate research funding among the universities. Not only is there no political interference, there is also no room for political interference in those kinds of decisions.

Then there were some arguments made in favour of this bill – I don't know if they were even arguments – that there was some research quoted by the Premier that 70-some per cent of academia are left leaning or left wing. That was a cause for concern for this government and this Premier. Those were the kinds of reasons that were given to us; that's the reason that they want to have the gatekeeping role for all funding.

They didn't consult with anybody. They didn't consult with Indigenous communities. They didn't tell us how this bill will impact agreements that exist between Indigenous communities and the federal government, because constitutionally the federal government can do so and can enter into those agreements.

They listed some entities that will be subject to this piece of legislation, but as if those entities were not enough, they also are reserving power for the cabinet to designate any other person or entity that could be covered by this legislation.

This bill is fundamentally about control; that this government wants to control everything, everywhere, and all the time. By putting this power here, they are creating fear that they will rely on to push these entities, to push these school boards, push these municipalities to fall in line. That's a classic example of politics of fear. It doesn't help us with governing. It doesn't help us with issues facing our institutions, our universities, our municipalities.

If they seriously wanted to help universities, they would not have cut 800-plus million dollars from university budgets in the last five years; \$80 million just last year. They raised interest on student loans at a time when Alberta was going through the worst affordability crisis in the history of this province. They jacked up university fees somewhere around 30, 40, and in some cases 100 per cent. After doing all that, now they also want to meddle and interfere with whatever research grants universities can get,

researchers can get. They want to have control. Imagine that a government that doesn't know how that funding even gets allocated wants to have control on those grants.

A similar thing just last week when it comes to passing the buck because nobody can compete with this government. When they cancelled the low income transit pass, their first line of defence was: oh, it's not a provincial responsibility. The next day they will come and say: no, municipalities are a child of the province.

If municipalities can find ways to collaborate with other orders of government, with Indigenous communities for the betterment of their constituents, I don't think that they need a provincial government as gatekeeper. This is just creating huge red tape in every process. There are 14,000-plus agreements, and the last time we remember when this government sat on reviewing one agreement with the federal government, it took them two years and billion-plus dollar O cost runs. I'm talking about the Minister of Municipal Affairs reviewing the transportation agreement, the local green line agreement in Calgary, and 14,000 agreements that they want us to believe that they are capable to review them.

With that, I think we have heard concern from all around the province. We have heard concerns from public agencies. We have heard concerns from Crown-controlled corporations. We have heard concerns from postsecondary education institutions, boards of education, health regions, municipal governments across this province, housing management bodies, that none of them were consulted on this legislation. They have raised serious concerns about how this bill will impact their work, their financial viability, so it's incumbent on this government that at least they should try to reach out to these entities, hear their concerns, accommodate their reasonable requests, and take the time to listen to Albertans.

There is no need to rush through these kinds of pieces of legislation.

With that, I do have an amendment to move, and I do have the requisite number of copies for the House. I will wait until it's distributed, and I will share some remarks about that. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Members, this amendment will be referred to as REF1 going forward.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Speaker. The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall to move that motion for second reading of Bill 18, Provincial Priorities Act, be amended by deleting all the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 18, Provincial Priorities Act, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

3:10

I think what this amendment is simply doing is that it's giving this government time and opportunity to talk to the impacted stakeholders, talk to people it will impact. As I initially mentioned, this bill impacts a lot of ministries, and they did not consult on this at all. I don't think that in this case they can say: that's something that we ran in the last election; we told everyone that we will review everything in every agreement. That's not what happened.

It's impacting a lot of ministries. It's causing a lot of concern. It can hurt our institutions, postsecondary institutions. It can be detrimental to the research projects that are ongoing in our amazing postsecondary institutions. It can impact the work the boards of education are doing. It can impact the work municipalities are doing. It has potential to cause a lot of unintended consequences, so that's why we are asking this government to put a brake, send it to the committee, take time to listen to all the impacted stakeholders. They talk about consultation all the time. They should, I guess, try to kind of have real consultation at least once on any bill, and this

will be a good bill to start if they want to hear what people have to say about their piece of legislation.

In short, it's an unnecessary, incompetent piece of legislation, and it was not consulted upon by anyone. Any minister did not mention to their stakeholders about this bill. The second thing is that Albertans should be consulted before the bill is brought to this House.

With that, I urge everyone to support this amendment.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak to the referral amendment brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall? We have the Member for Edmonton-Decore who has risen to speak to the amendment.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in support of the amendment to defer this bill to the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future in accordance with Standing Order 74.2. Bill 18 blocks badly needed federal funding for housing, a very important social infrastructure that is much needed in the province now. This bill will have an implication on various entities that play a crucial role in a partnership with provincial, municipal, federal government, businesses in terms of developing housing infrastructure, which is one of our social infrastructures that comes with shared responsibilities across different orders of government as well as other entities.

Housing delivery entities will be impacted. For example, Calgary Housing Company is a subsidiary entity under the municipality. If the Calgary Housing Company wants to enter a partnership with the federal government on housing, this bill as it is today will either be red tape or completely block, and there are many reasons that include housing infrastructure that could be impacted. A good example is that zero building codes, that this government ideologically disapproves of, will mean that Calgary Housing Company will not be able to receive the funding that is much needed in terms of increasing the housing stock supply. Blocking federal housing funding in situations like that is red tape and could amount to hundreds of millions of dollars for Alberta's struggling affordable housing system.

In a time of crisis, when we have the highest number of homeless, the longest wait-list for social housing, the lowest vacancy rate, when it takes years to build housing because of supply chain disruptions, when this government fails to introduce measures that deliver relief to the current affordability crisis, missing out on money for building new affordable housing or regenerating existing aging stocks can have generational impact, Mr. Speaker. Decisions that we make on the basis of this bill and the way it is presented will have implications for many years.

Demographic changes have already impacted the demand on affordable housing in the province. In 2020 there were 19,000 households on wait-lists for social housing, with approximately one-third of those being seniors. In addition to that, Alberta had one of the highest rates of provincial population growth in 2023, driven by a higher rate of international and interprovincial migration. The increase in population without appropriate infrastructure is already leading to an unprecedented increase in demand for affordable housing. It is already showing in the numbers that we see on our streets as a result of homelessness.

The increase in the population is not matched by an increase in housing completion. An analysis made by the Business Council of Alberta reveals that demand outpaces supply by at least 2 to 1. For example, for every two new households that move to the province, only one new home is being built. Situations like that demand a reduction in red tape, increased partnerships so that we can speed up the needed stocks based on the population increase.

To put this into perspective, if Canada's community housing units as a share of our total housing units were to increase from the 2023 level of 5.5 per cent just to 7 per cent by 2030, if each province receives the equivalent share based on their forecasted population growth, Alberta's community housing stock would need 43,800, almost 50,000, additional units by 2030. This is a 47 per cent increase in the current stock that we have. Bill 18 is not how to get there. It really is not.

3:20

In recent years the number of residential building permits has not risen to historical heights. We needed to increase that. It's not going to be impacting Edmonton and Calgary alone, as the members of the opposite side may feel. Rural communities in Alberta face significant housing challenges due to the limited housing stock and high construction costs that hinder the development of new homes in rural Alberta. Alberta's community housing stock is an average of 35 years old, which leads to a need for ongoing maintenance, which means that there is a need for increased partnerships with all players to ensure that maintenance is not deferred, as we have seen over the years.

Currently deferral maintenance, inefficiency, and delays in planning and completion of maintenance are leading to physical pressures and inadequate housing units. A good example is my constituency. The neighbourhood of Balwin has 46 social housing units that are way behind on maintenance because this government has deferred year after year. Dickinsfield has 134 units that have been deferred for many years, and Delton has 50 units that have needed maintenance for many years. This is a time when you need to increase partnerships, when you need to bring ways to leverage other resources to increase the financial need that will help maintenance that has been deferred for many years and relieve the needed stocks in social housing.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2022-2023 fiscal year the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services, which is responsible for housing and homelessness, spent \$282 million on building new affordable housing, on renewal of existing housing, maintenance, and operations of the affordable housing system through deficit funding.

Let's uncouple this. The department has a bilateral agreement with the federal government to provide the province with funding under the national housing strategy. This is a 10-year agreement that goes up to 2028. Under this agreement there are three cost-matched fundings, which include community housing initiatives as well as the community housing benefit. About \$180 million, or 65 per cent, of the department's spending is spent on community housing and seniors' community housing; 50 per cent of that is a contribution through the federal government. The department leveraged that to find other entities that can also receive funding from the federal government, and I have used the example of the Calgary Housing Company.

In situations like that, Bill 18 will block or hinder that partnership to play out the way it has been, which means that we have deficits that we have to deal with in terms of addressing the housing needs as far as supply is concerned. Bill 18 will have implications on the most needed community social housing supply, where we have 19,000 Albertans on a wait-list today.

As I said before, demand for community housing has outpaced affordable housing stock, and much of Alberta's affordable housing is aging. The Alberta Social Housing Corporation owns half of this subsidized housing. This is about 3,000 assets that need maintenance and operations. Mr. Speaker, most of the social housing corporation owned housing stock requires major repairs,

and I have examples that I have already provided from my own constituency.

In 2022-2023, according to the ministry, \$47 million in capital maintenance and renewal investment was matched by other partners, that included the federal government, that had players like the nonprofits and other players to support the capital maintenance needed. Bill 18 will create confusion and expand red tape and jeopardize the ability to repair and maintain aging housing units. This will deteriorate Alberta's social housing supply.

The government of Alberta's capital plan allocated, in the last fiscal year, \$281 million over three years, and \$94 million was spent to increase and maintain affordable housing. A sizable per cent of that is coming from other partners that either receive CMHC funding or match the funding needed to increase the supply. The department responsible for housing announced, for example, the affordable housing partnership program in 2022, and the ministry announced provincial funding support of \$54 million for 17 approved projects.

This is a third, and the other two-thirds come from either municipal governments or the federal government. That is directly provided through partnerships, so Bill 18 will implicate these existing partnerships. Programs like this are part of the government's plan, and I don't understand why they don't see or probably haven't looked into the implications that Bill 18 has on existing agreements, partnerships and will hinder the affordable housing needs of the province.

Another example is providing the rental assistance program. The last fiscal year close to 7,500 households received the benefits of rental assistance, and this is, again, done in partnerships. This bill will have an impact on this.

Mr. Speaker, I am strongly voting against the bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The Member for Calgary-Currie has risen.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to stand and speak about why I support the referral from my colleague from Calgary-Bhullar-McCall in regard to Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act. You know, it was quite stark, I think, right off the top and really quite revealing when we heard the Premier speak multiple times, both in the introduction of this bill and in press releases since then with media, that highlight that this is entirely about ideology. It is not about strategy.

If I were feeling generous, Mr. Speaker, one day I could almost imagine that if a bill such as this actually promoted a kind of strategic alignment that we need on issues as critical as housing, which is what my colleague here was just referencing, I could almost see it, right? It is so critically important that when we talk about something as critical as housing, that requires the kinds of investments that that needs, that needs all hands on deck, that something like that requires, I could actually imagine that there could be some benefit for us all to be rowing in the same direction when it comes to the federal, provincial, and municipal governments.

But that is not what is happening here. It's actually very clear – and it's straight from the Premier's mouth, Mr. Speaker – that this is about ideology, that where municipal governments, where provincial entities don't align with the provincial government on an ideological basis, that is grounds for Bill 18 and giving immense powers to the provincial government to play gatekeeper-in-chief. It is my fundamental concern with Bill 18 and why it is so incredibly important that Bill 18 be referred to committee for further

discussion, for adequate consultation, for research into, actually, what this looks like and what it means.

3:30

So I'm very pleased to be able to stand and speak to what I think is at stake here, and what is at stake is hundreds of millions of dollars that the federal government is able to provide and to flow into this province to address critical issues like housing. We can talk about some of the numbers in the housing accelerator fund that have already been committed to municipalities, large and small, and we can talk about some of the smaller dollars that are still absolute game changers when it comes to communities, when it comes to one-off events, when it comes to the kind of everyday service and program that we rely on.

A couple of numbers. I'm going to throw a bunch out here that I hope really do reinforce just how much is at risk: \$175 million to Edmonton to fast-track 5,200 new housing units. That's from the federal government directly to the city of Edmonton. There is \$228.5 million to Calgary to deliver 6,825 units, desperately needed units that we need in our two largest cities, Mr. Speaker.

But it's not just about Calgary and Edmonton though I'm sure the members opposite would like for it to be exclusively about Calgary and Edmonton. It is their constituents and it is their constituencies that are also impacted by this maximum interference that is being exercised by their government. A total of \$13.8 million, with a total of 400 homes, over the next three years to the towns of Banff, Sylvan Lake, Bow Island, Westlock, Smoky Lake, and the village of Duchess: all of those are funds that are currently being provided by the federal government through the housing accelerator fund.

I'd love to hear what this government proposes as the alternative. If this is about a per capita funding allocation so that we can make sure that it's fair, will the small hamlet of Cowley get one house and, you know, Cold Lake might get 20? No, Mr. Speaker, that is not reasonable. It is not practical. What we actually need to do is ensure that whatever dollars are flowing are flowing to the communities that are in greatest need. I don't really understand how this is actually supposed to play out.

Let's talk about some other dollars that have been funding to municipalities or, as Bill 18 likes to refer, provincial entities. We have the rapid housing initiative that provided \$23 million to Calgary housing providers between all three orders of government. We have a number of significant investments that have been made in public transit: \$325 million to Calgary to electrify the public transit fleet; \$11 million to Red Deer for CPR bridge rehabilitation. Let's talk about public health because that, according to Bill 18, is also a provincial entity: \$12 million in federal funding for 14 projects in Alberta through the HIV and hepatitis C community action fund and the harm reduction fund; \$3.3 million for the University of Alberta to French and English linguistic minority access to health care. I'll keep going: \$47.8 million to plant one and a half million trees in Edmonton; 900 grand to Stony Plain to build a trail to Spruce Grove.

There's a federal program, Mr. Speaker, called PrairiesCan, which provides investments for projects to support tourism, community, economic development, and economic growth and innovation. Twenty million dollars in the last year has been allocated to both northern Alberta and southern Alberta to promote economic growth, tourism, good job-creating opportunities across this province. That didn't go through the province. Is that going to be next online?

Speaking of PrairiesCan and speaking of ideology, I'll point to the green prairie economy framework that the federal government through PrairiesCan has developed. Well, I bet the UCP can't wait to get their hands on the green prairie economy framework and

dollars that might flow. We've made it clear once more that this is about ideology, and again, straight from the Premier's mouth, we have heard that any kind of initiative, any kind of funding that flows to pursue efficiency, net-zero, new green building initiatives: oh, no, not unless we green-light it. What an immensely missed opportunity for this province, for businesspeople, for entrepreneurs, for innovators, for tech because it simply doesn't align with what the provincial government has decided is best for them. It just reeks of that kind of paternalism that I think everybody here has no patience for. No patience for.

I think what is really important here is that this legislation leaves a pretty wide and unreasonable berth around the definition of federal entities and provincial entities, so I just want to read a couple of those into *Hansard* if I may. Federal entity means "the Crown in right of Canada; a Minister of the Crown in right of Canada; a federal Crown corporation; a federal agency," several more. But I want to emphasize the last category there, "any other entity or class of entity designated as a federal entity in accordance with the regulations," the regulations that will not be debated in these Chambers.

The same can be said for provincial entities:

- (i) a public agency as defined in the Alberta Public Agencies Governance Act;
- (ii) a Crown-controlled organization . . .
- (iii) a public post-secondary institution . . .
- (iv) a board as defined in the Education Act;
- (v) a regional health authority established under the Regional Health Authorities Act . . .
- (vi) Covenant Health . . .
- (vii) a municipal authority . . .
- (viii) a management body as defined in the Alberta Housing Act.

But no, that's not enough, Mr. Speaker. It can also be

- (ix) any other entity or class of entity . . . in accordance with the regulations.

So I think Albertans should be very concerned about what may or may not fall under that category of federal entity or provincial entity when that is not going to be a topic of discussion that will be had here. It will come out in the regulations, and the debate will be done. I've only listed a few very high-level programs and high-level allocations, but I think that there should be cause for much more concern.

Now, something else that was mentioned in the introduction in these Chambers when it came to Bill 18 and that has been referenced a number of times since is the comparison to Quebec. In preparation for this debate I did a little bit of deep dive into: well, okay; if Quebec is so great in terms of what they are able to do when it comes to managing balance and fairness, when it comes to the allocation of federal dollars, I wanted to learn a little bit more about that. What I certainly did find is what Quebec currently has under the – let me just make sure I'm getting the name of the act properly – Act Respecting the Ministère du Conseil exécutif from 1984 brought in by René Lévesque. Not exactly someone who has a reputation of really upholding the values of federalism in our country. What it has demonstrated as it currently is – you know, what is this, 40 years later? – is that this is a heavily bureaucratic endeavour that is absolutely rife with red tape.

I've just visited the Secrétariat du Québec's web page outlining the approval and authorization process for agreements that may be flowing from the federal government. "The draft agreement must be submitted to the Cabinet, on recommendation of the sector minister and the Minister responsible . . . and his approval must be confirmed by an Order in Council." Furthermore, prior "authorization takes the form of a ministerial order signed by the Minister responsible for Canadian Intergovernmental Affairs and is

issued once a request has been made to this effect by the sector minister responsible for the file." Nothing screams "red tape reduction" like this. The minister of red tape reduction really, I think, would probably benefit from maybe, you know, calling our Quebec counterparts and figuring out just how much is actually allocated to the administration of this program.

Quebec has evolved over nearly 50 years through successive and diverse governments to reach this point. Bill 18 is a singular action by a government who did not campaign on this, who has failed to consult with the provincial entities who are most impacted by it. Yet they go even farther than the Quebec government has done after 40, 50 years of social licence that they have earned. Now, we can talk whether or not Quebec has taken the right decision or not. But let's be very clear about what Bill 18 is and what it isn't and what it actually has in common with the 1984 act and not.

Lastly, the motions adopted to inform the approval and authorization by the Quebec government are debated in the National Assembly. There is a significant system of transparency and checks and balances that the Quebec National Assembly provides to Quebecers around what comes in for approval and authorization, the agreements that are actually okayed, and there is a system of accountability there. There is nothing about this Bill 18 that talks about accountability. This is about power and control. This is about, as I said, a level of paternalism informed by ideology and that there is no real accountability to Albertans.

3:40

Another really bizarre thing that I've noticed is becoming a bit of a trend as we debate bills in this Legislature is a great deal of fanfare, a great deal of bluster, and then no resources that actually accompany the legislation. As has already been made clear, Bill 18 has no funding allocated to it to actually execute on what is going to be a very burdensome, time-intensive, resource-intensive endeavour.

I looked up the budget for the office of the minister responsible for Canadian relations and the Canadian Francophonie in Quebec. Their annual budget for 2024-2025 to deliver on exactly what Bill 18 wants to deliver on is \$745,000. This government has allocated nothing to try and do exactly what Quebec is currently offering. So it begs the question: what are you actually going to be able to do, or is this simply another gesture of political bluster, of continuing the squabble with Ottawa, of continuing to, you know, fuel the rhetoric? If they actually wanted to execute on what the legislation is meant to facilitate, then we would see some dollars. Maybe we will. Maybe we'll see a budgetary allocation from Executive Council in the '25-26 budget. Until then I don't get how they're going to deliver on any of it. But it sure makes for clips, and it gets them in the news.

In the meantime all those provincial entities – the education boards, the regional health authorities, the municipalities, the postsecondaries – are thrown into the deep end of uncertainty and a lack of clarity. You know, we've got grad students whose livelihoods depend on federal funding, and all that is left is a great deal of concern and uncertainty about what actually is going to come next.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any others wishing to speak to the amendment? The government whip.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had a choice to eat chips in the back lounge or listen to the speech in here, and I definitely took the choice to come in here and listen to this fulsome debate. I've heard some very compelling arguments, and I'm trying to figure it

out. Like, they're good arguments, but I'm pretty much one-eighty from where the positions are coming. There's an old saying that says that for you to catch a thief, you have to, you know, think like a thief. I can't get the socialist mantra. I've tried to listen to it here, and I can't get it.

The members opposite keep talking about these ideologies. I'm really struggling to see what ideology it is when you actually represent your electorate, when you stand up for your province and do that. The other side may be very good with centralist control back in Ottawa, with the Trudeau-Singh alliance, because they all belong to that same thing. Every time that we assert ourselves and we find an issue with that methodology that takes place, they lose their stuff, Mr. Speaker. Bill 204 was a prime example of us finding a loophole. A private member plugged that hole, made sure that the feds weren't doing overreach and taking out parks and doing that. But these folks lose their mind. This is something similar.

When I'm sitting down with the U of A and they're trying to figure out why they're not getting the same funding as the folks down east, it comes back to this type of stuff right here. They will drop and cherry-bomb and -pick and everything else, and they will pick and choose which ones they're funding. Just because the U of A happens to be in Alberta, they get unduly punished. Just because, all of a sudden, Edmonton and Calgary have Members of Parliament that are Liberal, all of a sudden they get cherry-dropped in here.

Mr. Speaker, we're seeing an alliance here that's taking place. There's a different ideology. That's right. And we're going to keep standing up for Albertans doing the right thing. Bill 18 helps us do that, to represent what's happening in our province, represent our people, and make sure we're moving forward. So with the amendment, despite what my colleagues may be hearing, do not – do not – listen to it. You are in the right right now with Bill 18. You're doing the right thing for the province, and we've got to stand up for what the people need, what they want so we get our fair share, full stop.

With due respect, please do not vote in favour of this amendment. Let's get back to the bill, because that's what Albertans need and deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader has risen.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government will continue to move forward with its legislative agenda. Bill 18 is a key part of what we are bringing to Albertans, which is, unlike members opposite believe, true accountability. This bill is our notice to the federal government that Alberta's Legislature is now our third chamber of sober third thought. We will continue to represent our constituents and the people of Alberta. We see nothing but delay tactics from members opposite when it comes to moving referral amendments like this one, so we will not let it stop the government from its business, and we will continue to move forward.

With that, I adjourn debate on Bill 18.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: I will call the committee to order.

Bill 11

Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Deputy Chair: Are there any speakers wishing to speak to Bill 11? The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I rise to speak to Bill 11. This bill does two or three things. I will only focus on the part where this legislation is creating an independent agency police service. Before I get into the specifics, I do want to talk a little bit of the background. That will be helpful, I think, since Alberta used to have a police force, which was abandoned in 1932 as a cost-cutting measure by a then Conservative government, and then around 2000, 2001 there was another letter. I believe colloquially it's called the firewall letter; I don't remember the exact name of that letter. Again, prominent Conservatives were part of that, and that idea was coined then for the most part for political purposes.

After that, most of those politicians got elected to the federal Conservative government. Prime Minister Harper was there for a long time, and former Premier Jason Kenney was part of that government, and during those years nothing, I guess, was talked about why Alberta is not getting a fair deal and fair share. Everything was good and fine. They signed on to many things, including one that they oppose a fair bit now, the equalization formula, where they took the resource revenue out of the fluctuations that were the basis for calculation of equalization payments. Then as soon as they got booted out of the government, they started, I guess, opposing the same equalization formula, saying how unfair Ottawa is, even though they were there and they signed on to negotiate that equalization formula.

3:50

And same thing when Premier Kenney came back to provincial politics: he started talking about the same equalization formula, then started talking about a provincial police force. There was a Fair Deal Panel that, I guess, consulted with Albertans, and there was not huge support, but there was mention of this police force. They tried to, I guess, study that idea, and they hired Pricewaterhouse-Coopers to study that. That report is public.

That report showed that in order for Alberta to move towards a provincial police force, the set-up cost would be \$366 million. Alberta would also lose the subsidy funding that the federal government provides for the RCMP. There could be also other hidden costs, additional costs in terms of training, expertise, and all those. As opposed to what Alberta is spending today – \$330 million; now it has increased – Alberta would be paying somewhere between \$734 million and \$754 million for that provincial police force.

Then that discussion died down or went to the back burner because Premier Kenney's leadership was put on the front burner, and we didn't hear much about a police force for a little bit. Then the current Premier was elected. There was no mention initially, but at one point the provincial police force became an issue again. Instead of focusing on crimes, increasing crime facing our communities, gun violence facing our communities, they found, I guess, this as a safe nonissue to talk about, that if we replace the RCMP, somehow, magically, everything will be resolved.

Last August they realized, close to elections, that it's not a very popular idea, so that was dropped from the Minister of Justice's mandate letter: again, a matter of public record. Then during the campaign in May again the Premier said that she wouldn't bring in a provincial police force. Some may argue that this is not a provincial police force, that they are not dismantling the RCMP, but many Albertans, many municipal leaders, many police and law

enforcement leaders have described it as: that's their roundabout way of getting to what they said they wouldn't do.

So, one, it's a broken promise, and, two, I guess they are doing exactly what they said before the election that they won't do. The problem with that is that people, when they go into elections, they adhere to political parties, they listen to their words, their platforms, and based on that, they enter into that social contract, and they expect their government to follow through on their words.

This government said that on January 1, 2024, you will get a tax break. No, that's not happening; that will now happen in 2027, just before the elections. They said they won't pursue this Alberta police force; exactly that is happening. Then they said they won't touch your pensions; soon after they got elected, the same thing is happening. That kind of behaviour, I guess, erodes public trust in the institution of government and in the institution of democracy. That's dangerous. So that's one reason that government should not pursue this piece of legislation.

The second thing: I will quote Professor Oriola, a criminology and sociology professor at the University of Alberta, who previously advised government on the changes to the Police Act and said that Bill 11 is setting the stage to having a provincial police force replacing the RCMP. Let me quote what he said: if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck, and let's just call it what it is. This is going to be, for all intents and purposes, if not immediately, over time, a provincial police force. That's what, I guess, the government is doing after repeatedly saying that they won't do that.

With that background, the government did not get a mandate from Albertans. In fact, not only did they not get a mandate; I think during the campaign they were not truthful. They told Albertans they wouldn't do it.

I have an amendment that I will move, and I have the requisite number of copies. All it does is that it asks this government to go to Albertans and seek a mandate from Albertans for what they are doing. I will wait for it to be distributed, and then I can read that into the record.

The Deputy Chair: Members, this will be referred to as amendment A1.

I'm going to ask the member to read it into the record as well.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Chair. How much time do I have left?

The Deputy Chair: You have 10 and a half minutes. You've got lots of time.

Mr. Sabir: Okay.

The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall to move that Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, be amended in section 2(11) as follows: (a) in the proposed section 33.4(1), by adding "Subject to section 33.41," immediately before "The Lieutenant Governor in Council, by order, may authorize"; (b) by adding the following immediately after the proposed section 33.4:

Referendum required

33.41(1) The Lieutenant Governor in Council may authorize the Minister to establish an independent agency police service under section 33.4 only if the following occurs:

- (a) the Chief Electoral Officer announces the result of a referendum conducted in accordance with section 33.42 in respect of the independent agency police service;
- (b) the referendum is held in the part of Alberta for which the independent agency police service will provide policing services;

- (c) the referendum result is that the majority of voters are in favour of the establishment of the independent agency police service.

Holding a referendum

33.42(1) The Lieutenant Governor may, in accordance with subsection (3), order the holding of a referendum that relates to the establishment of an independent agency police service under section 33.4.

(2) An order made under subsection (1) is considered to be an order made under section 5.1 of the Referendum Act.

(3) The order must specify the following:

- (a) a question or questions to electors that
 - (i) asks whether the elector supports the establishment of the independent agency police service that is the subject of the referendum, and
 - (ii) describes the proposed independent agency police service, including the amount of money required to establish the independent agency police service;
- (b) whether the referendum is to be held
 - (i) in conjunction with a general election under the Election Act,
 - (ii) separately as a stand-alone referendum on a date provided in the order, or
 - (iii) in conjunction with the general elections under the Local Authorities Election Act;
- (c) the areas of Alberta in which the referendum is to be held;
- (d) that the results of the referendum are to be binding;
- (e) whether the referendum is to be conducted by mail-in ballot.

4:00

The Deputy Chair: You can proceed, Member.

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Chair, simply put, what this amendment is doing is asking this government to seek the mandate of Albertans through a referendum, a binding referendum in order to proceed with their provincial police force. The reasons I outlined are, one, that during the campaign Albertans were lied to. The police force was removed from the Justice minister's mandate letter last August, and during the most recent campaign they said that they wouldn't bring in the police force. They were elected by Albertans based on what they told Albertans. That was one of the things they said they wouldn't do that now they are doing. It's only reasonable and it's democratic that they go back to Albertans and ask for this in a referendum, and Albertans can have their say on this project.

I can say that from my, I guess, previous interactions with municipalities, with law enforcement bodies that Albertans at large are opposed to this. Alberta Municipalities at their convention passed a resolution to oppose Alberta moving towards their own police force and dismantling the RCMP. RMA did the same. There were 72 municipalities and other organizations coming together to oppose government on this idea. That was the reason that they took that out of the Justice minister's mandate last August. That was the reason that they didn't talk to Albertans about this. It's undemocratic, unfair that now that they are in government, they are exactly doing what they told Albertans that they won't do.

The second thing is that it showed there are issues of rising crime, gun violence that are related to drugs in our communities. That should be the focus of the government. The government will have a hard time telling me that a new force somehow magically will address that. This government's own record is that when they became government in 2019, the first thing they did: they cut police budgets. They cut police budgets across the province. Like, for

instance, in 2019 just in Calgary they cut by \$13 million. They cut other municipalities' budgets by increasing the provincial share of fine revenues from 26.7 per cent to 40 per cent. That's how they cut police budgets, cut resources. Now, as a result, crime has gone up; disorder has gone up. Now they're using that as an excuse to pursue their ideological agenda that their masters, I guess, talked about in a firewall letter in 2001. No Albertan, no municipality, no organization is asking for it. It's just their ideological agenda from two decades ago that they are pursuing now.

When they changed the provincial share of fine revenues, there was a loss of \$32 million in that financial year for the municipalities. Those funds could have supported public safety initiatives; they could have supported the hiring of new officers. Then for four years we were hearing that they're hiring 50 prosecutors, they're hiring 100 officers. Like, that's been going on over five years. Just the 2019 cuts alone would have been enough to hire all these prosecutors, all these police officers and actually focus on addressing the crime facing our communities.

They downloaded costs onto municipalities by changing that formula, and municipalities were either left with increasing the property tax to backfill for the UCP cuts or reducing the services that they could provide. That's the UCP's record. I guess, when in '21-22 Calgary was facing gun violence, the only thing they were doing: they were making acquisition licences easier for people to get. That was, I guess, their priority because that's what their base wanted from them. They have completely ignored public safety and have engaged in political games, and they're just pursuing their ideological agenda from 2001 that said that they should establish a separate police force, that they should establish a separate pension plan, and all that.

If the government thinks that they have Albertans' support, I challenge them to accept this amendment, go into the referendum, seek Albertans' mandate, and then proceed with this legislation. If Albertans support their new police force, we will be happy to, I guess, support their bill and their move.

The second thing that they are also doing in this piece of legislation is ankle monitoring for high-risk offenders. During the most recent estimates we asked about what costs have been allocated to this bill in the budget. That's the 2024-25 budget. The answer was zero dollars. Like, zero dollars are allocated for this bill, so it's more political posturing than anything else. They should seek a mandate in a referendum.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Member.

The Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services has risen.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Well, we did have a mandate. We had a mandate from the people of Alberta to keep them safe. I'm sure the members opposite are not interested in hearing this, but we need to talk about why Albertans are less safe, why Canadians are less safe. It has to do with the soft-on-crime policies that the NDP are proposing to the federal government as they are propping up the federal government currently. As we all know, the NDP is one party throughout Canada. There's no such thing as a separate provincial party. It's one party throughout Canada. So we are less safe in Canada and specifically in Alberta because of NDP-Liberal policies. And in order to do that . . .

An Hon. Member: Hear, hear.

Mr. Ellis: I heard a "hear, hear." That's crazy, right? Hear, hear? We're less safe in Canada. We're less safe in Alberta, Mr. Chair. That's not a good thing.

We need to think outside of the box. As I've stated before, we have the sheriffs, hard-working men and women – please, let's understand that: hard-working men and women – who are performing policing functions. They are doing commercial vehicle enforcement services, fish and wildlife enforcement services, safe communities and neighborhoods. Those are the SCAN teams, that many communities throughout Alberta are asking for. They do executive protection. They do surveillance, sheriffs highway patrol, interdiction units, rural Alberta provincial integrated defence force – that's the RAPID team; they work with the RCMP, as an example – the recent downtown deployments in both Calgary and Edmonton. Other jurisdictions are asking for more sheriff support services. We have fugitive apprehension supports, street patrols and enforcement, enhanced bail monitoring. Mr. Chair, these are already policing duties, so it only stands to reason that as we ask people to do policing functions, they be treated as a police service.

In fact, I know the members opposite probably don't like to hear this either, but it's actually insulting to call the law enforcement in here, in Alberta, a force. They're services. You know, 50, 60, 70 years ago they were forces, but here, now, they're services because we provide a multitude of different services to help people with severe mental health and addictions issues, to provide people who are facing crime in rural Alberta, as an example.

4:10

I'd like to talk a little bit because I know a lot of folks get upset over there when I use the words "urban privilege" as an example, but let me explain this to you. I'm from Calgary – sure – and I recognize that I have urban privilege because when I call 911, I know somebody is going to show up, but that is not a luxury that people in rural Alberta have. There are areas within rural Alberta that do not have 24/7 coverage. That is unacceptable, so we are working to augment and support the RCMP. We are working to augment and support Calgary, Edmonton, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, whoever requires those additional supports. When I sit there and say that you have urban privilege, I know I have urban privilege. The issue is that they don't recognize that they have that privilege, and that is why they get so triggered. That is why they get so upset over that.

It's because they are not from rural Alberta. They don't understand the challenges that rural Alberta has. They don't understand what it's like to have to call 911, and they go: yeah, we don't really have anybody available for you. You don't understand. You don't understand that when you call 911 and nobody shows up, the gut feeling inside of you saying: what do I do?

We had that case around Okotoks with Eddie Maurice. Eddie was a man who had never even received a parking ticket once in his life, Mr. Chair, yet when he called 911 because people were breaking into property on his property – and he's there, and he's with his child, and he calls 911, and nobody's showing up. Do you have any idea what kind of feeling that is? I can argue many of you don't have an idea what that feeling is.

Mr. Chair, I have stated this in this House many times before as well. There's nothing against the wonderful men and women in the RCMP. I have nothing but respect for them – I was a front-line officer for over 10 years – but the reality is that they do not have enough human beings to be policing Canada. It's not my opinion; that's just the reality.

That is why we looked here in Alberta, and we have a 21.6 per cent shortage. What we are authorized is over 1,900 officers, and we're about 413 officers short. It's not about more money. I would like, quite frankly, the RCMP to provide us what we're authorized, but they're not doing that, and that becomes part of the challenge.

We are paying, Mr. Chair, \$16 million for services that we're not receiving.

Also, when we talk about this, let me talk about my friend. Yes, I do have a friend in the NDP, Minister Farnworth. Although he and I don't agree on a lot of things, there are some things upon which we do agree. Minister Farnworth is from British Columbia, and he challenged the RCMP, Mr. Chair. He challenged them in regard to Surrey because there were folks that wanted to reverse that decision. He challenged them. He said: "You know what, RCMP? You show me that you can provide the same level of service at the same cost with the same oversight." They couldn't do it. In fact, they had to beg, borrow, and steal from jurisdictions all across western Canada in order to meet those needs, at which point Minister Farnworth said: "Well, my job is public safety. I need to make sure that people feel safe. I need to make sure that when somebody calls 911, somebody is going to show up." So they're continuing with that Surrey police service model.

Now, we have made no decision. I say this, and I continue to say this, whether the members opposite want to believe me or not. We've made no decision on a provincial police service; however, we have to be prepared. The federal government, as I've stated time and time again, have signal checked that they may not wish to continue with policing services for the contracts. As I've stated in this House before, in our briefing notes to the federal Minister of Public Safety, "It has been the Government of Canada's objective since the 1960s to decrease [its] contract policing financial liability." There's growing dissatisfaction from contract jurisdictions relating, for example, to costs and officer vacancies and the result, impact on community safety. Mr. Chair, we made that announcement in Coaldale. Coaldale: Public Safety Canada won't let them back into the police service contract, so they pay 100 per cent of the costs. That's not right. That's not fair. If that isn't a signal check that they're saying, "You know what? We may not wish to continue with contract policing anymore," then I don't know what is. Again, I think people need to understand and realize that.

I would say that it would be negligent on my part if I did not prepare for any sort of scenario. That is why I have provided jurisdictions all throughout this province a \$30,000 grant to do an independent study so that you can tell me what you want. It's not the heavy hand of government coming in. I know that's typical of the NDP. We saw that with the carbon tax; we saw that with Bill 6, where the heavy hand of government comes in and tells everybody what to do. But that's not what this is. This is not about the heavy hand of government. This is about empowering the municipality, to sit there and say: you tell me what your needs are and how I can help you.

We have these independent studies that are being created right now. I think we've had over 30 regions, municipalities all throughout Alberta, because they're looking for other models. If I could tell you the number of Indigenous communities, the First Nations communities that have reached out, saying: "We're having issues. We're having issues with drugs and crime. We're having issues with gangs," and as a result of that the police are just not there. So we have to be able to augment and support them in whatever way that we can.

I know the members opposite think that, you know, just dumping money into something is the solution to this, but the reality is – and I'll state this again for the record, because I said it already – that right now I'm asking the RCMP to actually provide us the officers that we're authorized. Then we can maybe have a further conversation about even more officers. But the reality is that they can't. And that's not just here in Alberta. When I talk to colleagues all throughout Canada, whether it be Saskatchewan, British

Columbia, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, as an example, they're all sitting at 20 per cent short. Anecdotally, I've heard 30 per cent. In some jurisdictions I've heard from mayors who've told me 50 per cent short. So what? We're supposed to just wait and figure out the RCMP and figure out how they're going to make this work? That would be negligent.

Our responsibility is to the people of Alberta. Our responsibility is to people in rural Alberta, to make sure that, Mr. Chair, when somebody calls 911, somebody shows up to that call. That should be everyone's priority. I don't care – I really don't care – what the uniform is. I know a lot of folks in this Chamber seem to think that officers really have this love affair with the badge on their shoulder patch. That's actually not true. It's actually not true at all. We care about stability. We care about where we live. We care that we have a job. We care that we have a pension. That's what we care about, and that is really the essence of what we're talking about, ensuring that we have these police officers readily available.

Maybe I should say this: no, we're not going to accept this amendment at all.

Mr. Chair, I know the members opposite – since I have a moment here – always want to talk about the ticket revenue and the ticket fines and how we are the ones that have cut police even though, you know, this administration on this side of the House has put 100 new front-line police officers, 50 in Calgary, 50 in Edmonton, that we are paying and not the municipality is paying. We provided 500 positions since 2020 before the RCMP in a combination of civilian and sworn members. We are doing our part.

4:20

But let me go back to the ticket revenue, Mr. Chair. Calgary, and this is what I take a huge issue with, is dependent – let me be clear on this – on that ticket revenue. If we notice, that particular jurisdiction was the one that was really, really concerned about that revenue. So now I ask this: are the officers' jobs dependent on the number of tickets that they write to citizens? The citizens of Calgary: is their safety dependent on the tickets that are being written to them? You know, I know the members opposite want to use that as one of their talking points, but I strongly caution that they stop continuing down that particular road of talking about ticket revenues because that's what we're talking about.

In Calgary they use that and calculate that as part of their budget. That is not correct. That is wrong because what you are telling police officers is that their job is dependent on whether they write tickets. You're telling people in the community that their safety is dependent on whether they get written a ticket. I disagree with that, but if that's the position of the members opposite – I don't know – I'm not telling you what to do, but I strongly caution against that, because that's not true. On this side of the House we support law enforcement. On this side of the House we support public safety. On this side of the House when somebody calls 911, somebody is going to be showing up for that call.

All this amendment is, quite frankly, is another slap in the face to rural Alberta. Not surprising coming from the NDP, right? We're really surprised. To sit there and say: "Yeah, I know that, quite frankly, when you call 911 and nobody shows up that, you know, that might be problematic. However, I think that we should delay this six months, a year, 18 months, or whatever until we can have a referendum, and then, hopefully, you don't get murdered in the meantime. Good luck to you in rural Alberta. And by the way, we want to take all your guns from you to make sure that you can't defend yourself either." Again another Liberal-NDP policy, we'll say, right?

Mr. Chair, we're not going to support this amendment. We're not going to support policies from the NDP and the Liberals that have

made Canada, that have made Alberta less safe. I remember I said to my friend in British Columbia: although we don't agree on things, do you know the amount of drugs that are being funnelled into Alberta? It's unbelievable. It's unprecedented. But that's NDP policy – right? – the decriminalization of drugs, the flooding of the streets with hydromorphone, as an example. Let's flood the streets. That's a failure to understand addictions, the soft-on-crime policies.

You know, Mr. Chair, we talk about soft-on-crime policies. Let's think about this for a second. Because of the soft-on-crime policies organized crime – when I mean organized crime, I'm talking about the folks that are the cartels, the serious organized crime, not petty organized crime but serious organized crime members. This is a haven for them, not just in Alberta but in Canada. They can make \$5 million off a \$20,000 investment. Even if they get caught, maybe a couple of years, house arrest tops, and if they kill a bunch of people in the meantime, you know what? That's the cost of doing business. That's NDP policy.

On this side of the House we're not going to support organized crime. No. No. This is why we've invested an enormous amount of money into the Alberta law enforcement response teams, and this is why my message to all law enforcement in this province has been: when somebody commits a crime, arrest them, and if the NDP-Liberal system lets them out and they commit another crime, arrest them again. You keep arresting them up until the point they either leave this province or they stop doing crime.

That's where we are, Mr. Chair. We're less safe in this province because of the NDP-Liberals, and we are not going to let them slow down this process any longer. I can tell you that right now. We are going to forge ahead. We are going to make sure that Albertans are safer, that rural Albertans are safer. We're going to make sure that Calgaryans are safer. We're going to make sure Edmontonians are safer. And as the Premier has stated, as I have stated, we are going to do whatever it takes to make sure that Albertans are safe.

Let's talk a little bit about our friends – I know my parliamentary secretary is acutely aware of this – in the Indigenous communities and First Nations communities. They're less safe. They're less safe because of the federal NDP alliance. Do you know that Bill C-75 has had an inverse effect on them? Do you know that Bill C-75, because when somebody commits a crime or we have drug dealers on the reserves and the community wants them removed – the community, the leaders, the chiefs, the elders want them removed, but no; not the NDP-Liberals. No, no, no, no. We don't want to incarcerate that individual. That person gets released. You know what happens, Mr. Chair? Those people go back and seek vengeance on those individuals who called the police. That is what's happening right now in our First Nations communities.

That's not my opinion. My friend can tell you this. We've sat there, I've sat there and listened to First Nations community after First Nations community who, quite frankly, are gobsmacked at the level of violence and crime and organized crime in their communities, and they are begging for support. You know what we're going to do? I've said this to them, and I'll say this to you, Mr. Chair: we're not going to let them down. If the federal NDP-Liberal alliance wants to let them down, we're not going to let them down, and we're going to make this province a safer place.

Do not support this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: On amendment A1 are there any others wishing to make comment?

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: Back on the main bill. The Member for Calgary-Acadia has risen to speak.

Member Batten: Hello. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I rise again today in opposition to Bill 11, Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. You might recall that I rose a few weeks back expressing the needs of my constituents in Calgary-Acadia. At that time, I used a bit of sarcasm to illustrate the absurd ignorance of this bill relative to what Albertans have been asking for and what Albertans need. When I rise in this House, just like all of us, and share the concerns from my constituents, I expect the government to at least listen and not jump to name-calling and outright discounting the voices I represent. The government seems to believe that the voices on this side of the House and those we represent deserve less consideration. If this were not the case, we would actually be hearing a true debate and true engagement from that side of the House, and we're not.

On this side of the House we bring forward very real needs of Albertans while this government continues to push for bills which not only are not timely but aren't wanted. If this UCP government truly wanted to hear how Albertans felt about an Albertan police service, they would have campaigned on it over a year ago. Instead, seeing the writing on the wall, that Albertans do not want another police service, the government backed off, removed it from consideration during the election, only to sneak it back in now. Bait and switch, Mr. Chair. Bait and switch.

The government privilege is out of control, Mr. Chair. Albertans right now are desperately needing immediate support and action from their government, but instead we're here debating a police service that Albertans have clearly indicated they do not want. Further, this is not an immediate need and cannot come into effect until 2032, and it assumes specific actions by the RCMP.

4:30

If, in fact, this UCP government wanted to provide safety for Albertans, rural or urban, they would be prioritizing funding and supporting the services we have now, but that's not what they're doing. Again, Mr. Chair, Albertans have clearly shared that they do not want another police service.

Albertans need help now. Now, Mr. Chair. Before the government sets their hair on fire calling my advocacy urban privilege as I represent my urban riding of Calgary-Acadia, of course all Albertans need to feel safe and have the services available when they need it. I would love to hear from all the government MLAs who represent rural ridings. Bring in your constituent e-mails. Table the proof that your constituents are asking for this, because that is not what Alberta said a year ago, and that's not what I'm hearing now.

Speaking to those I directly represent, the constituents of Calgary-Acadia, not once have they ever mentioned to me via e-mail, in person, snail mail, or any other form any interest in another Alberta police service. In fact, speaking from a riding with five LRT stations directly following the downtown core, what I've heard about safety is that initially the addition of sheriffs to the LRT safety plan in Calgary was okay. Folks felt a little bit more supported until they didn't.

Folks in Calgary-Acadia are concerned with more than just their safety. They are concerned about fellow Albertans, those who need more than just law enforcement to make decisions, to be provided different options, and to catch a damn break. Albertans I speak with are very tired of the reckless spending of taxpayer money while providing fewer and fewer social services like health care.

The happiest Nursing Week to all my fellow nurses. We love you, we see you, and we thank you.

Health care. Calgary-Acadians are concerned with accessing the care they need when they need it. They would prefer their tax dollars to be invested in improving our public health care system. They want to see the health care workers resourced and supported

appropriately so that we can attract, retain, and demonstrate respect for these incredibly important roles.

Education is another social service that Calgary-Acadians would prefer their tax dollars be used on, investing in the future by resourcing and supporting our public education system. They want the best for their kids, their grandkids, and the neighbours' kids because what happens in our community affects our communities. Calgary-Acadians understand that education is the ultimate equalizer, and they're demanding better from their government. They want good opportunities for newcomers, new business owners, retirees, new families, and everyone who calls Alberta home.

I am delighted, as many of us are in this room, because we are seeing some much-needed rain here in Alberta, but are Albertans prepared for a possible flood? Has the province done all it can do to prepare Albertans for that real possibility? Have the opportunities from the 2013 flood been realized? Are Calgary and the surrounding area now protected? Or is this more like how they handled the wildfires, where the government started the season early by two weeks when, in reality, Alberta has fires burning year-round, which, you know, maybe means we need a year-round plan? But I'm sure that the two weeks were just enough to prevent another record level of wildfires. Shame.

What Bill 11 tries to do is take away power and control from Albertans and give it to a government who is more wishy-washy than a laundry machine. Case in point: the cruel cut to low-income transit riders, targeting some of our most vulnerable Albertans just to pick a fight with the municipalities, but not with all municipalities, just Edmonton and Calgary. This is a gross misuse of power and, honestly, is so incredibly petty.

Now, this government walked the change back very quickly after Albertans shared their outrage. Will they do the same for Bill 11? Will they walk this bill, focused on government power and control, way back and remember that it's Albertans you represent, the same Albertans who have been very clear that they do not want an Alberta police service?

Let's take a minute and just review the history of this UCP and safety in this province. Back in 2019 the UCP government increased the share of revenues they would receive from fines. Now, by how much? Well, using the numbers, unfortunately, from 2018, 2019, it accounts for at least the salaries of 300 police officers. That's 300 police officers fewer on our streets protecting Albertans. Three hundred. And where was that funding pulled from? Oh, our municipalities, the very municipalities that were just targeted for low-income transit cuts.

What's the big push for it now? In case the RCMP won't renew their contract in 2032? It's 2024. Why push this legislation through now, when Albertans are clearly saying no? They are telling us to focus on what matters to Albertans right now. Albertans are hurting. They want a government focused on what they need and maybe not on what they might need eight years from now. Mr. Chair, Albertans are now worried that they won't be here in eight years. Maybe they'll get served with a thousand-dollar increase on their rent, on the home that they've lived in for decades and had hoped would be their last. Maybe their health declines and they need to see specialists but won't last the 18 months for an appointment, let alone treatment. Maybe they're working three jobs and still cannot make ends meet. Maybe they are unionized workers trying to advocate for both their needs and the needs of those they serve. Maybe they just want their government to worry about what matters to them right now. Albertans are absolutely concerned about the future, but for many planning for their future right now is a luxury they do not have.

A PricewaterhouseCoopers' report estimates that transitioning away from the RCMP would cost at least \$366 million and that Alberta would lose \$170 million in funding from the federal government. Calgary-Acadians certainly have a few ideas on how to better spend those millions of tax dollars. Let me remind you of some that I've already mentioned: health care, education, housing, cost of living, affordability, fair bargaining. And while it's well and good to focus on the future of our province – it is important to have a plan – if you choose to undersupport our fellow Albertans who need help right now, you are actively doing a disservice to the province. Bill 11 does not serve Albertans where they need to be served.

This government promised a tax break for Albertans with income under \$60,000, a tax break that would have placed up to \$1,500 back into their wallets. But where's the tax break? Oh, wait. It's been delayed. But don't worry; you'll see it again before the next election. Does the UCP government truly believe that Albertans are stupid? Do they think that if they use the same carrot, tax breaks, in 2027, without having actually actualized their 2023 campaign promises, Albertans will take them seriously or continue to trust them? Albertans will look at the output from these bills, note that they as Albertans receive nothing from them, note all the wasted tax dollars gambled on things Albertans do not want, yet you think that they'll still support you. Mr. Chair, that's arrogance if I've ever heard it.

Bill 11 is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It offers claims of safety and provides nothing more than power and control to this wishy-washy government. I encourage all members to vote against Bill 11.

The Deputy Chair: The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview has risen to make comment.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks for the opportunity to rise and speak a little bit about Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Just to begin with, I'll let everyone know that I have more than just a few concerns with this bill as well as a few questions and, I hope, a few insightful observations to share with everyone today.

As I begin, though, I am, of course, mindful of the complexities involved in the work that police officers, sheriffs, peace officers, RCMP officers, and all of those that they work with do on our collective behalf. I very much appreciate that their work isn't easy and is often trying. I can say that, personally, there have been a few moments in my life when I have been incredibly grateful for their presence.

That being said, Mr. Chair, I'm speaking in opposition to this bill. During the most recent election, despite earlier musings by a previous UCP government, this version of the UCP promised that there wouldn't be any pursuit of a provincial police service. It just wasn't in the cards. It wasn't anything that folks needed to concern themselves with. It is curious that that didn't happen during the election, but now it appears to be happening. My assumption is that one of the reasons why it didn't happen during the election was because everyone was very clear that it wasn't supported by Albertans no matter where they might live.

Certainly, when I talk to folks in my riding of Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and when I ask them about this new police agency, I'm going to tell you that folks are simply confused. They don't know why. They wonder why, if there are issues with the RCMP, our government wouldn't just simply try to work them out. If this is where the government is deciding to land at this moment, they wonder why. I know that they're feeling a bit left out here, because they have really important issues on their minds like the lack of affordable housing, the lack of rental spaces, the lack of

supportive housing, the lack of family doctors or access to primary care, the lack of supports for children in our schools.

But this UCP government clearly isn't one that's about listening to views that are in opposition to what it wants or has unilaterally decided to do even as it promises it won't do it, and I suppose, as a result, despite the idea clearly still lingering in the background, that's probably why talk about this particular issue all but disappeared during the campaign.

4:40

So here we are with Bill 11 in front of us, yet another example of the fine listening skills of this UCP government. This is a bill which amends the Police Act and allows for the establishment of an independent police agency. Certainly, oversight is a good thing. It's always a good thing to have that sort of check and balance going on. But that isn't the only initiative that's addressed in this bill. As I've alluded to, it's about the qualification, and it's about the establishment of that additional police agency.

Now, I understand that the idea, at least from what we've heard from the minister and others, for this new independent police agency is that it will operate seamlessly alongside local police, whoever and wherever they might be, and if we're to believe that, Mr. Chair, the goal isn't an entire police service. It's just about being able to increase and enhance the jobs of Alberta sheriffs. However, as the minister has noted, if sheriffs are going to be acting like police – and I am certainly paraphrasing at this moment – then they should be treated like police. It would seem to me, then, that any discussions that we might be having about an independent police agency, we're actually having about an Alberta provincial police.

That's why I believe that the claims that it's just an agency, that it's not that important, that it's just a step to help sheriffs kind of realize their job aspirations – I'm going to say that this is an incredibly disingenuous argument. While saying that sheriffs will merely continue to see the scope of their work change to include more policelike work, to work alongside officers but that it's not totally police work, much in the way that sheriffs have already seen that scope of practice change, I wonder what, in the end, those changes will actually look like. Will sheriffs just have one or two additional duties added to the current work, or will they perhaps see over time greater and greater policing responsibility?

This bill does indeed, despite the use of the word "agency," set up a body that amounts to a provincial police service. It sets a framework, it sets the infrastructure for such a service, and that's in addition to creating a body to oversee the work of that agency. You know, I'm reminded of, like, the whole *Field of Dreams* thing: if you build it, he will come. I think this is being built, and a provincial police service will indeed be the next item on our agenda.

Mr. Chair, I also have some concerns where cost implications for Albertans lie. Since we know there's no budget allocation for this new independent policing agency – or one would assume to move those additionally trained sheriffs up the collective agreement pay grid – I'm wondering just where the money will be coming from. Where will the money be coming from for a new board or the new chief? What's the plan? Will there be money coming from contingency dollars, from current programming or perhaps current initiatives? Are we going to be moving around some deck chairs?

One of the things I was curious about when I began to think about the money: I was wondering how much the OPP costs. I was wondering how much the Quebec version of provincial police, the Sûreté, costs. In Ontario – now, granted, they do have an increased population, certainly – they have an annual budget of nearly \$1.4 billion. In Quebec it turns out to be \$183 million. That's an awful

lot of money to establish an agency that isn't actually an official agency or police service.

If we can take what the minister says at face value in terms of, "We're just creating this agency to provide a bit of a buffer when or if the RCMP and the province together decide not to renew the RCMP's agreement with the province," that means that in less than a decade many towns and cities will need to proceed either with the creation of their own unique police services, who, again, I assume the newly increased scope of practice, enhanced sheriffs will be very happy to work alongside, or again we're going to have to take this agency and make it into a full-fledged police service. I can only imagine what that final annual budget might actually look like.

Again, it's incredibly curious to me, when I think about a government that's all about "We need to be fiscally responsible," Mr. Chair, the fact that there's no budget allocation for this agency or for the boards associated with it or for salaries that have to come along with it or for a raise in salary for all of those sheriffs who are going to be having those enhanced capabilities within their job description. I'm curious as to why there was no funding in the current budget. It honestly doesn't make sense to me.

One of the other things that doesn't make sense to me is the fact that we know that Albertans don't want this. A year ago Albertans didn't want this. A month ago Albertans didn't want this. They've said it loud and clear on multiple occasions. Folks absolutely want to maintain and strengthen what we have in terms of public safety initiatives, but folks also want that focus to be on improving policing along with an improvement of social services and an improvement of the justice system to ensure, for instance, that rural communities are indeed safe and supported. They didn't just want to discard what is already in place.

Certainly, as a teacher I can attest to the importance, Mr. Chair, of those wraparound supports, depending upon the circumstances, but in cases with any measure of complexity it makes a great deal of sense that the police wouldn't simply just be on their own. They'd be there with a team right from the first point of contact with whoever that person might be at the centre of that first point of contact.

Indeed, I've had conversations with many constituents who understand the many complexities some folks live with daily. As a result of those complexities, they also see the need, the necessity for comprehensive supports being available. Problems will not be resolved or fixed if there is only one strategy that's being applied. That isn't how it works. So why, then? What is the real reason why this agency is being created if not to provide an end run around what Albertans are saying loudly? They've been saying it loudly for a period of years, not just a period of months.

The other issue, of course, is that issue of recruitment. We know that police forces around the world, around the rest of Canada and other jurisdictions, have been having an awful lot of problems recruiting officers. While there is a wee bit of easing going on, that indeed is an issue. So the notion that the RCMP might be having some difficulty: that's probably true. But we also know that, like other police services out there, those difficulties in terms of attracting, retaining new officers are indeed easing. We know that sometimes a vacancy isn't always a vacancy. It could be someone off on a leave. It could be a paternity leave or sick leave. In fact, then those positions will, I'm sure, be soon filled. We also know that because of that interjurisdictional aspect of things, there is indeed competition amongst those different agencies, and I'm sure that the different agencies have been talking to each other.

But coming back to the issue of funding, having things in place just in case the agreement with the RCMP is not renewed: how much, again, will this new program, the new agency, actually cost?

Finally, Mr. Chair, with respect to sheriffs, who will of course be central to the new independent police agency, I have grave concerns because, as we know, they simply weren't consulted before the tabling of this bill. I've got concerns about what their new scope of practice will be, collective bargaining agreements. Interested in knowing what consultations might have taken place either before, during, or after the bill was tabled. I'm wondering if there is a plan for transitioning those sheriffs who upgrade their training to a new job. What happens to their seniority, to their salary? Will they have benefits of a new agreement? To their conditions of work: will they be safe? Will they get home at the end of the day?

As one of my colleagues has already noted, this government really likes to fix things that aren't broken. It is about the fact that there are structures that exist that maybe need some support and improvement.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'll end my remarks.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any others wishing to make comments?

If not, are we ready to take the question? Okay. Ready for the questions on Bill 11, the Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 11 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 is carried.

4:50

Bill 13 Real Property Governance Act

The Deputy Chair: I will call the committee to order. Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The Member for Calgary-Elbow has risen.

Member Kayande: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yeah. I'd like to speak on the Real Property Governance Act, Bill 13. It's one of these, like, just plumbing and electrical of government. It's actually refreshing to see that in this particular session, when there are so many other things going on.

The area where I want to, like, actually speak to a little bit is that this bill actually – there are two things that really create somewhat of a missed opportunity here. One is specifically around school boards, and the challenge is that the school board will be compensated at book value for the sale of their land. Now, basically, book value, if you're not an accountant, is the historical cost at which the asset is carried on the books. In many cases the book value of some of these land parcels, especially if it's a land parcel in inner-city Calgary or inner-city Edmonton or inner-city, really, any city – in the oldest parts of the city these land parcels can be actually extremely valuable at market rates. School boards depend on the sale of these lands in order to fund things like fitting up schools, for example, because, you know, a new school's funding comes with the cost of the building. It doesn't necessarily include the cost of the desks and most certainly does not include a playground, for which I hope there will be a separate bill and a separate opportunity to talk about that.

Bottom line: if the school board is going to get compensated at historical cost rather than at market value, first of all, I can foresee a situation – having had a management position at a large, complex enterprise, I know that when line managers are not compensated for

doing the right thing, oftentimes they tend to, you know, hold on to resources. Certainly, if a land is truly surplus, I would like to see the school boards with an incentive to declare it surplus and then have it actually addressed in that way. That's one comment on this bill, on Bill 13.

The second comment that I have is actually more related to the massive, massive challenge that we have as a province in building sufficient housing for people who want to move here. We are in a crisis, and we need to build double the number of homes that we built last year. It's actually very clear that there is no plan right now. The market can't do it right away. It takes time to ramp up. The government also needs to take a step. For sure, one of the elements that would be really attractive and helpful for building additional housing is if other lands owned by other governments as well as consolidated entities could be repurposed explicitly for housing. The fact that Bill 13 doesn't say, "Hey, let's, for the first-priority use, see if housing is an appropriate use," is, I think, a massive missed opportunity because we can foresee that, you know, if this province continues to be a place where people want to move to, then we need to house them as a primary goal.

Like, our lack of housing is not just a human cost. It's not just a cost in relation to, you know, the lack of dignity that people are facing. And it's not just a stressor in terms of parents who are concerned that their kids are never going to move out of their basement – believe me, I'm going to be in that situation – and adult children who are wondering: what am I going to do? There is also the sheer economic cost of dealing with housing unaffordability, where businesses come to me and ask me: "What are you going to do about this problem? I can't pay my people enough that they'll stay here. They'll work with me for six months, and then – bang – they're off."

So the fact that this bill, unfortunately, does not have in the legislation first use of housing as one of the most important and highest value uses of land and including perhaps the ability to cut some municipal red tape when, for example, a school board or a provincial department or another consolidated entity decides to bring surplus land and eliminate the excuse of, "Well, it turns out that this property isn't zoned for housing," for example, and cut through some of that red tape and just say: no; look, this is provincial land, and we're going to use it for housing, and that's going to be the first use.

Those are two things that I definitely have questions about, especially at the Committee of the Whole stage, where it's possible to bring amendments. I honestly don't know, like, what the kind of amendment would be, but one thing that I do want is some protection for school boards for the revenue source that they're going to be giving up on, some incentive for consolidated entities to start declaring land surplus and use those surplus lands to build homes for people. I think that that is something that a government that serves the people of Alberta, that we on either side of the aisle can agree with. Let's build some housing.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Member.

Any others wishing to comment? The Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I rise today in the Committee of the Whole stage on Bill 13, the Real Property Governance Act. This bill, if passed as written, will replace the current process around surplus properties for school boards and postsecondary institutions with one where the Minister of Infrastructure and department staff will decide the disposal of that property behind

closed doors. In that sense, we do have yet another example of undermining local democracy and local decision-making.

It is to that, Mr. Chair, that I would like to move an amendment at this stage of debate on Bill 13. The requisite number of copies are there for the table.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. I'll ask the member to read the amendment into the record. You may proceed.

Ms Phillips: Sure. The amendment reads that the Real Property Governance Act be amended by striking out section 4 and substituting the following:

Paramountcy

4(1) Subject to subsection (2), the provisions of this Act and the regulations under this Act prevail to the extent of any inconsistency or conflict with one or more provisions of any other enactment.

(2) If there is an inconsistency or conflict between a provision of this Act or the regulations under this Act and one or more provisions of the following enactments, including any regulations made under those enactments, the provisions under those enactments prevail:

- (a) Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act;
- (b) Education Act;
- (c) Post-secondary Learning Act.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the House receives copies of the amendment, I would like to just provide a little bit of reasoning for moving it if I might. All right. Thank you. During this sitting the Assembly has of course seen Bill 20, the Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Bill 20, if passed without amendments, will give the cabinet power to overturn municipal elections, fire duly elected councillors by a process known only to Premier and cabinet. It also applies to school boards, as it turns out, or at least as far as we understand. It will give the Premier and the cabinet the power to amend local bylaws. It will, in short, replace local democratic processes with cabinet decisions.

5:00

Another example during this session that we have seen is Bill 18, which would give the cabinet the power to overturn agreements between federal governments and provincial entities, including but not limited to school boards and postsecondary institutions. I note as well that nonprofits and others could be designated provincial entities in a sprawling piece of legislation that would have widespread consequences for the financial stability of a number of different organizations, both public, private, and in civil society. Bill 13 continues, unamended that is, with that theme of, in fact, the Executive Council being gatekeeper-in-chief of everything that they can get their hands on, Mr. Chair.

The current process for surplus properties of Alberta school boards is broadly that a duly elected school board determines which properties are surplus and takes into account education needs, capital needs of the community, and the student growth trends before determining if properties should be sold or retained. The Minister of Education, in the current iteration anyway, holds the pen on the final outcome, and in this way a locally elected school board can determine what's in the best interests of the community.

Bill 13 will change that process. Instead of the school board looking to the needs of the community in terms of education, a community to which they are accountable, I might add, the minister's department staff decides. Section 7 of the bill says that entities like school boards "must offer to transfer the real property to the Department of Infrastructure at net book value." Section 7(2)

states, "If an offer to transfer is made... the Department of Infrastructure shall assess whether the real property should be repurposed or disposed of by the Minister." Once again, "disposed of by the Minister" meaning that we have ministerial authority over a process that was iterative between elements of local democracy, taking into account local needs and local accountability, I might add, because if the community didn't like the way that things were being disposed of, they could hold those people accountable every four years.

When this bill was introduced, the president of the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta, Dennis MacNeil, said that he had concerns about this effect on school boards' autonomy, and when you add those concerns around capital and infrastructure planning and you add that to the potentially far-reaching consequences of Bill 20 on school boards, this adds up to a direct attack on school boards and the important function that they play both constitutionally in terms of provinces having constitutional power over education but also just the ability for citizens to have accountability through the education system. I'm sure many Albertans have questions such as this, such as Dennis MacNeil has, and nowhere in this process is there an assessment of local education needs by an elected school board. It's all up to the Minister of Infrastructure.

Similarly, with postsecondary institutions and their properties Bill 13 will override the current process where basically the university or college incorporates plans for land in long-term planning and then takes into account education needs of the institution. There's also here an interplay with Bill 18. Postsecondary institutions often undertake future capital investments in concert with the federal government. This is something that they do based on their future enrolment growth, their future research needs, their partnerships with the federal government, with federal agencies, and with the private sector. This bill will override a number of those postsecondary processes, and it will centralize the ability to make those land and capital decisions within the Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Chair, many Edmontonians can no doubt envision a scenario where the UCP government unilaterally decides to sell off the University of Alberta farm to developers without a thought to the long-term needs of the university community or even to the residential community surrounding the farm. Certainly, that piece of land has been the subject of a lot of community planning and university planning over the years. The insertion of the Minister of Infrastructure and a UCP government fundamentally hostile to academic freedom would certainly constitute too many cooks in the kitchen there.

This bill that we're currently debating, Bill 13, continues with that theme of antidemocratic, antilocal decision-making and centralization of power in cabinet. It is for this reason that I rise today to introduce this amendment and to ensure decisions of this nature are left with people actually running schools, colleges, and universities, and that is why the amendment proposed paramountcy of FOIP, the Education Act, and the Post-secondary Learning Act.

Other than a sort of throwaway line in the MacKinnon report the UCP government has not really offered any meaningful insight as to why it needs to override school boards and postsecondary institutions. There might be some accounting reasons or other infrastructure planning reasons to bring forward this piece of legislation. Those haven't been particularly well articulated in this House. The ways in which the current process is broken, if it is in fact broken, are not clear to me. I don't think they're clear to this House, I don't think they're clear to the public, and they certainly, based on the comments from the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta president, aren't clear to school boards either. So I urge this Assembly to ensure that the paramountcy of the Education Act

and the Post-secondary Learning Act are maintained with the passage of this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

This amendment will be referred to as amendment A1.

Are there any members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The Minister of Infrastructure has risen to speak.

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah. Thanks, Mr. Chair. Over the course of debate here I've heard commentary that I feel misrepresents Bill 13, so I'll make some quick comments to set the record straight in a few different areas and explain the problem that we're solving for and, finally, provide some corrective comments around process where education and school boards are concerned and then, naturally, give a recommendation on the amendment. You know, first, this bill only applies to entities that exist on Alberta's consolidated balance sheet. Effectively, the GOA is the parent organization, and ABCs are the subsidiaries. That means that infrastructure assets are already owned by the province and previously paid for by the taxpayers of Alberta.

Now, lands transferred, Mr. Chair, are being done at book value, and that's because that is the valuation attributed to those assets on that same consolidated balance sheet. Net book value allows for transfers on a balance sheet without adjustments to our financial position. It's also being done because the GOA already paid for these properties, with a consolidated entity receiving the asset virtually for free. So net book value is actually a significant net gain for a school board or any consolidated entity, but I'll have some more to say on that a bit later.

There are exceptions here, Mr. Chair. Bill 13 does not apply to grazing leases. You know, these have a long-standing process and a history, so we felt that those would be best to remain with the department of agriculture. Donated lands with caveats: this is applied, naturally, because we want to honour the wishes of donors. Family accommodation within the Alberta Housing Act: here we felt that decision-making where affordable dwellings are concerned was best assessed through ASHC. Naturally, no entity should be permitted to transfer away liability around contaminated sites. Land trusts are excluded as well, with regulations being developed.

Next, on the paramountcy thing this was the easiest way to deal with the numerous existing acts that are out there that deal with property, thus avoiding excess administration and avoidance of potential inconsistency and conflicting provisions.

5:10

Now the problem that we're solving for here, Mr. Chair. In Alberta and across Canada governments purchase land, they build the infrastructure, and then they transfer those assets away to their agencies, boards, and commissions. They do that for a nominal fee, and that's typically \$1. If the GOA wants to use those lands for priority projects in the future, it's expected by those ABCs that we will repurchase that land or lease those very same properties back at market value.

Mr. Chair, like, these are lands that the people of Alberta already paid for once, and we are purchasing those back a second time, properties the GOA paid for, transferred to an ABC for \$1, and exist currently on Alberta's current balance sheet. So this doesn't make a lot of sense.

Now, it was mentioned more than once by opposition members that they couldn't understand how the province would save money through Bill 13. You know, in the last five years the province has transferred away assets in the order of \$3.3 billion, and our ABCs hold over \$83 billion in land and building assets. I think that should

be a little bit of an eye-opener as to the magnitude of the potential savings.

Now, where school boards are concerned, I'd like to explain the process because decision-making on surplus lands remains exactly the same as it does now. There is no change, Mr. Chair. Currently schools are built, and assets, including land, are transferred to the school division for a nominal \$1 fee upon construction completion and typically held in a municipal school reserve. When land at some time in the future is deemed surplus, the school board notifies the Minister of Education, who will sign off, allowing the division to sell that property. The current practice is to offer the municipality first right of purchase, and this is the element that we're altering. Now the GOA will have first right.

If the property is deemed surplus by the school board, they'll notify the Minister of Education. If the minister approves that surplus classification, the school board will notify Infrastructure in writing, giving the GOA an opportunity to assess potential priority opportunities. If the GOA chooses to retain the land, they will pay book value for the property. If the GOA chooses not to proceed, then the school division can offer the property at market value to the municipality and then to the marketplace if the municipality decides to pass as well. Once again, this does not change decision-making around surplus land for school boards.

Mr. Chair, the opposition has made some claims around Bill 13, but these changes are good policy, plain and simple. This is just common-sense stuff. The RPG Act creates, first, a single inventory system with a platform that will have a public interface, and second, it creates a right of first refusal for lands under the GOA's balance sheet. This is going to reduce red tape – oh, the red tape minister didn't look up – with having fewer transactions. It will increase transparency and improve decision-making, naturally saving millions of dollars by not repurchasing or leasing lands more than once. It's common sense.

With that said, you know, I would not recommend us moving forward with this amendment as it provides exceptions that kind of circumvent the nature of this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any others wishing to make comments on amendment A1?

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are back on the main bill, Bill 13. Any comments, questions, or amendments on the main bill?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question on Bill 13?

[The remaining clauses of Bill 13 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 is carried.

The Minister of Mental Health and Addiction has risen.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I move that the committee rise and report bills 11 and 13.

[Motion carried]

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. van Dijken: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the

following bills: Bill 11, Bill 13. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Speaker: All those in favour of the report, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. In my opinion, the ayes have it. The motion is carried and so ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading (continued)

Bill 19 Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move second reading of Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

Albertans have told us that a key affordability issue is the rising cost and volatility of utility bills. Bill 19 addresses this problem head-on and begins what will be quite a number of changes that will follow in the months ahead. The Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act will help make utility costs more affordable and predictable across the province by ending the use of variable rates when setting local access fees for electricity and natural gas service distribution. This bill also includes legislation that will enable changes to the name of the default rate of electricity, currently known as the regulated rate option, or the RRO.

Mr. Speaker, it's my privilege to present this bill and move it through second reading in the House. If passed, these legislative amendments will help deliver relief for many Albertans struggling with the cost of living. We heard concerns about the high impact of local access fees being charged on Albertans' utility bills by municipalities. Local access fees function essentially as a regressive tax that is charged to electricity distributors by municipalities. These fees are then passed on to all distributors' customers in the municipality and appear on the local access fees line item on their utilities bill.

Linear taxes and franchise fees are usually combined together on consumers' power bills in one line item as the local access fee. The linear tax is charged to the utility for the right to use the municipality's property for the construction, operation, and extension of that utility. The franchise fee is the charge paid by the utility to the municipality for the exclusive right to provide service in that municipality. These fees are set by municipalities and can vary greatly across the province. Local access fees are usually calculated as a percentage, typically 10 to 15 per cent of the transmission and distribution costs, and are essentially the delivery costs for electricity.

Only two municipalities do not use a fixed percentage of delivery costs to calculate their local access fees. These are Calgary and Edmonton. In the city of Edmonton they use a consumption-based calculation, which is a fixed charge based on the cents per kilowatt hour of consumed power. The city of Calgary, however, is the only municipality that employs a two-part fee calculation formula. Their formula is 11 per cent of the delivery charges plus 11 per cent of the variable or the regulated rate option multiplied by the consumed kilowatt hours. This formula has led to extremely high and unpredictable local access fees for Calgarians over recent years and could again in the future if not addressed.

5:20

In 2023 the average Calgarian paid \$240 in local access fees while the average Edmontonian only paid \$75. Mr. Speaker, the rules for applying local access fees for basic utility services should be consistent across the province. Currently local access fees are capped at 20 per cent for electricity and 35 per cent for natural gas for the majority of Alberta's municipalities. However, this doesn't currently apply to municipally owned service providers like in Edmonton and Calgary. Municipalities who own their own service provider aren't subject to the same level of oversight from the Alberta Utilities Commission for their local access fees. The Alberta Utilities Commission is the independent utilities regulator, with a mandate to protect Albertans' best interests in the electricity market, ensuring that customers receive safe and reliable service at just and reasonable rates.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's clear that the current rules for local access fees are not fair, and that is why we have chosen to introduce Bill 19. If passed, Bill 19 would protect Albertan ratepayers and provide much-needed affordability and predictability. The changes included in Bill 19 would reduce and stabilize local access fees across Alberta through the amendments to the Municipal Government Act, the MGA; the Electric Utilities Act, the EUA; and the Gas Utilities Act, the GUA.

The amendments to the Municipal Government Act would end the use of variable rates when setting local access fees. As previously mentioned, Calgary bases their local access fees on the variable regulated rate. Because the RRO currently fluctuates on a monthly basis, Calgary's local access fees are far more volatile and lead to higher costs in comparison to other municipalities. Spikes in the RRO price last year led to local access fees costing Calgarians an average of \$240 over the course of the year. This is significant when compared to Edmonton's average of only \$75 in 2023. It may not seem like much when presented as an individual average, but using this formula, Calgary collected \$303 million in revenue from local access fees, which is a surplus of \$186 million more in these fees being collected by the city than they had budgeted for. This is grossly over and above their anticipated \$117 million in revenue through November of 2023.

Prohibiting the usage of variable rates when calculating local access fees aligns with how most municipalities in Alberta are already setting their fees. Additionally, this would simply ensure that no other municipality is able to use their local access fees as a formula for a cash cow, like Calgary has done over the past few years. It is unacceptable for municipalities to be raking in hundreds of millions of dollars in surplus revenue off the backs of Albertans by tying their fees to a variable rate.

Bill 19 would also amend sections of the Electric Utilities Act and the Gas Utilities Act to ensure that the Alberta Utilities Commission has stronger regulatory oversight over these fees, ensuring all of Alberta's ratepayers are better protected. Currently municipalities that wholly own their utility company, such as Calgary's Enmax and Edmonton's EPCOR, are subject to far less regulatory oversight from the Alberta Utilities Commission. Let me be clear that neither Enmax nor EPCOR set this rate or profit from this rate. It is strictly a cost passed on from the municipality to their customers.

The Alberta Utilities Commission is an independent agency of the province that is responsible to ensure that the delivery of Alberta's utilities service takes place in a manner that is fair, responsible, and in the public interest. The entire purpose of the Alberta Utilities Commission is to protect the social, economic, and environmental interests of Alberta where competitive market forces

do not. They are impartial and objective, and they are an important aspect of accountability.

By granting the Alberta Utilities Commission strong oversight over all of Alberta's local access fees, we are ensuring that all of Alberta's ratepayers are more appropriately protected. There have been some inaccurate claims that the delays in correcting the city of Calgary's local access fees were due to the Alberta Utilities Commission timelines for approval. This is simply not the case. As the Alberta Utilities Commission has confirmed, any application to approve a new formula would take less than three months, not three years, like some have claimed, proven in fact by a similar application from Calgary in 2017 that took two and a half months.

Albertans need relief on their utility bills as soon as possible. That's why, if passed, the changes in Bill 19 would come into effect for January 1, 2025, not in 2027, as proposed by the city of Calgary. Reducing the cost of Albertans' utility bills is my top priority for the Ministry of Affordability and Utilities, and local access fees are an important part of this process.

In addition to local access fees, our government is also focusing on addressing Alberta's default electricity rate, the second item addressed in Bill 19, which is currently known as the regulated rate option. In Alberta we are fortunate to have a unique, deregulated electricity market and are the only jurisdiction like this in Canada. The only other energy-only market in North America is Texas in the United States.

The beauty of having a free market in Alberta is that utilities consumers have options. In fact, Albertans have three choices when purchasing their electricity and natural gas utilities: the default rate, as we're discussing; a competitive contract for a variable or floating rate; or a competitive contract for a fixed rate. In Alberta customers who don't sign a competitive contract will receive the default electricity rate from their local RRO provider. Default electricity rates currently fluctuate month to month based on market prices for electricity in Alberta. These rates are set by the Alberta Utilities Commission and are not determined by government.

To get a fixed rate, you're required to sign a contract with a competitive retailer, of which we have 52 terrific independent retailers in Alberta. They offer a wide range of creative and innovative plans. I encourage all Albertans to check them out.

Only a fixed-rate plan will guarantee a certain rate. A fixed rate is a guarantee from a utility company that your utility rate will stay the same over a specified period of time. Knowing the price you're paying every month can help you better budget your monthly expenses. A fixed rate does not necessarily mean that you will pay the same amount each month. Your monthly utility bill can be higher or lower, depending on the amount of energy that you have used or consumed over the previous month. A fixed rate protects you from the market rate fluctuations. The cost of a kilowatt hour is the unit of measurement for electricity within North America. If you lock in the rate and market rates increase, you still get to keep your lower rate.

Another amazing part of Alberta's deregulated electricity market is that even if you sign a long-term contract up to five years, you are able to break that contract at any time without penalty. As with other financial contracts like a mortgage, the market may change and make another option more attractive. However, Albertans are only able to take advantage of our deregulated electricity market if they are informed and understand these opportunities.

If you sign a competitive contract, the best part is that you're always able to move to a better option if one becomes available. Many consumers are on the default electricity rate simply because they aren't aware of these options. This is especially true for those who have recently moved to Alberta from other provinces. That's why last year our government led a public awareness campaign, and

tens of thousands of Albertans moved off the default rate to a more affordable and stable electricity option even while the temporary price cap on the rate was in place.

Currently there are roughly 430,000 residential RRO customers. Approximately 29 per cent of residential customers purchase their electricity through the regulated rate option along with another 32 per cent of eligible commercial customers and 46 per cent of farm customers. Edmonton makes up the largest portion of residential default rate consumers, with over a third of Edmontonians purchasing their electricity through the default electricity rate, and this doesn't include the commercial customers within Edmonton.

In February 2023 our government established an RRO working group to examine the future of the default electricity rate in Alberta. This working group was made up of industry experts to help provide our government with recommendations on what to do with a default rate moving forward.

The number one recommendation that the working group made was for our government to help Albertans be better informed about their electricity rate. There are a number of ways to do this, including the changes we're making through this legislation. In Budget 2024 we increased funding for the Utilities Consumer Advocate. As part of the Ministry of Affordability and Utilities the Utilities Consumer Advocate aims to help educate and advocate for Alberta's utility consumers, including residents, farmers, and small businesses. They help educate consumers through a variety of outreach programs and engagement activities and help mediate disputes between consumers and their power providers.

5:30

Albertans who may be experiencing hardship resulting in difficulty paying utility bills can apply to the Utilities Consumer Advocate for financial assistance as well. While the Utilities Consumer Advocate is a fantastic resource, the RRO working group had the recommendation to change the name of the default electricity rate to allow consumers to better understand the rate they are paying and encourage them to find the best option for them. I want to thank the RRO working group for the recommendations on helping better inform Albertans of their choices.

Mr. Speaker, through Bill 19 we are looking to rename the default rate of electricity, currently known as the regulated rate option, or the RRO, to the rate of last resort. The name regulated rate option has been misleading. By changing the name to the rate of last resort, this will more clearly communicate to Alberta consumers that the default rate is neither directly regulated nor determined by government.

As part of the transition to this new name, administrative amendments need to be made in the acts that are affected. The terms "regulated rate option, RRO," and "regulated rate provider" are in four acts and will be amended to the new terms "rate of last resort" and "rate of last resort provider" as applicable. The impacted acts include the Alberta Utilities Commission Act, the Electric Utilities Act, the Government Organization Act, and the RRO stability act.

This proposed name change is yet another step towards ensuring Albertans' electricity system is affordable, reliable, and sustainable for generations to come. It is designed in part to encourage Albertans to make informed decisions by providing clarity and removing confusion about what the default rate is. Once Bill 19 is passed, our government will continue to work through stakeholders to update regulations that will be brought forward by the end of this year in order to align the rate with its new name. We remain committed to the legislative process, and more details will be outlined through regulation and policy once this legislation is passed.

Making life more affordable for all Albertans has been and continues to be my top priority. We have taken an all-government approach, and addressing utility prices has been my primary focus. Electricity is not a luxury; it is a basic necessity, and utility bills can make or break a tight budget when every penny counts. By lowering the cost of utilities and empowering consumers to get the best rate available to them, we are directly making a difference for every single Albertan. While the federal government is continuing to make power bills more expensive with their carbon tax, our government is doing everything we possibly can to help Albertans save their hard-earned dollars.

Mr. Speaker, I hereby move second reading of Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, and ask all members of this House to support this bill. Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities has moved second reading of Bill 19. Is there anyone wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore has the call.

Ms Al-Guneid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak about Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. From what we see here, this is a bill that will do two things. One is changing the name of the regulated rate option, RRO, and, two, changing the local access fee in municipalities.

Let's start with the RRO. While I do appreciate the intention of clarifying the term "regulated" in the RRO name to Albertans, the government should focus on tackling the root issues affecting electricity prices in Alberta. The UCP government delivered record electricity prices last summer. Albertans paid one of the highest power prices in the whole country. Alberta's default electricity rate soared to its highest rate charged to Albertans in the province's history. It reached to around 29 and 33 cents per kilowatt hour in August 2023.

Instead of looking at the root of the problem, the government of Alberta capped what Albertans on the RRO would pay. The price cap limited the amount per kilowatt hour that RRO providers can charge Albertans, with the difference to be paid back by RRO users over a 21-month period. Now, for the record this UCP price cap came at a \$200 million cost, which under the government's current policy design will be recovered by raising the RRO rates from April 2023 to December 2024. This policy design for the cap has some serious consequences on Albertans. You know why, Mr. Speaker? Albertans who remained on the RRO continued to face a roughly 2.5 cent per kilowatt hour additional charge on their bills. This is according to a University of Calgary School of Public Policy study. This added cost to the RRO has made competitive retail rates more attractive, which has increased the incentive to leave the RRO for those who are able to make the switch. The question is: how many people have the privilege and the luxury to make this switch? I doubt the UCP will know. We know that they barely consult with Albertans or impacted communities. We've seen the sham consultations of Bill 18 and Bill 20 as well as their pension consultations. They barely consult with Albertans.

If they try to talk to people, they'll know that Albertans are still struggling with the cost of living and energy bills. My team and I have canvassed thousands of homes and spent many hours speaking with the constituents of the beautiful riding of Calgary-Glenmore. I'll never forget speaking to a couple in Cedarbrae, who told me that they're moving from their apartment because the rent increased from \$1,300 to \$1,900 a month. Just like that and overnight. I won't forget the tenants from Glenmore Gardens and Elata complexes as they discussed their concern with the increasing rents. Tenants in

this complex have faced drastic rent increases. Some renters have faced a 60 per cent increase of what they were paying before.

Calgary-Glenmore is home to more than 10,795 seniors, and many are currently struggling to keep up with the rising cost of living and out-of-control rent increases. The Glenmore Gardens and Elata complexes are home to more than 400 families, with 60 per cent of individuals being seniors. The seniors are on fixed incomes, trying to keep up with the rent increases, cost of living, and the skyrocketing electricity prices under this government for the last three years.

Mr. Speaker, last weekend I attended an event with the communities of Woodbine and Woodlands. They opened a community pantry in the Calgary-Glenmore riding. While I'm deeply grateful to the amazing community leaders and volunteers who are thinking about their vulnerable neighbours in Calgary-Glenmore, this only shows how many Albertans are facing food insecurity, struggling with the cost of living, cost of energy, and the cost of groceries.

Now, I invite the members opposite to understand the problem that they created with their electricity cap. This is confirmed by the University of Calgary School of Public Policy. Some Albertans who benefited from the UCP cap last winter have fled the RRO and avoided the cost, leaving those that remain with an awful and increasing burden to pay the \$200 million cap. They cannot leave the RRO rate, and they won't be able to leave the rate of last resort.

Mr. Speaker, do you know who remains on the RRO rate, covering the expense of the UCP's cap? The most vulnerable. The ones with harder socioeconomic backgrounds. The newcomers with no credit history in our country. The ones with lower credit scores because the credit requirements from individual utilities in Alberta and household credit scores might not allow many Albertans to qualify for the competitive retail rate.

Under the new rate, the rate of last resort, these vulnerable Albertans will face the same challenge. They still cannot change the rate to other competitive rates. They would be stuck with the rate, and they are stuck fixing the UCP's problematic cap that they created to begin with. When some Albertans are forced to remain on the RRO and the newly created rate of last resort due to credit barriers while others leave, the repayment of the \$200 million cost of the UCP cap falls squarely on those who can least afford it. This is the problem, Mr. Speaker. Some Albertans who benefit from the cap can flee these rates and avoid the cost, leaving the most vulnerable covering this burden.

5:40

In the last quarter of 2023 the total number of residential RRO customers fell by around 66,000. This is the highest net reduction in any quarter since 2012. There has been an exodus from the RRO, and it is the most privileged who are able to exit this rate. What is the government planning to do to help the most vulnerable who will be stuck on the rate of last resort, as they were stuck in the RRO? Nothing changes for them. Has the government considered stepping up to cover security deposits and credit requirements, enabling all Albertans to not only access the rate of last resort but also new and competitive rates? What does the government plan to do with the rest of the cost of the cap? Does it plan to cover the entire cost of the cap? Are they backstopping the cost with taxpayers' money? This is \$200 million. Who's paying for this? Is it the most vulnerable? Have you also consulted with industry on: how can the government keep a competitive policy environment for retailers to provide competitive rates for Albertans? These are the questions we need answers to.

Now, let's look at the local access fee. The local access fee is used to cover the costs municipalities charge utility companies for

the right to exclusively serve its residents and to have utility infrastructure on municipal grounds. The Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, will force municipalities, including the city of Calgary, to change how it calculates local access fees. To be clear, this legislative process through Bill 19 will amend what the city of Calgary is doing and force the change on the municipality.

Now, it was fascinating to me. We heard the Minister of Municipal Affairs multiple times citing that this calculation change is a good example of why the UCP needs Bill 20. It is surprising because the minister has spent many years as an elected official, yet he clearly doesn't understand that Bill 19 will help the government make changes to the local access fees without imposing the UCP's nondemocratic Bill 20. To be clear, the government can make changes to the local access fees through the democratic legislative process. The government can make this change through the Assembly without being autocratic and without jeopardizing our democratic process.

Mr. Speaker, besides autocratic bills the UCP are conducting heavy-handed tactics and approaches to electricity prices. As I said earlier, if they want to fix electricity prices, they should look into the deep causes of the problem while increasing low-cost energy supply to enter the market. But this is the government that imposed a moratorium on renewables. The UCP decided to ban renewables in Alberta, another heavy-handed, big-government intervention. When the government halts renewables, it is also halting new energy supply from entering the market. Not only are renewables low cost and low emission; it is well known that increasing competition in the market is key to reducing electricity prices and addressing the affordability crisis that this government has presided over in Alberta.

While increased competition in the market is expected to finally bring some price relief this year, it is misguided that the government chose to hit the brakes on more low-cost supply for months and months. Limiting new investments risks higher electricity costs, higher emissions, higher uncertainty for anyone who is thinking about investing in Alberta, and we are already seeing this. For months we've told the UCP that the new vague, arbitrary rules on renewables will impact new investments and will impact Alberta's autonomy and rural economy. TransAlta announced that it's shelving one project and halting three others due to the UCP's mismanagement of the electricity sector. These projects would have brought low-cost energy supply that will help Albertans. We told this government they're shaking investor confidence in low-cost energy in our province, and we see proof of all that in TransAlta's announcement.

Can the Premier and her ministers list how many jobs, how much low-cost energy supply, how much investment TransAlta's cancellation, caused by this government's random rules on renewables, will cost Alberta? TransAlta had planned to build its Riplinger wind farm. The company cancelled the 300-megawatt project, saying that new restrictions on renewables imposed by the Alberta government made it impossible to proceed.

A reminder that TransAlta alone had announced it will spend \$33.5 billion in renewables by the end of 2028, which will provide much-needed power for Alberta, increase competition, and eventually increase low-cost energy in our province. The government must listen to the business community and stop suppressing investments and new business opportunities.

This was not only much-needed low-cost energy supply entering the market, but it's also income for municipalities, municipal revenue that would help pay for services and help the rural economy and improve affordability for Albertans. For example, Cardston county in southern Alberta has long been dependent on agriculture

and tourism for revenue, but wind energy is an emerging economic factor. Cardston county Reeve Randy Bullock had a lot to say about the loss of revenue and how this low-cost energy source would have improved lives in rural Alberta.

I want to read some of Reeve Bullock's statements into the record because they are very important and insightful. This is what he had to say on the TransAlta project cancellation that was caused by the UCP's mishandling of the renewable sector.

The project would have contributed millions and millions of dollars to the coffers of Cardston county. That's no longer on the table, so that is a pretty big blow. That money would have been used for multiple purposes. The county council is doing everything possible not to be a tax burden on individuals. We want to stay out of people's pocketbooks. We are also very reluctant to borrow money to pay for infrastructure improvements across the county. We would like to build water treatment facilities, more regional water lines along with paving roads and other capital expenditures.

He continues, saying that

the provincial government has played a role in taking away some ability to be self-reliant. The ability to attract and tax renewable energy projects has been eroded.

Mr. Speaker, these are powerful words from the reeve. These communities are trying to make a living, but the UCP is applying heavy-handed tactics to limit their participation in the new economy. The irony is that the minister of community services rose in the House and talked about urban privilege in decision-making, but he seems fine with the UCP government making decisions from urban centres like Edmonton, dictating what rural Alberta can and cannot do. He seems okay messing with the revenue sources and rural economy that will give them dignified living and improve their lives and livelihoods. He seems okay deciding their economic future from his comfortable seat here at the Legislature right here in Edmonton. If this is not peak urban privilege, I am not sure what is. The hypocrisy of this government continues, and it's not escaping anyone.

5:50

All the UCP could have done is actually talk to people, ask and consult, and they would know what rural communities actually want. They could have learned that rural Albertans pay disproportionate power prices. They pay more for many services, and the government needs to enhance accessibility so they have more opportunities.

The UCP should focus on building diversified electricity generation and a modern electricity grid that is not only reliable but also affordable. The world is enhancing grid reliability and affordability by advancing a mix of technologies like wind, solar, geothermal, hydrogen, gas, abated gas, storage, energy efficiency, and building inerties. Where is this government's road map to build a diversified, affordable grid that will improve the local and rural economy? Why is the government painting a vision from the past for Alberta?

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act is just scratching the surface. From what we see here, this is a bill that will do two things, changing the name of the RRO and changing the local access fee. It is truly unfortunate that the UCP government is implementing many heavy-handed interventions that are counterproductive, that limit low-cost energy supply from the market, that limit competition and would not make prices competitive and more affordable for Albertans. It is truly unfortunate that this bill is just scratching the surface and that it does not off-set all the big-government interventions that the UCP has applied in the electricity sector.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, second reading of Bill 19. The hon. member. I see the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright. I'm not sure if the Deputy Government House Leader has – well, the hon. the Deputy Government House Leader?

The Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It feels like every other day we're talking about utilities and affordability in this Chamber, but the topic has never been more important. Affordability: I get calls on that all the time from people. Part of the problem is inflation, and thanks to, you know, out-of-control spending by the federal Liberal and NDP government, inflation has skyrocketed and the affordability crisis has hit Canadians hard.

Inflation is a hidden tax, Mr. Speaker, but just as Ottawa is already devaluing the savings and income of Albertan families, it won't stop them from just taxing more. This playbook of the political left at all levels of government is to spend and spend until you actually do run out of money and then tax to make up the difference. With one hand they devalue the money you already have through inflation, and with the other they pick your pocket for more.

Electricity is a fundamental input cost behind everything we do. Ensuring affordable electricity is enormously important for our economy and our way of life. The burden of high local access fees on utility bills has been a significant concern for many families, particularly in recent years, with Albertans facing exorbitant charges.

As we deal with high inflation, our government is taking decisive action to address this issue by introducing Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, to lower and stabilize local access fees. These fees, essentially taxes charged by the municipalities to the electricity distributors, are passed on to all customers, appearing as a line item on their utility bill. We have heard the concerns of Albertans loud and clear, and we are committed to ensuring long-term affordability and predictability for Albertans.

If passed, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act would bring about significant changes to reduce and stabilize local access fees. This legislation would prohibit the use of variable rates, including the highly volatile rate of last resort, in setting the formula for local access fees. It would also strengthen regulatory oversight by Alberta Utilities Commission to ensure that Albertans' best interests are protected.

Local access fees, essentially taxes, are calculated based on either a percentage of transmission and distribution costs or a fixed cents-per-kilowatt-hour charge. For example, we've seen that Calgary's unique two-part fee calculation formula tied to the regulated rate option has resulted in significantly higher fees for Calgarians compared to other municipalities. The regulated rate option, RRO, serves as Alberta's default electrical rate, set monthly by the Alberta Utilities Commission. Approximately 29 per cent of residential

customers and a significant portion of commercial and farm customers purchase electricity through the RRO, making it crucial to ensure that fees tied to this rate are fair and reasonable.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation is not just about reducing costs. It's about relieving the financial strains on families and businesses and providing them with the stability and predictability they need to thrive. At its core, this legislation is about putting Albertans first. It's about recognizing the challenges faced by hard-working individuals and families and taking concrete steps to address them. By lowering and stabilizing local access fees, we are helping to ease the financial burden on Albertans and ensure that utility bills remain affordable for all.

But this issue goes beyond mere economics; it's also about fairness and equity. High utility bills can have a large impact on low-income families and vulnerable individuals. By taking action to reduce these fees, our government is working to ensure that every Albertan has an opportunity to thrive.

Affordability is a top priority for our UCP government, with the cost of utilities being a large focus. By introducing legislation through Bill 19 to help reduce the cost of utility bills, we are continuing to follow through on our commitments to make life more affordable for all Albertans. Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of this Assembly to support Bill 19, the Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act. Let us come together and help alleviate the burden of high local access fees and ensure that utility bills remain affordable for all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Mr. Speaker, a terrifically succinct speech. With that, I move that we adjourn the Assembly until tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.

The Speaker: Perhaps the hon. member might adjourn debate on Bill 19 prior to adjourning the Assembly.

Mr. Williams: Okay.

The Speaker: I don't make the rules; I just enforce them.

Mr. Williams: I will move to adjourn debate first.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: I renew my plea to adjourn the Assembly until tomorrow at 1:30.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:58 p.m.]

Table of Contents

Prayers	1317
Introduction of Guests	1317
Members' Statements	
Government Policies	1317
Women's Health Care	1317
Mental Health Week	1318
CPR Demonstration and Supply Farm	1318
Low-income Transit Pass Program	1318
Asian Heritage Month	1319
Notices of Motions	1319
Tabling Returns and Reports	1319
Oral Question Period	
Bill 20	1319, 1322, 1325, 1326
Children's Pain Medication Purchase	1320
Ombudsman's Report on PDD Program	1321
Support for Survivors of Gender-based Violence	1322
Bill 18	1323
Renewable Energy Development	1323
Life Lease Regulation	1324
French Policy Action Plan	1325
Presumptive WCB Coverage for Wildland Firefighters	1326
Statement by the Speaker	
Speaker Casting Votes	1329
Orders of the Day	1329
Government Bills and Orders	
Second Reading	
Bill 18 Provincial Priorities Act	1329
Bill 19 Utilities Affordability Statutes Amendment Act, 2024	1344
Committee of the Whole	
Bill 11 Public Safety Statutes Amendment Act, 2024	1334
Bill 13 Real Property Governance Act	1341

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