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The 30th Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, October 29, 2019

Day 35

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature

First Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, October 29, 2019

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 18

Electricity Statutes (Capacity Market Termination) Amendment Act, 2019

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to rise to move third reading of Bill 18.

The proposed legislation will halt the implementation of a capacity market for electricity and return Alberta to an energy-only market. Alberta's energy-only market has been operating for more than 20 years. It's well established, tried and true. Investors have confidence in the energy-only system, and their willingness to continue to invest in it underlies our decision to stop implementing a capacity market. It's telling that despite their involvement in designing the capacity market that would be operational in 2021, industry overwhelmingly supports retaining Alberta's current market structure. They want the structural and administrative simplicity. They want the regulatory clarity. They want the certainty that the energy-only market provides them. Mr. Speaker, Alberta's energy-only market works. It encourages efficient investment decisions where investors, not consumers or taxpayers, bear the risk, and it has and will continue to deliver an adequate supply of electricity at affordable prices.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans and investors need certainty in their electricity market. If passed, Bill 18 will restore that certainty by ending the creating of a capacity market.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate on Bill 18 tonight? I see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Ms Phillips: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 18, the Electricity Statutes (Capacity Market Termination) Amendment Act, 2019. You know, I think I made these comments a little bit at second reading, but I'll expand on them a little bit. I think it's fair to say that both the energy-only and the capacity markets have pluses and minuses.

When one reviews the work done by the AESO in having a look at reliability and supply, which is their mandate, over the next while, it's clear why the AESO recommended at the time that we undertook the decision, in '15, '16, '17, to transition to a capacity market. The analysis is right there. It's been made public by the AESO.

As recently as about a year ago, at Public Accounts AESO underlined again their strong support for the development of a capacity market for the two reasons of reliability of supply and affordability. Of course, those things rely on new investment in the sector. New investment is required as many coal plants have reached their end of economic life, and indeed 2012 regulations passed by the Harper government phased out a number of facilities.

That generation supply will have to be replaced in some way, shape, or form, and attracting that investment is important to having security of supply and also an adequate supply so that we avoid price spikes. That was what underpinned the transition to a capacity market.

Now, as I've said, both publicly and privately, many times, within the context of a deregulated electricity market there's no ideological reason to support one over the other. They're both deregulated market mechanisms. That means that a whole bunch of private-sector players, not state-owned companies like in Saskatchewan or elsewhere, are making the decisions about how the lights get turned on and what you're going to pay for it when you do that. In that way, the guiding decision-making, then, in terms of government's approach has to be: what is the best regulatory environment that will ensure that we don't see price spikes and we don't see a threat to security of supply? That was why we got the strong advice that we did from the AESO, and that is why we moved ahead with the development of a capacity market.

Now, as I understand it, this was rejected by the current government for a number of reasons. A number of folks would make a lot of money off price volatility, right? We know this from people who are stockbrokers and make a lot of money off volatility in the stock market. The same sort of thing prevails in electricity.

We also know that one of the reasons why the AESO was recommending the implementation of a capacity market and a few other market reforms at the time was that people were observing – folks who were writing for the U of C School of Public Policy, the AESO, and others were observing; the MSA certainly observed this over the sort of 2010 to 2012-13 period – companies using market power in order to extract excessive rent out of the system. That's another way of saying: gaming the system and the rest of us pay for it, to the extent where the MSA issued new directives prior to our government's time, in '13 or '14. I can't remember when. A number of structural difficulties came from the existence of an energy-only market in a market the size of Alberta's.

Now, the only other place where we see a deregulated market prevailing in an energy-only form without a parallel capacity market functioning is, of course, in Texas, which is a much larger grid with a much different kind of complexity to its electricity system. There are reasons for that. Smaller places with fewer interties and some of the other characteristics of Alberta's electricity system certainly have that capacity market for some of those reasons, curtailing the exercise of market power and for reasons of ensuring better control over price.

Now that we are not moving forward in any way, shape, or form with a capacity market – and I know that some generators have said, "Okay; we don't want this," and that's fine. Others did and likely, depending on its structure, still would, but when the government, this new government, only consulted on a very narrow set of proposals, it was, I think, easier for a number of different interested stakeholders to just go back to the energy-only market structure because the different capacity options that were put before people weren't terrifically good.

I think what we'll have to watch for now are any subsequent reforms to the energy-only market. One of these things that we could do is write straight into the act that affordability is key to the system, but that was something that was rejected by this government, and that is too bad. That amendment along with the removal of the regulated rate option, the so-called electricity cap, are two reforms in the electricity sector that I don't believe will have positive consequences for the vast majority of ratepayers.

That's really what we've got to kind of come back to out of this, Mr. Speaker, which is: what is in the best interests of Albertans? It's not just those of us who pay a utility bill to keep the lights on in

our homes. It is also about our smaller industrial operators. It is also about folks who are doing things like value-added upgrading, whether that's in the oil and gas sector or in the agricultural sector. Electricity is a massive input cost or can be. It has been kept under control for the last few years, and certainly we've seen historically very low prices currently, but with the complete rejection of all capacity market options and, it appears, a number of rejections already of systems to ensure affordability by this government in order to satisfy a very small group, I would argue, of self-interested lobbyists to the exclusion of everyone else who has a stake in the electricity system, it doesn't bode well.

7:40

I think a number of things need to be done in order for us to properly support a bill of this nature, which is why we are not voting in favour of it. For example, the Department of Energy has not yet received its advice from the AESO on reforms to the energy-only market. That advice is due on November 1, after this bill passes, so we certainly have a situation where, you know, it appears, anyway, that the government is just doing what will satisfy a certain small group of self-interested lobbyists at the expense of everyone else and at the expense of all of the fulsome advice that they could be getting around other reforms that could potentially be in this legislation, or they will have to come back to this place if they want to actually address some of the volatility issues and some of the issues around exercise of market power that we talked about.

You know, I think it's important to talk about some of the reasons why a capacity market would incent new investment if appropriately structured and if there was, on the part of the province and the Department of Energy, I think, a good-faith effort at actually taking a 360-degree view of the problems inherent in an energy-only market, some of the problems inherent in a capacity market – we have many examples everywhere to learn from – and then moving forward on that basis for a plan that works for Alberta if they were actually making that good-faith effort.

It's not just about the AESO. There are places where we have seen good advice; for example, Terry Boston. Terry Boston was the former executive vice-president of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Of course, the TVA was an FDR initiative to build about 16 dams and give people good work after the war. Terry Boston also negotiated our agreements to phase out coal, which is, of course, the lowest cost – post-2030, because, of course, coal was being phased out already. But anything between 2030 and 2062: Terry handled that file and did a great job.

Here's what he said about a capacity market.

I spent the last eight years of my career . . .

I will not do Terry Boston's accent although it is delightful.

. . . as the CEO of PJM . . . which has a mature capacity market structure. Private investors from around the world have built over 30,000 megawatts of new generation in PJM under this market structure, which kept the lights on at stable prices. Investors have shown a growing reluctance to invest in the riskier energy-only market designs around the world, preferring the price stability and revenue certainty provided by a capacity market structure. I am confident this model will work well in Alberta too, ensuring future stability in your admirable and smooth transition to a lower carbon electricity system.

There's a guy from the south, very much the south. What I remember most fondly of him is his propensity to add syllables in words and say them extremely slowly. It's a delight to listen to. But not exactly a card-carrying socialist, Mr. Terry Boston. Far from it. I don't think that he was feeling the Bern – put it that way – in the United States. Very much a businessman and very much a lot of experience with very mature, well-developed electricity markets in the eastern United States and in the south.

You know, I think that, really, what this shows is that it was a long time coming, our decision to move forward with the capacity market. Like I said, those decisions were not made quickly. They were made over a period of some months and even, essentially, a year of deliberating on the matter. They weren't made without consultation, and those decisions weren't made without expert advice. It would appear to me that there is a bit of a philistine streak in terms of listening to experts and understanding expert advice and understanding what might be motivating expert advice. That is certainly something where I would caution this government in terms of taking on that sort of posture. It does not reflect well. It does not attract investment, and it does not mean the best kind of well-deliberated-upon public policy.

I will look forward to reforms in the energy-only market, and I will be watching for them because what I care about at the end of the day are people whose doors I knocked on who said: "What are you doing about the transmission and distribution charges? What's going to happen to my bills?" At the end of the day, the people who sent us here, every single one of us – nobody ever asked me about the capacity market versus a well-designed energy-only market on the doorstep, my friends, and I don't know if they ever will. I don't live in any CEO neighbourhoods, but I do live in neighbourhoods where people worry about the cost of living. And removing the cap and putting them back on a roller coaster, in addition to all of the other cost-of-living increases that are contained within other pieces of legislation that we will be deliberating upon tonight, have left me concluding that this Bill 18 does not merit my support at this time.

Having said that, I will reserve my full-throated criticism because I think there are some places where we could indeed undertake some reforms around the energy-only market. Hopefully – cross our fingers – the capacity market would have been a more certain path towards the AESO being able to fulfill its mandate for affordable power, a reliable supply, and a grid that is built to accommodate new investment and growth in the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening?

Seeing no one, I'm prepared to allow the hon. Minister of Energy to close debate should she choose to do so.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you. I just have nothing further to say.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 20 Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, 2019

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

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tonight I would like to move second reading of Bill 20, the Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, 2019.

This important bill addresses our overspending problem, improves how we manage our cash resources, promotes fiscal accountability, and helps bring Alberta back to balance. Specifically, Bill 20 focuses on a number of tax-related issues, including pausing indexation of the personal income tax system, eliminating specific tax credits, and the restructuring of important tax-funded services that Albertans rely on. It also closes a number of regulated funds that are no longer required and shifts specific

funding dollars to directly come out of the general revenue fund. This will save on administrative costs, reduce borrowing requirements by about \$650 million, and improve accountability of our spending. In total, it proposes 17 changes across seven ministries.

7:50

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to provide an overview of these changes and explain how they contribute to the positive fiscal health of Alberta now and into the future. I'll begin with changes from my own ministry, Treasury Board and Finance. First, we are pausing indexation of the personal income tax system. This includes credit amounts and tax bracket thresholds. This is a temporary measure until the fiscal situation improves. If passed, Albertans will continue to pay far lower taxes than people living in other provinces. In fact, if it passes, Albertans will pay the same amount of income tax next year as they did this year. We would also pause indexation of other programs, which will be touched on in another bill to come.

Next we're amending dividend tax credits to enact new rates for the '20-21 tax year and onward. The change is in recognition that corporate income is now subject to a lower tax rate, and this measure ensures proper integration of dividend income.

Moving on to tax credits that support the most vulnerable Albertans, we're proposing to restructure child tax benefits in Alberta to be more efficient and better focused on the families who need the support most. Two current programs, the Alberta child benefit and the Alberta family employment tax credit, would be consolidated into one program, the Alberta child and family benefit. Under this new benefit approximately 70,000 families would receive increased benefits, and an updated phase-in approach sees benefits increasing as household income increases. This encourages parents as they return to employment while still providing meaningful supports during this transitional period. Merging these two programs is expected to save government up to \$55 million annually when fully implemented while supporting those who need the funding most.

This legislation would also eliminate Alberta's education and tuition tax credit amounts. This change aligns with other provinces like Ontario and Saskatchewan, who have eliminated these credits in their respective jurisdictions. Individuals with banked credits from previous years will still be able to claim them in subsequent tax years, but additional new incremental credits will be eliminated from 2020 onward. This change is poised to save more than \$85 million in 2020-2021 alone. We will continue to help thousands of students receive postsecondary education through scholarships, awards, and student loans.

We would also eliminate the scientific research and experimental development tax credit in favour of a broad-based, low-rate corporate tax system. This is one of a few boutique tax credits we would eliminate in order to improve our cash management. I'll speak more on those in a moment. The job-creation tax cut, combined with the recently adopted accelerated capital cost allowance provision, will benefit Alberta businesses much more than targeted tax credits.

Next we would eliminate the lottery fund and redirect gaming revenue to the general revenue fund. The programs that the lottery fund supported would continue to be funded but through the general revenue fund. This change lowers administrative costs and reduces red tape by simplifying reporting and improving accountability.

Lastly for Treasury Board and Finance changes, we've increased tobacco tax rates by \$5, to \$55 per carton, and will be applying an equivalent increase to other tobacco products. This was effective at 12:01 a.m. on October 25. This change accomplishes three

important things. It aligns us with other western provinces, increases government revenue by approximately \$50 million annually, and furthers our efforts to reduce tobacco usage among Albertans. That last point is key as it also has a positive impact on our health care system.

Next I'll run through the changes to legislation for Economic Development, Trade and Tourism. The majority of these changes are focused on existing tax credits. Like the aforementioned scientific research and experimental development tax credit, we are focusing on moving away from boutique tax credits. First up is the elimination of the interactive digital media tax credit. This tax credit is narrowly focused and limited in scope. This tax credit has not had the broad impact on this sector as was intended. Instead, again we will be focusing on broad corporate tax cuts and supporting all Alberta businesses.

We're eliminating three other tax credits for similar reasons: the capital investment tax credit, the community economic development corporation tax credit, and the Alberta investor tax credit. We know that we can better build on Alberta's competitive strengths through broad supports for all sectors, creating the best economic conditions for businesses to thrive.

However, we aren't solely cutting tax credits. We are creating them where appropriate and where we believe they will have significant impact. That's why this bill creates the film and television tax credit, consistent with our platform, which will replace the existing screen-based production grant program. This is more in line with offerings in other provinces and will support and grow an industry that adds up to \$250 million to our economy and supports more than 3,200 jobs annually.

Moving on to Advanced Education, we would dissolve the access to the future fund. This dedicated fund was established within the Alberta heritage savings trust fund, and in 2014-15 the government suspended cash transfers to it. At this point it is effectively unused legislation, and this will allow us to better use the approximately \$58 million that has sat idle for several years as these funds will be moved into general revenue.

We would also dissolve the environmental protection and enhancement fund. This fund provided support for environmental emergencies, and its sources included forfeited reclamation security, tax forfeiture, and timber royalties. However, a new mechanism has been developed to appropriate funds for environmental emergencies. This is largely about improving our cash management, and we will continue to ensure that funding is available to protect communities from emergencies.

Another dedicated fund that we would dissolve is the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund. Let me be clear. Funding for cancer research or treatment would continue to come through the general revenue fund. Our government believes deeply in supporting the important work in preventing cancer and other chronic diseases. However, this change, again, would improve our cash management and would allow us greater flexibility to invest in initiatives aimed at preventing cancer and other chronic diseases that share similar root causes.

The bill would also amend our funding agreements with municipalities. We are committed to delivering predictable, long-term municipal capital funding so that Albertans have the local infrastructure and services they depend on. The new fiscal framework is affordable and responsible. It balances the needs of municipalities with our provincial priorities and fiscal capacity and aligns with recommendations from the MacKinnon panel. Municipalities have asked for more predictable funding in order to develop their annual budgets and five-year capital plans. This legislation delivers this. Together, under the new Local Government Fiscal Framework Act and Budget 2019, Alberta

would provide similar per capita funding levels compared to other provinces. This legislation includes a funding allocation formula for Edmonton and Calgary.

Lastly, we are introducing new legislation that would provide flexibility in funding for Calgary's green line and Edmonton's LRT. We remain committed to supporting light rail development in both cities, with funding remaining at \$3 billion over nine years. However, we would revise the funding cash flows to help us meet our funding commitment in the current fiscal climate of restraint.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you and the rest of the House for the time and patience to outline each of these changes. I understand that Bill 20 is complex and touches on a number of facets of government operations. There is a lot for members in the House to digest. However, I do believe that all of these changes represent a positive step forward for Alberta and our financial situation. These changes are about transparently transforming how we operate, with a deep focus on fiscal accountability.

Again I'd like to thank members for their time and attention, and I look forward to a healthy debate moving forward. Thank you.

8:00

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not going to go through each section of the bill. I appreciate the minister walking through some of the highlights as he sees them, and I will do the same.

I am going to begin with one that he mentioned towards the end, which is the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund, and say how dismayed I am that this is one of the areas for I think it was referred to as "streamlining" or "helping the balance sheet." It's had a number of different phrases around it. I think that when it comes to both sides of this House, I've seen members on both sides of this House make very moving personal statements and talk about their families' involvement in cancer prevention as well as surviving cancer or dying of cancer. I think that there isn't an Albertan who hasn't felt a direct connection to cancer or an Albertan who wouldn't want us to prevent cancer. Having funds dedicated to the prevention of cancer – a dedicated fund, the ACPLF – is something that I thought would have been sacred in this province.

I should stop being shocked. I guess I'm not shocked. I'm very disappointed that this is one of the areas that is seen as an easy cash grab in this current fiscal and political climate. There isn't a lot I look south of the border to for inspiration, but one thing I've noticed among one of the leadership candidates seeking the Democratic nomination is the lofty goal of eliminating cancer. I believe it was former Vice-president Biden who said that finding a cure for cancer was something that he was really going to focus government on should he become president. I think those are the kinds of discussions of cancer that I certainly would much rather be having in this place than eliminating the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund.

I'm going to talk about a couple of other pieces. One is around the end of the education and tuition tax credits. This is something that's been in place – I'm sure the Finance minister could say the date that it came into place. I can tell you that, being a kid growing up in the north, in a riding not too far from where the Finance minister represents today, the idea of coming away to university was a scary enough idea, moving from a village of 300 to a city of probably at that time a little more than half a million. But my parents said to me: "We know that this is going to be a big financial burden for you, but we will help. We will pay your tuition. We get the tax credits, but we'll pay your tuition, and then you just need to

worry about your cost of living." And, to be honest, they probably helped with that quite a bit, too. But one of the ways that they were able to do that is because they knew that they would get that tax credit, so I was able to come to Edmonton and not worry about tuition. Most kids in the north don't have that luxury, but I certainly felt very fortunate to be in a position where my parents were able to make that a priority, and in turn they got a tax credit.

Often it's students themselves who claim those tax credits while they're going to school if they're doing something like an apprenticeship and they have an income as well and they're paying taxes. Of course, their income has dipped a bit while they're doing their postsecondary, further studies, and they're able to use those tax credits to help offset some of the significant costs that are associated. Sometimes it's spouses. Sometimes your combined family income when somebody is going back to school takes a significant dip, and it would be even more significant once we deal with some of the other pieces of legislation that seem forthcoming. But at least having that tax credit was something that sort of ordinary, middle-class folks could take advantage of in this province.

This student I spoke with yesterday, Fajar: she's amazing. I'll get the spelling of her name to *Hansard* because it's complicated. She is a fantastic example, I think, of somebody who is seeing the compounding downloading onto her. She talked about the difference with the increase to tuition, which, of course, is not in this bill; with the elimination of the tax credit, which is in this bill; with the elimination of the STEP program and increases to student loan repayment, that is moving from prime to prime plus 1. When we add it up – some of it was nickel and diming, but most of it was rather big – it was about \$600 at least that her tax credit would have been for this upcoming year. For, you know, a 19- or 20-year-old in her second year of university and probably for most Albertans, \$600 is a lot of money.

I know we heard a lot of stories in a previous sitting of this Legislature about people talking about downloading costs around the price on carbon. I remember there being stories from members in central Alberta about \$300 bills and how devastating those were. I think a \$600 bill is something that I didn't expect to see. Again, I should get better at predicting the future given what we've seen as some of the priorities in this place, but it was still very disappointing.

Another one I want to talk about is the tax brackets. We certainly heard quite a bit about that in question period both yesterday and today. I know that the Finance minister and, I think, the Premier as well stood and said that taxes aren't going up, but they are by \$600 million by the end of the 2022-23 fiscal year – \$600 million – simply by suspending the indexation of tax brackets, which is absolutely a move to increase personal income tax.

One that I think will probably be the biggest, actually – well, who knows? These are all big. They all have it seems like at least three zeros behind them. But one that's coming up as well is repealing the city charters. These, again, were legal agreements struck between the cities of Edmonton and Calgary and the provincial government to put a local government fiscal framework in place, starting with Edmonton and Calgary. Of course, the desire was to expand to other municipalities. We've seen across this province, in response to the budget on Thursday and now this bill here today, that municipalities are in a state of significant angst trying to anticipate exactly how they will respond to these significant changes and downloading onto municipalities. For example, the city of Edmonton had I believe it was over \$150 million in dedicated infrastructure projects that were planned based on the agreements that were in place both for MSI and for the big-city charters.

The big-city charters actually didn't even come into effect yet. They were something that was negotiated, that was put in legislation, that the governing party of the day put in the platform to maintain. The then aspiring government, the now government, said in their platform: don't worry; we're going to leave the big-city charters alone; we're going to respect the legal agreements that were struck with Edmonton and Calgary. That has since been broken. I was going to say derailed. I was going to say deviated from, but it's completely being broken.

I believe one of the ministers said: well, we're still going to respect the intent; we're just not going to respect the actual agreement. Well, that's like saying: I'm going to respect the intent of a speed limit; I'm just going to go double the speed limit. Well, that doesn't actually respect the speed limit, doesn't respect the actual law. It's completely breaking it. If an individual were to do that, it would be seen as reckless, dangerous, risky, and there would be consequences for that individual. There could be consequences for other individuals who were involved as well, but there certainly would be legal and punitive consequences for somebody, quote, respecting the intent but completely breaking the actual law. Those are a couple of the ones that I wanted to start with.

One that I'm going to touch on a little bit more is the lottery fund. I certainly welcome members of the government stepping up and providing clarity, because the lottery fund is something that I know has helped every community in the riding I represent, every community league in the riding I represent, and probably every community, social agency, charity, and nonprofit in ridings right across this province. It's something that I get asked, to help find volunteers to work casinos, on a regular basis. Community organizations rely on those funds from the lottery fund to do important things.

8:10

My own community league last week talked about the fact that between some of the lotto funds they had plus the climate leadership fund, "We've put solar panels on the roof, we're further insulating our building, and we'll be net zero by the end of the year," something that they're really proud of. This is a community hub, adjacent to the school, that provides dinners to members of the community. It provides yoga classes, it provides soccer clubs, it provides a simple drop-in space for parents and tots, and it is a place in the building that has been able to access some of the money through the price on carbon as well as money through the lottery fund.

I don't think anyone – well, maybe; I hope not – would say that we should be encouraging gambling or that we should be encouraging pollution, but these programs were put in place to help community organizations meet the needs of the many without having to charge exorbitant fees. Some community associations probably charge a lot of money to be members, but because we had access to programs like this, we charge nothing to be a part of the community league in Inglewood, for example.

I know that there are others that have done major renovations to their hall, renovations that haven't been done in 40 or 50 years that now have been able to be done, and as a result the facilities are used far more than they were before. Woodcroft Community League, for example, just did a major renovation, and again that was possible because of good long-term planning, accessing the lottery fund, and the community pulling together to do those initiatives to make sure that that funding was there to support that.

There are others that use funds for ongoing basic operations, operations of things like seniors' programs. Again, I recall the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre talking about, you know: how dare you download costs onto seniors. But that's exactly what this bill and this budget are doing, downloading costs

onto organizations like seniors' organizations that do social activities and do different things. I know that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview often talks about elder abuse programs that are available through the province. They do get some grants directly from government, but I think that those have been reduced, again, this year. I know that they were discussing it this morning. If I was wrong, I'm happy to be corrected by my colleagues on either side of the House.

They get some grant funding specifically for that, but these seniors' organizations also access lottery funds so that they can do important work in our communities. Ending the lottery fund and moving money into general revenue I think is something that has been done in a significant way to, quote, streamline costs or reduce expenses. Well, those reduced expenses have significant impacts on our communities and on the programs and work that's done in our communities to support one another.

Again, I'll recap sort of the five points I've mentioned: the elimination of the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund, heartless and backwards and, I think, shameful; the lottery fund, something that I think has benefited probably any community organization that you can think of in your own ridings and in others; suspending the tax brackets for income tax. Again, that's \$600 million. I'm sure that people have probably asked: are we really, really seriously doing this? Isn't this something that our leader pushed back hard on in Ottawa before coming back here? It was. Repealing the city charters for Edmonton and Calgary: I know that a lot of folks are probably going to feel that. These cities are two of the largest cities in western Canada. They provide important services for the people who live in them, and also they're hubs for people who don't.

I know that when I was at an Oil Kings game not that long ago, I was talking to a family that was here because they were accessing the Stollery children's hospital, and they were taking in a game while they were here. They were from out of town, significantly out of town. These are hubs, and an attack on Edmonton and Calgary is an attack on Albertans and all Albertans who use these cities and live or work or come here to recreate here as well.

And then, of course, the end of the education and tuition tax credits, something that I know helped me get to where I am today. Probably many members in this House have claimed them themselves, either for themselves going to postsecondary or for somebody they love going to postsecondary. There's something that made that big bill, that's only going to be bigger because of this budget, a little bit easier to digest come tax time, at least, something that I think was put in place because we had a vision in this province of helping people who wanted to access higher education be able to attain that, and we wanted to encourage that as a society. Unfortunately, in the first two sittings of this Legislature we've seen a two-tiered minimum wage, one for students and one for non students. If you're not a student, you get paid more. Now we're seeing attacks on postsecondary through the elimination of things like the STEP, increases in tuition, cutting grants to postsecondary institutions, and repealing the benefits that people who are paying those additional fees saw over many, many years. If one of my colleagues has a chance to find out when Alberta brought in that tuition tax credit, I think that that would be something worth considering. I know that at least for one generation it's been in place and, I imagine, even longer.

When I visit with school groups, I talk to them about how some of my priorities include a really strong public education system, which, to me, means that every kid is in, every kid is welcome, and every kid can succeed. I talk about how we're investing in them, how we choose as a province to give them opportunities through their education to ensure that they can attain their fullest.

This bill is saying to postsecondary students or aspiring postsecondary students – I also am concerned what message this sends to them, to students who are thinking, “One day I want to go back to school,” whether it’s somebody who’s already been out for a number of years or somebody who isn’t yet done high school and is thinking about their future. What message does it send to them that we are eliminating – this reminds me a lot of when, on the eve of the 2015 election, charitable tax credits were being attacked, and I think that many of us, especially those who ran in that election, remember how angry the public was that government was eliminating tax credits for charities or reducing at that time tax credits for charities. Here we are proposing the complete elimination of a tax credit for those who are going to postsecondary, and I think that that is not something that anyone in this place should be proud of.

Again, the cancer prevention legacy fund: I don’t think that was in the platform; I don’t think that’s something that your constituents asked you to do. I doubt they said: “You know what we need less of? Less prevention of cancer. Let’s spend less time and less money preventing cancer.” I imagine you probably had some stories of people who are living with cancer and how much they desperately needed increased supports and access. I know that, especially in rural communities, there are a lot of rural hospitals that are advocating to have more access to cancer treatments. I know that when I was in Hinton for the opening of the new wing there for cancer treatments, a beautiful facility where chemotherapy happens, that was something that the community was incredibly proud of, not just because it was a beautiful facility with a view of the mountains – it certainly is – but because it meant that people didn’t have to spend time on the highway and they didn’t have to ask their loved ones to take a day off to drive them for their treatments. It was about actually working to make life better, which I know is a slogan on the government documents these days.

I think one of the ways that that could be done is if, instead of cancelling or cutting Alberta cancer prevention, instead of cancelling or cutting tuition tax credits, instead of cancelling or cutting the deals that were reached with Edmonton and Calgary, instead of cancelling or cutting the indexation of personal income tax, we could all be in this place actually fighting for things that will make life better. Again, as has been mentioned, the stark contrast between giving \$4.7 billion in a no-jobs corporate handout and being able to maintain some of these programs and at the end of the day actually having a \$2 billion bigger deficit than there would have been otherwise, I think, is deeply disappointing. I imagine that members on both sides of the House paused to ask themselves: is this really what we were elected to do? I don’t think it was, Mr. Speaker.

That being said, I think I’ll cede the remainder of my time to my colleagues and ask that members on both sides of this House pause to consider why we were sent here and if these are really the kinds of cuts that we were proud to campaign for.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, anyone else wishing to join debate?

Unfortunately, the minister has already spoken, and 29(2)(a) isn’t available until after the third speech. I’m sure that if you would like to join the debate, 29(2)(a) will be available following the next speaker, assuming that there is one.

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the bill this evening? The hon. Minister of Transportation has the call.

8:20

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn’t going to speak, but because the hon. Finance minister can’t speak twice on this reading, I just need to point out that there will be no less cancer prevention

that goes on. A bank account closed. All the activities of that bank account to prevent cancer will continue. It will continue from a different bank account. It will just be a less expensive overhead for the taxpayers.

What the hon. member said, whether it was intentional or not intentional, was not accurate. There will be no less cancer prevention as a result of what the hon. Finance minister has included in this bill.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see that the hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board would like to add a brief question or comment.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member who responded. I’d just like to add to that. By dissolving these funds, specifically the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund, we will not be reducing funds spent on cancer prevention, research, or treatment. I concur that there’s not one of us in this House that has not been touched personally by cancer in one way, shape, or form, and this government will continue to fund cancer research, cancer prevention, and cancer treatment at the same levels even though this fund will be dissolved.

Similarly, with the lottery fund, Mr. Speaker, we will not change the use of those funds. Community groups and charities will continue to be able to access those funds in the same way and at the same level that they did before. The fundamental difference is that Albertans elected us to manage the province’s resources responsibly, and this is part of a measure that will streamline the operation of government, save Albertans \$13 million annually, and save on administration costs so that more money can go to front-line service delivery such as cancer prevention, research, and treatment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: There are three minutes and 30 seconds left under 29(2)(a) if anyone else would like to add a brief question or a comment. I see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. I guess that the tough thing is that there used to be a dedicated area where we knew every year how much was going towards cancer prevention, the cancer prevention legacy fund, and it had dedicated financing focused towards it every single year. So we knew overtly through this place and through the presentation of financials what the government’s priorities were when it came to cancer prevention.

What we are seeing is the elimination of the fund. The minister says that the funding won’t actually be cut. I would love a reference to where that is and what confidences can be given. Certainly, I know that when we were dedicating money specifically to a fund and we had staff specifically cast with conducting research and supporting postsecondary research, often in cancer prevention, we knew that that was a focused, dedicated mission of that organization.

Of course, general revenues have a variety of focused, dedicated missions, including things like setting corporate rates for taxation and other things. I would love it if the minister would like to show us exactly where and how we can have that public confidence through this place in receiving public documents about the budget and about how much is actually being allocated towards cancer prevention because certainly under the elimination of the fund I don’t have that confidence, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: There’s approximately a minute and 40 left under 29(2)(a) if anyone would like to add a brief question or comment. I see the hon. Minister of Finance has risen again to do so.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to respond to the member opposite. We will be continuing to support cancer prevention, treatment, and research to the same levels that we would have had we maintained the fund. We're able to do this through the budgeting process, and the Minister of Health will be able to manage his budget in his department to accommodate this type of spending. Cancer prevention, research, and treatment remains a very high priority for this government, as it is for all Albertans.

The same can be said again for the lottery fund. We know that community groups and charities benefit significantly from these funds. I hear about this regularly in my constituency as various groups conduct their operations this way. Mr. Speaker, this funding will remain in place. It will not change for those groups that rely on it.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for brief questions or comments.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has caught my eye. He would like to join the debate this evening.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly would enjoy speaking on the item of the day, Bill 20. I must say, not with any delight, that the Unlimited Cuts and Pain Party is living up to its name once again this evening. All pain, no economic gain once again.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The governing party does not acknowledge and refuses to acknowledge that the royalty windfall era, from which we've been rescued from economic disaster numerous times and which we've relied upon to fund our government and public services mistakenly over 44 years of Conservative rule – that era of relying on fossil fuel windfall revenues is winding down. The time now is for transitional investment, Mr. Speaker, not retrenchment, not shrinkage, not magically hoping that trickle-down economics will once again cause the oil and gas sector to rebound to what its former glory was. They are fundamentally and for all Albertans, present and future, tragically wrong in their assumptions about the Alberta economy and what they're doing to prepare this province and its citizens and its economy for the transition that we are facing. It's a transition away from reliance on fossil fuels for 30 per cent of our budget, and it's a transition to a new economy, which features things like artificial intelligence and a much smaller reliance upon labour in many resulting cases because of the application of artificial intelligence.

What we need now is, fundamentally, a shift to retraining and preparing our population for that new economy that's coming upon us, whether the government wishes to acknowledge and accept it or not. We need to transition away from risk that is not only – I wouldn't say in slow motion; it's a fairly rapid approach that we are having over the next two to three decades. It's commonly talked about globally, but this government seems to want to resist the reality of climate change and the transition away from fossil fuels and refuses to do things to take advantage of our opportunity that we have to develop a strategy to make the best use of our natural resources, our oil and gas resources, over the time frame of the next couple of decades and transition to a use of them that would be more oriented to plastics and perhaps other products we don't even know about yet.

That requires an investment, Mr. Speaker, an investment in education, an investment in our younger generations. In order to improve your financial picture because of the loss of this revenue, it doesn't mean that you go ahead and take the knees out from underneath the rest of your society. Because one element of your

workforce is hurting, it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to go ahead and say: "Well, good grief. We're going to make everybody else hurt equally, and that's going to make things better." That doesn't address the fundamental problems that we're facing.

Those things are things that this government seems to be blind to. It's going to be very hurtful for the province over the long run to do things such as the measures that are envisioned and proposed under Bill 20. It touches on ending some of the tax credits and capital investment tax credits, the digital media tax credits that were in place, some from our government and others that even preceded our government, that were incenting new activity and really recognizing the change and transition to a new, intelligent economy that took advantage of the young generation that we have here. It took advantage of the investments that have been made in the past in our universities and our colleges, and it would continue those wise investments while we are in need of taking all the opportunity we have from this short window in order to transition our intelligentsia, our young people, our brain trust to getting onboard with the new economies, that are forthcoming quickly.

8:30

Unfortunately, we're getting lots of people now in this province who are saying: "What the heck are we getting out of this government? We're not getting prepared for the future. We basically keep sticking our heads in the sand like someone who is afraid of the future." You have to recognize what's going on in this province, Mr. Speaker, and look forward without fear and without trepidation. The government is looking, in Bill 20, at ways of grabbing bits of money here and there and attempting to, in many ways, stealthily create a budget that looks like it's not going to hurt anybody, but indeed the pain that's going to be caused unnecessarily is astronomical. The tax bracket suspension, the deindexing of the tax brackets, is going to cost taxpayers about \$600 million by the end of the '22-23 fiscal year. Yet the minister this afternoon stood in the House and talked about how, if your income didn't go up beyond \$75,000, your taxation wouldn't change, so where's the hurt? Well, I'll tell you what. The measure will end up taking in \$600 million by the end of '22-23, so somebody is paying it.

It's called bracket creep, and it's something that the current Premier, while he was with the Canadian taxpayers' association and also an MP in Ottawa, spoke about numerous times. In fact, I think that if you search openparliament.ca for the words "bracket creep," you'll find that the current Premier of this province comes in second place to Monte Solberg: 36 search hits for Monte Solberg and for our current Premier 26 mentions of bracket creep on the parliamentary record in Ottawa. He railed against it constantly, yet in fact here he is implementing the same type of tax policy here, one that he criticized repeatedly and vociferously in the House of Commons when he was a Member of Parliament there.

So be careful about what you said in the past, but also watch out for those that are very quick to criticize, because they may indeed know more about the implementation of measures to impose bracket creep than anybody else, and indeed that seems to be what's happening here. The Premier's experience in Ottawa has told him that there's maybe one way that he could increase tax revenue by \$600 million, an increase in taxes, which he never promised anybody in his platform, yet \$600 million, at the end of the day, is going to be taken out of the pockets of Albertans of every tax bracket. It's going to be a tax increase that wasn't promised.

Yet, of course, we're getting a song and dance from the government that, in fact, it's not a tax increase. Well, I'll tell you what. That \$600 million is going to be in the coffers of the provincial government at the end of '22-23. It came from

somebody's pocket, and the only pocket, we're constantly reminded about, that is available to pay taxes in this province is the taxpayer. So if it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck, it's a duck. That's a tax increase of \$600 million that this government has promised to implement as part of this omnibus Bill 20.

I can't wait to hear the cacophony of stories and, I would say, anger and upset and probably surprise from many, many long-time former Conservative supporters, maybe current Conservative supporters, about the proposed ending of the lottery fund and moving the money into general revenue. Now, we may hear yet the government suggesting that the programs and so forth under the lottery fund will be maintained. I am not certain of the details on that, and I'm certainly eager to hear. But there's a lot of uncertainty out there among many, many people in communities, rural and urban, right throughout the province who really relied upon the funding that came out of the lottery fund as community initiatives that would otherwise never get the funding or receive money to launch a community initiative. So whether it's a small community like Thorhild, that I originally came from, or your own local community league, there were lottery funds that were at work. They could be matching funds. They generated a huge lot of community infrastructure and events that otherwise wouldn't have happened. It's become something that the province has relied upon and has been a great community-building fund of money that people expected to see into the future.

I'm thinking that perhaps with the Premier's distance from the communities he purportedly served when he was serving in Ottawa, perhaps he has not really realized the depth to which the lottery fund has been appreciated in this province. I'm staying tuned to listen to the supporters, the former supporters at least, of the current government and past Conservative supporters from the time when this lottery fund was initiated to the present. You're going to have a lot of people wondering out loud at community meetings, at perhaps even ag societies, at local skating rinks, Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, and all kinds of organizations that look forward to receiving some form of grant or assistance or matching fund from this lottery fund. I don't think it'll take long before the voices are loud and clear that this is a wrong-headed move and perhaps one that this current government will live to regret.

The number of things that they're contemplating doing under one bill always begs the question: why an omnibus bill, and why the move to block things together? Well, typically it's because a government wants to bury things by volume. One of the things that they had perhaps hoped to mute somewhat was the repealing of the city charters for Edmonton and Calgary and putting a new local fiscal framework act in its place.

We had the Minister of Justice today shrieking at reporters about how the mayor of Calgary should get his own house in order and then hightailing it back in behind closed doors, perhaps in embarrassment over what he said. But I can tell you that that interview will be one that's going to be replayed many, many times, perhaps not as many times as the cookie interview, but it certainly was a memorable piece of television news this afternoon, that I think the Minister of Justice probably regrets already but that I think epitomized the attitude of this government as we move forward through its mandate, how it's solidifying and retrenching and circling to hold fast to a mistaken belief that if they simply maintain loyalty to trickle-down economics, somehow the austerity budget will get us through to the other side and, lo and behold, the resurrection will take place and oil prices will rise again.

8:40

That, in fact, isn't something that most researchers support in terms of predictions, and I think that we'll come to see pretty soon

how easily it's told that the economic predictions of boom or this UCP-predicted boom because of their \$4.7 billion tax giveaway turns into a busted theory. It has been proven time and time again that giving a tax cut to major corporations, expecting them to incent the economy, is not something that economically works out.

Why we had to go through this failed experiment again is beyond me, but, you know, this is the bet they're making. They're making a big bet, and – I'll tell you what – they're taking Alberta's economy along for the ride on that bet. The bet is one that, unfortunately, this government appears willing to risk everything on, and that means our economic future, that of our children, and it so didn't have to be this way, Mr. Speaker. The problem is . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the comments from the Member for Edmonton-McClung. One of the things I was hoping he might just spend maybe a moment on is around the deindexing, the student tuition tax credits being removed. Throughout his travels within his constituency – I know that in Edmonton-Decore I have all three of the high schools in north Edmonton, so I get a chance to chat with my high school students on a regular basis – I'm wondering how excited, maybe, some of the students in his riding or maybe their parents, that are going to be helping out those students heading off to university, are around losing out on these tax credits. Also, maybe just in general thoughts around his constituents and the deindexing of the brackets and how, you know, his constituents are looking forward to, hopefully, not getting a raise just so that they won't pay any more. I was hoping you might be able to share some thoughts around that.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, with about four minutes remaining under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Glad to respond. Thanks to the Member for Edmonton-Decore for his questions and concerns about his constituency. Of course, we're all here to serve our constituents, and that's what's at the bottom of my comments when I express my concerns about this government's proposed Bill 20 to end so many of the things that were put in place to get us through and bridge us through a downturn in the economy, so many things that we relied upon on a community basis such as the lottery fund grants and so forth and also things such as the tuition tax credits.

Now, this government seems intent on targeting students and young workers in many measures that have been implemented or that are proposed to be implemented under Bill 20. We've already seen a \$2 decrease in the minimum wage based on age for young workers. That's a huge hit. That's 3,400 bucks on an annual basis that a young student is going to be forced to come up with or that their parents are going to be forced to come up with to put them through school because of that \$2-an-hour wage cut.

On top of that, now with Bill 20 we're seeing an attitude towards young people that, in fact, they're kind of dispensable. We don't realize, through this government, the value of our young people, and it's disheartening to see that as a result of some of the tax credits and tuition tax credit changes, parents are going to end up having to pay more to put their young people through school. Mr. Speaker, it's a time frame when we need to be taking advantage of the window we have to get our young people educated in areas that they are going to take advantage of and that allow them to enter into the new, intelligence-based economy, that is rapidly upon us. It's coming very quickly, and it's in many cases already here.

So many of the things that our past government was doing to incent activity in the new economy are being swept aside by this government in a short-sighted effort to reach a balanced budget. The result is long-term damage to our population, to our young people, to the intellectual capacity that we have as a population. It's more than short-sighted; it's irresponsible. I'm deeply, deeply concerned that we will become not only barren ground for young people, who are going to be going elsewhere to do things with their degrees, if indeed they even decide to take their degrees here. There are lots of reasons why we might find that the people who are looking to invest may just decide to invest elsewhere, and part of that is because they've got a workforce that can't afford to go to university here.

I'm thinking not only about this generation, Mr. Speaker; I'm thinking about, you know, 20, 30, 40 years from now. That's the type of effect and impact that the measures of this government are having upon future generations by implementing omnibus bills like Bill 20 and the elements within it that will have a long-lasting, damaging impact. The Premier would have us think that the goal of reaching a balanced budget as a result of his measures is a worthy one, but it's really damaging.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has risen to join debate.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Bill 20 and bring my concerns to the table on a bill which probably should be renamed The Bill to Centralize Power and Money in the Hands of a Small Oligarchy in the Province of Alberta, because when we look at what the intention is here in this bill, it's clearly to remove control from community groups, from individuals and money from those people and centralize it into the power of the government to make decisions and, of course, as we know, to reward their paymasters in the political realm and in a small section of our economy, to ignore everyone else who doesn't fit into their vision of the universe.

You know, I'm very concerned even that this bill exists in this nature, that we see this happening increasingly in Canada and around the world, where an omnibus bill is put together, in this case bringing together 15 different actions and putting them all into the same act, because it has the very clear purpose of limiting the ability to address them in a clear and independent way so that we can respond to them one by one. The cloud that is created from an omnibus bill makes it very difficult to communicate to the public.

Of course, we know that that's exactly the intent of this government. We know that they put earplugs in because they don't really want to hear what anyone who isn't part of their elite corporate group has to say, and now they try to find repeated ways to take the voice away from people so that not only do they not have to hear but that, in fact, people do not have an ability to speak to issues. This is just another way in which they are doing this, just as they have here in the House by limiting, you know, the voice of the opposition through a number of changes to House rules. Of course, they have done so by changing rules around unions and changing rules in a variety of other areas.

What we see, you know, is a government that's intent on a path that is so antidemocratic, as are so many other things that they have done since they got into government a mere six months ago. We see them essentially acting in a way which betrays that which we have learned as a western democracy in terms of ensuring the voice of the people in the governance of the province. I know that I can say that kind of thing in this House and it won't get very far, and they know that as well because it's very difficult for people in the

community to have a deep understanding of how it is that their rights are slowly being taken away from them, how the sands that hold up democracy in western parliaments are being slipped away by people whose only intent is to centralize power to themselves and a small group of people.

8:50

Now, having said that, I think I will make some attempt to talk to some of the articles of the bill because I think they're very concerning. Of course, what they all have thematically the same amongst them is the idea that the things that give opportunity and advantage to a variety of people are taken away from them. Each and every action within this bill is intended to reduce the ability of people to live a good life in their own way and to make decisions in their own lives that are positive.

I want to start with a statement by the minister who presented the bill. In the House earlier this evening he was addressing the question of the pausing of the indexation, and he said something much along the lines of: you will pay the same amount this year as next year. We can check that in the Blues later, but I'm fairly sure that I caught that right.

What I think is really important about this is that this is clearly a statement that's intended to mislead the House, because we know that there actually is money to be gained from this. The minister himself said that there is money to be gained from this; \$600 million will be gained from this. What he is saying is that if you have \$25,000, the tax rate for \$25,000 will stay the same this year as it does next year. So technically he's saying that the number is the same. What he's not telling you is that this is ignoring the reality that this has a differential effect on people when you don't index things and that, in fact, you will be paying more even if the numbers on the chart in the tax bill remain exactly the same. Now, he knows that, but more importantly, we know that the Premier, his boss, also knows that because he's addressed this as an issue, this behaviour which we refer to as bracket creep.

I just happened to have an opportunity to look up *Hansard* from the Canadian Parliament, on March 2, 1999, when the Premier was a member of the national Reform Party, and he actually had something to say about this very issue. I will quote a little bit from *Hansard* because I don't want to put words in the Premier's mouth. I want the Premier to tell you what he thinks about this sort of behaviour that his own Finance minister is engaged in. What he says is:

Again, as I pointed out in question period, with the new Liberal math they forget to tell us the whole story. Part of the story is that since 1993, 1.2 million low income Canadians, those who can least afford it, many of whom are under the poverty line, single mothers and single parents struggling to get by or seniors on fixed incomes, have seen themselves pushed on to the tax rolls by the government's pernicious back door tax grab called bracket creep, by the pernicious tax on inflation.

Ms Hoffman: Who said that?

Mr. Feehan: That was Premier Kenney at a time when he was a Member of Parliament in Ottawa.

Ms Hoffman: The current Premier.

Mr. Feehan: That's right. The current Premier.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt at this juncture; however, I just want to remind the House that names of individuals in the House won't be used even when responding to questions between each other. Going forward, just make sure that we refer to each other in the third person, through the Speaker.

Thank you.

Mr. Feehan: I believe I did say Premier Kenney, but I will keep it limited to Premier if that's the correct procedure. Thank you.

I think that's very important, that this very thing that is being introduced by the Minister of Finance here today was described in that one sentence twice by the Premier as "pernicious" behaviour. I think that's very disconcerting, that he would be saying that about what, effectively, is behaviour by his own minister. And I think it's important that we speak about the fact that this is what he refers to as a "tax on inflation"; that is, inflation, which naturally happens, will push people into a place where they are paying more taxes. We know how much it is because the minister himself has said that it's \$600 million. That is particularly assaultive. Listen to the group of people that the Premier was concerned about at the time, that is "many of whom are under the poverty line, single mothers and single parents struggling to get by or seniors on fixed incomes."

So what we have is a government who knows that they are attacking the most vulnerable people in society. We know because these are the words of the Premier himself, and he says that this is "pernicious." You know, what do you say about a government that has those kinds of judgments about a behaviour that they in fact are engaged in?

He goes on to say, by the way:

If these people get a cost of living adjustment in their pension cheques or their minimum wage income from working in the labour force, if they get an automatic COLA, a cost of living adjustment, they end up paying taxes not because they are making more in real terms – they are making the same in real terms – but because the government decides to generate more revenue to finance its insatiable appetite for spending in a way that is not transparent, in a way that Canadians cannot see it and in a way that parliament cannot approve it.

That's a very serious condemnation of this behaviour on the part of the very government that he is now in charge of. You know, there are words we can't use in this House to describe people's behaviour, but when someone publicly makes a statement decrying a behaviour and then engages in that behaviour, we all know what words apply. And I think it's very upsetting that here we are in the province of Alberta doing that exact thing.

This is just one of 15 ways in which the government has extended its reach, extended its power, and pulled away resources from members of the community in a way that is the least transparent possible, by sticking it into an omnibus bill so it cannot be debated individually on its own merits, each individual piece.

Now, I know that the minister has stood up and suggested that these things don't really matter, that the elimination of the Alberta cancer prevention legacy fund will not mean less money for cancer research, that the elimination of the lottery fund will not mean less money for community groups. But what he's not saying, as the Premier said in Ottawa – the language that the Premier used was that it was "not transparent" and that it was done "in a way that Canadians cannot see it and ... that parliament cannot approve it."

What is happening here is that they're taking all of these dollars and they're bringing them in under their control, where there will no longer be legislation that controls how much money is being sent out into the community. They can say to us now: don't worry; we'll take in those lottery dollars, but we will send the same number of dollars out into the community as happened under the lottery fund. But the difference is that under the lottery fund there is an act that controls how much that money will be, what percentage of the lottery funds come in, how that money is allotted to various community groups and then goes out again. There's an act that controls that decision-making, and in order to change that, you would have to change the act.

What they've done is they have subverted the act. They've subverted that by taking the dollars out of a transparent, accountable process and slipping it into the government's back pocket, where they can begin to distribute money in any way they choose to do so without accountability to an act. Before, when the lottery dollars came in, they would have to demonstrate to the public that they actually did with the money what the lottery act said that they should do with the money.

9:00

Now, instead, they could decide on any average day to reduce the amount of money put out in the lottery fund by, let's say, 50 per cent and would not have to be accountable to any kind of an act. That's the perniciousness of this whole bill. That's what they're doing. That inherent level of dishonesty in the creation and construction of this bill is appalling to me.

We look at the number of things that they're doing. They are eliminating the interactive digital media tax credit. We know that gaming companies that were taking advantage of this are saying that there was absolutely no consultation on this and that it's devastating to them and that it's going to have them reconsider whether or not they really want to be investing in the province of Alberta.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has risen under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Getson: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a couple of things here that I've been quiet on, and the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford made reference to it again, about the earplugs being worn in the Chamber. The member that he keeps referring to from the UCP: well, that was me. For those that were here that night, I measured the level of decibels that were being expended by the member that sits over here. It was over 98 decibels, towards 101 that evening, where the noise-induced hearing loss issues are at 85 decibels or higher. I had shared with the Chamber at that time that I had tinnitus, as it is. At that time I also had some allergy issues or some other issues that were taking place, and I had actual pressure on the inside of my ear. So, yes, indeed, for the record – and it's been stated before – I am the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, that wore one single earplug in my left ear – one single earplug in my ear – that, yes, the Premier put in. [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: The Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has the call. I will listen to his question or comment for four more minutes. That's what you have left in time.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, yes, in fact, I did put one single earplug in that was made available to me because my head was splitting out wide.

Now, I find it very hard to believe that the folks over there, who want to stand up for the little guy all the time, are actually picking on me, a little six-foot-two guy who had a hearing issue. What I am going to be doing for the record and since they want to keep going on this: I did have an audiology report that took place once we were out of session because I sucked it up – as my dad used to say, "Suck it up, Buttercup, when you're working" – and I put up with that issue for a while. This summer I had an audiology report, and indeed I do have problems in my left ear. The tinnitus was an item, but I had unequal pressure in my left ear, for which now I have a meeting with an ear, nose, and throat specialist on November 8, again, which I would be more than happy to table.

I find it very insulting to be picked on, quite honestly, again by the bully crowd that wants to point out a medical condition. If I had a hearing issue, well, I guess that's just not good enough to be taken at its word. It continues to come up nonstop, and I don't appreciate

it. So if the members could please refrain from talking about my issues and making light of it or anything else, it would be much appreciated.

Even with my left ear, that still hurts a bit, depending on the environment, I still heard the minister quite clearly say that coming down to the lottery fund, it was going into general revenue. It was going into one bucket that could be drawn from. There wouldn't be any shortfalls. Even with my left ear, that still doesn't work as well, in listening to that, I can hear clearly that it was said, again, when it comes to the cancer type of items, that it wasn't going to be reduced in funding. It's simply a matter of efficiencies.

To save the Alberta taxpayers about \$13 million through efficiencies: to make that out to be something else is actually a disservice to what we're doing. So quit scaring, quite honestly, the members, the province. Quit scaring the people that have those different conditions. Quit scaring the people in my area, that rely on those lottery funds, and listen to the points. Instead of speaking to the camera for the 10-second sound bite that they're going to throw up on their Facebook feed, perhaps let's do some service to the Alberta population and listen to the questions and listen to the answers that are provided.

With that, I would like to see if the member would actually like to retract it or maybe restate his position on the hearing issues and the earplugs. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Two minutes left under 29(2)(a). The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely no one is mocking the member for his hearing issues. That's absolutely sad to hear about. We're all with you on that.

I was in the House when the Premier handed out earplugs, laughed. We all witnessed it. A number of us witnessed it. What the member was referring to was nothing to do with you, the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. The member was referring to the continued attacks on democracy, the shutting down of debate, as we've seen many times, and he linked that quite adeptly, I would say, to this bill ahead of us, Bill 20, this omnibus bill. It's an omnibus bill, the same tactic that Harper used, combining multiple pieces of legislation, each of which could be independently reviewed and debated, but this government is choosing to do otherwise.

I'm going to sit down so the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford can also respond, but he is absolutely in no need of apologizing. That's a fact.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has risen with about 30 seconds left.

Mr. Feehan: Thirty seconds. Thank you. I thank the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland for his comments, and I assure you, if I ever refer to earplugs, I explicitly will tell him now that it is not a reference to him individually but, rather, to the general behaviour of the government and of the Premier, who generally handed out earplugs to people who did not have a problem with their left ear. I for the record exclude you from all such comments in the future.

Mr. Williams: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: Having heard a point of order called, I see the hon. Member for Peace River is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Williams: You'll forgive me, Mr. Speaker, if this is the wrong point, but the hon. members across the way referred to "you"

multiple times in reference to my colleague, and as the Chamber knows, the only "you" in this Chamber is the Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. I don't find a point of order with regard to that at this stage. Using certain terms in this House can be dealt with circumstantially. In the case that we've heard so far this evening, I haven't found something that crosses over. I assure you that when I do, I will be the first to stand up and call the House to order.

Considering that to be dealt with and looking to any other members who wish to speak to the bill proper, I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen to speak on this.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to add some of my thoughts around Bill 20, the Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, 2019, which – I don't know – has been pointed out by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford as a bit of an omnibus bill. You know, I can't help but find some of the irony a little bit around this. We have a couple of members that were around during the 29th Legislature who went on, shall we say, ad nauseam around what they thought were some omnibus bills that were presented by the former NDP government. It's always interesting when you hear objections to those kinds of things and when somebody is finally put into the position of being able to do it differently: here we are, second verse, same as the first. But I won't dwell on this.

I want to get into some of this bill that's being proposed. Initially, during the opening of second reading here, some of the comments that I heard from the Minister of Finance, you know, some little things that we are talking about here around, say, for instance, reducing red tape – and as the red tape critic, I've always said that I'm very much onboard. You know, do we need to make 15 copies when only 10 copies will do, things like that? But when I look at potentially moving this lottery fund into general revenue under the claims of reducing red tape, I wonder if perhaps we might be creating some red tape around how we monitor these funds. How do we ensure that what is actually coming in is going back out just like it used to do? So we've eliminated some red tape, yet we've created some.

You know, I find that comments around making changes so that those that need the funding the most get it – and here I'm looking at things like deindexing – don't necessarily work for getting the funding to those that need it most.

9:10

The other one that I couldn't help but kind of cue in on was around aligning us with other provinces. It's interesting when we talk about that phrase. One minute we're aligning with other provinces and that's a great thing because, you know, that brings us up, yet we have legislation that is getting rolled back, is being moved backwards, that did align us with other provinces. But now, all of a sudden, that's a bad thing because, well, we don't want to be aligned with other provinces. So I couldn't help but cue in on a few of those things.

I guess one of the first things I want to talk about around Bill 20 is the elimination of the five tax credits that were available: the interactive digital media tax credit, the capital investment tax credit, the community and economic tax credit, the Alberta investor tax credit, the scientific research and experimental development tax credit. Obviously, my time is limited. I can only speak for so long here, so what I think I'll do to make my point, Mr. Speaker, is that I'll cue in on the digital media tax credit.

Now, I'm pretty certain that I've mentioned in this House before that one of the things that I do in my free time, what very little of it I get – it's usually very, very late at night or maybe very late at night

on a weekend – is that I do like to participate in computer video games. When I was first elected, in 2015, and got a chance to chat with some of the stakeholders in that industry, one of the things I remember very, very clearly them saying to me: you know, there's this fantastic industry out in Quebec and out in B.C., and one of the things about the gaming industry is that it's only limited by the imagination and a little bit of money. One of the things I very, very clearly heard was that if we could somehow balance us out – we didn't even have to get it exactly but just kind of get close – around supporting that industry, they said very, very clearly that the businesses will come here.

What would eventually become the digital media tax credit was very, very quickly taken advantage of. You know, we saw businesses coming here because they had the expertise that was being trained right at our very excellent postsecondary institutions. We had the infrastructure in terms of public services that are attractive to businesses as well as one of the lowest tax structures in the entire country, with no payroll tax and no sales tax here within the province.

So when I see the elimination of this digital media tax credit, I can't help but wonder: why? You know, I've heard very clearly from some of the members here about their experience in business, so I can't help but ask: what kind of potential is available to Alberta within the gaming industry?

I've always managed to try to explain to people that I get to talk to within my communities that we need to think a little bit like a grocery store, Mr. Speaker. We need to have many products on the shelves. We need to have many different prices for those products. People will come in, they'll take what they need, they'll leave the rest, and that's exactly the way it's supposed to work. By bringing this industry here to Alberta, that was one of those products that we get to put on the shelf.

When I look in 2017 at what the gaming industry was bringing in, you know, Mr. Speaker, you might be quite surprised to learn that that industry was bringing in almost \$109 billion. So why doesn't Alberta get a piece of that action? When I look in 2018, the industry grew by almost 11 per cent over 2017 and was now almost a \$135 billion industry. Predictions are that in 2019 the industry is going to grow by almost another 10 per cent, 9.6, and they're predicting just over \$152 billion. That's quite the industry, Mr. Speaker, and I think we should be getting a piece of that action. I think we should be getting our thumbs in that pie as a province, and the digital media tax credit was providing that avenue, and those companies were coming here. They were relocating here because here is where we could get a piece of that action.

Obviously, I'm incredibly disappointed to see a tool that this government had to create jobs – I always use BioWare as the example. I mean, it's an absolutely amazing company: located, born right here in the city of Edmonton, over 25 years old, and at any given time it would employ anywhere between 300 and 400 people with an average salary of between \$70,000 and \$75,000 a year. Those are really good, mortgage-paying jobs. Here we are telling the industry: "Nah. We're not interested in that." I thought this government was elected to create jobs. That's what was in the election platform.

So here we are. We're about to set things up so that we're going to miss our own boat, Mr. Speaker, and that's really, really disappointing. You know, I know the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview can speak at length about this around things like the capital investment tax credit and the Alberta investor tax credit and how those have helped smaller businesses to really get a foothold and start to grow their business. I know all this data is out here where we've heard, you know: well, you've just got to lower the corporate rate. The smaller companies are saying: "I'm sorry.

It's not working for me. I don't get to take advantage of that." Here were programs that that business community asked for, and now we're saying: "Nah. We'd rather give that money to big, massive companies like Walmart." The last time I looked, Walmart wasn't making these kinds of gains like the digital media industry is doing.

Getting back, I guess, a little bit to the red tape discussion here, the repeal of the city charters from Edmonton and Calgary: if this is their idea of red tape reduction, Mr. Speaker, then it's no surprise why the mayors of both Edmonton and Calgary are so upset with this government. This very clearly is not red tape reduction. I know it's proposed that the ministry is going to have a \$10 million budget over the next three and a half years, but I think some of our members have said before that, you know, maybe we could potentially ask for our money back. Maybe this red tape reduction could be money better spent. Maybe we could back the STEP program for \$10 million and actually get some jobs going. So far we're at 27,000 minus and counting.

I guess that now starts to lead me – I've had the chance to ask some of the other members around their students and parents and how excited they are to find out that, you know, students will pay more to go to school. It's funny. I have yet to find a single student in my riding that says: "I am completely excited to be paying more on my loans to be able to go to school. I can't wait." I haven't found one.

9:20

I also haven't found any of their parents that are excited about not getting that tax credit. Some parents are in the position to be able to help their students go to school, but it was that tax credit that just kind of pushed it over the edge. I haven't found one yet that's excited that they're losing that. I also haven't found one single taxpayer yet that's excited about hoping their boss doesn't give them a raise so that they will make the same amount of money so their income tax won't go up. I'm still waiting to have somebody call me or write me around that.

With some of the moves that are being made here in Bill 20, besides the fact that it's just an omnibus bill, Mr. Speaker, I don't think that this serves Albertans. I guess that maybe if we were able to separate it out, there could be some things that we could debate on their merits and get those through, but, you know, clearly there are other things that are just not productive. It doesn't grow our businesses here in the province. We've heard that very, very clearly, as I'd mentioned, through the digital media tax credit. Giving big \$4.7 billion corporate handouts to places like Walmart does not move our economy forward.

I'm finding myself not in a position to be able to support this. Certainly, I guess that if the government side wants to maybe break things up a little bit, we can discuss those things. Otherwise, I'm just not seeing how this is going to move us forward.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 21

Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019

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

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move second reading of Bill 21, the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019.

Like Bill 20, this important bill addresses our overspending problem, promotes fiscal accountability, and helps bring Alberta back to balance. Bill 21 focuses on promoting fiscal sustainability for Alberta today and in the future. It addresses public-sector

compensation, the largest expense in the Alberta budget. It also pauses indexation for a number of programs and makes amendments that ensure we are prudent with taxpayers' money. All told, it proposes 18 changes across eight departments. I'd like to provide an overview of these changes and explain how they contribute to the good fiscal health of Alberta.

As I did with Bill 20, I'll begin with changes in my own ministry, Treasury Board and Finance. First and foremost, we are taking two important steps to ensure the sustainability of the public-sector workforce. The public-sector employers act would provide legislation to be in place for the forthcoming round of collective bargaining in 2020. At \$26.9 billion annually, public-sector compensation accounts for more than half of all government expenses. As stewards of taxpayers' dollars, the legislation helps to ensure that the costs of all collective agreements bargained by government and its public-sector employer partners are aligned with the province's fiscal realities.

It would do so by formalizing existing government oversight levers, including fiscal bargaining mandates already informally in place over a large percentage of agreements bargained by public-sector employers. This includes both the Alberta public service and Alberta Health Services. It will also extend greater accountability to government-funded employers such as postsecondary institutions, education support services, and agencies, boards, and commissions. Albertans expect government to be fully accountable for how their tax dollars are spent on public-sector wages.

Second, we would amend the Public Service Act limits on reasonable notice of termination and severance pay for non bargaining unit employees appointed under the act. Amendments would provide notice and severance requirements for these employees, from four weeks per year of continuous service to a maximum of 78 weeks.

Next we would improve the government's fiscal accountability and transparency by updating our budget processes and reporting. Amendments to the Fiscal Planning and Transparency Act would replace spending limits with a transferable supply vote, eliminate the contingency account, improve fiscal reporting, align business planning and financial reporting, and add an annual infrastructure report to provide details on the progress of major projects and programs relative to the budget.

Lastly, for Treasury Board and Finance this legislation would amend the Financial Administration Act to improve transparency. This includes creating a transferable supply vote for contingencies and emergencies such as responding to natural disasters, which are clearly in the public interest and cannot be delayed. Any transfers from the supply vote will be required to be explained via an order in council, which are public documents, thereby ensuring accountability.

Other minor changes include adopting a cohesive approach to approving Crown loans, indemnities, and guarantees, allowing Treasury Board to delegate some policy-making functions, removing government control of two health and welfare trusts, creating a right of offset to reduce payments to Crown debtors, and removing references to repealed legislation.

Moving on to changes in the Ministry of Labour and Immigration, we're taking more steps to better manage public-sector compensation. This bill proposes to reverse the replacement worker ban in the public sector. This would ensure essential services that Albertans need are not impacted by strikes or lockouts. We would reinstate the exclusion of specific public-sector jobs from bargaining units where it makes sense to do so. This includes auditors, systems analysts, and budget officers. Historically these roles were excluded from bargaining units, and for good reason. In

many cases, individuals in these roles are privy to information that would put them in a conflict of interest.

Lastly, for Labour and Immigration we would establish the authority to make retroactive regulations and define "employee" in the employment standards regulation. This change primarily clarifies that amateur athletes are not employees of the athletic associations that they belong to and allows them to follow existing agreements for providing benefits to athletes. This also better aligns our employment standards with other provinces.

Continuing on to the Ministry of Health, we are proposing changes to better ensure all Albertans have access to qualified doctors. First, we need to ensure that the \$5 billion the government spends on physicians every year is spent in a way that best serves Albertans' needs. To help achieve this goal, we're proposing amendments to the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act and regulation to give the Minister of Health the authority to place conditions on obtaining a practitioner identification number. The intent of this change is to improve access to physician services for rural and remote areas and to manage the physician services budget.

Next Bill 21 introduces provisions to change the doctors' master agreement in the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act. While we're committed to good-faith consultation and negotiation with the Alberta Medical Association, we need to be able to achieve the goals of budget certainty and good governance. Under the current agreement with doctors the growth in physician spending will only continue in the years ahead. This change would simply provide the minister and cabinet more authority regarding the physical contract.

Next the bill addresses how we fund policing in our province, with a focus on addressing rural crime. We're proposing amendments to the Police Act to update the police costing model for rural municipalities. A new, sustainable police funding model would address long-standing inequities in how police services are funded in our province, particularly between rural and urban areas. A new funding model would not only address this inequity; it would help direct needed resources to policing and justice services in rural Alberta.

Bill 21 would also increase the fine retention percentage for the province. Fines and penalties paid to municipalities are enforced through the Provincial Court, and the province keeps a percentage to offset expenses of administration. This additional revenue will help pay for programs and services that benefit all Albertans.

9:30

On the postsecondary education front Alberta currently spends significantly more for a full-time student equivalent than B.C., Ontario, and Quebec and without achieving better results. We would begin to address this inequality through a few measures. First, we would lift the tuition cap for three academic years in order to set an alternative cap in regulation. The current cap has been in place for the last five years. Untying the hands of institutions would reduce their dependency on government funding and would mitigate the impacts of funding reductions. Second, we would implement an interest rate increase on student loans by 1 per cent for all borrowers. This change would increase government revenue and would also save taxpayers on loan provisions. The impact on students with loans would be relatively small. For example, a student with a \$30,000 provincial loan amortized over a decade would see an increase of approximately \$15 a month.

As mentioned earlier and alluded to when speaking to Bill 20, we're pausing indexation for a number of programs. For this bill, the first of these is the assured income for the severely handicapped, or AISH. This is a program that supports some of the most vulnerable in our society. Alberta's spending in this area is currently the highest in Canada, and I'm happy to report that current

benefit rates for AISH will be maintained. This is only a temporary pause. Once Alberta's finances improve, we can look at reinstating indexing.

We would also be pausing indexation of the employment and income support benefits. This includes programs such as the learners' and employment training program at Advanced Education and the expected to work and barriers to full-time employment programs offered by Community and Social Services. Two additional programs would also have their indexation paused; the Alberta seniors' benefit and the seniors' lodge program would both have their funding maintained at current levels. Again, we would not cut any funding to these programs. Recipients will not see a reduction in their benefits. We will maintain existing levels while we get our finances back on track.

Lastly, in Bill 21 we would be eliminating the cap for the regulated rate option for electricity prices. To date the cap has cost the province more than \$90 million. If the program were to run until its legislated end date of May 31, 2021, it would cost government an estimated \$388 million. By ending the previous government's regulated electricity price cap, we are saving taxpayers millions and maintaining consumer choice.

Mr. Speaker, once again, I'd like to thank you and the House for the time and attention to outline this important bill. Like Bill 20, there are many pieces involved in Bill 21. It is complex, but then again our financial situation is complex. We need these changes to address our fiscal reality and get Alberta back on track.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to speak to Bill 21? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has risen to speak, with 20 minutes.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to say that I'm honoured to rise to speak to this, but I'm actually quite concerned about what I see in Bill 21, the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019. Wow. What an interesting name for an act that takes so much away from hard-working Albertans and attacks the most vulnerable. We'll have to think of a better name for this act because that's certainly not – ensuring fiscal sustainability on the backs of a whole lot of Albertans is quite shameful. We know this is just another example of the budget taking money out of the pockets of our neighbours just so that they can pay for their \$4.7 billion handout to big corporations.

As my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford spoke about earlier, this Bill 21 is a huge omnibus bill that combines a whole heck of a lot of things that should all, truly, be handled independently. I mean, I'll point to a lot of those measures here in my comments. These are huge. There are some huge pieces to this bill. It's hard for me, actually, to not get emotional because some of these hit really close to home in my riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

But just to get back to conclude my comments about the omnibus bill, as I noted earlier, this was a technique that PM Harper used a lot as well. It's a sneaky attack of really just combining a whole lot of things and not allowing the fulsome debate that they should each have separately. There's so much in here, and I have a little bit of time to analyze Bill 21. The impact that each of these pieces will have on people across the province is going to be huge, and I don't think we'll know that full impact immediately either.

One of the things I want to speak about first of all and one of the ones, like I said, that hits very close to home in my own neighbourhood – of course, I live in the riding that I represent, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and I've got a lot of friends,

neighbours, people that I would call close friends, actually, who are on AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped. Let me tell you: I've heard from a lot of them over the last few days. A lot of them didn't believe it. They said: "No. There's no way this government is actually going to be attacking AISH. They're not actually going to do that."

Ms Hoffman: Fear and smear.

Member Irwin: Right. Exactly. That's the fear and smear sort of, you know, technique that they would say of us.

You know, prior to seeing this in writing, I would have said, "You know what; you're probably right," because truly it's a mere pittance in budgets that are billions of dollars. Yet here we are. It's happening. The indexing of AISH is being postponed.

Now, I was so proud when our government indexed AISH. I know my colleague from Calgary-McCall did a lot of great work. I actually had the honour of being able to work a little bit on that and connect with a lot of stakeholders who were so happy I was at that announcement. It was at Boyle Street Plaza in my riding. Right by Boyle Street Plaza there are actually a number of affordable housing complexes, and I've had the pleasure of visiting and knocking on doors there. Many of those folks are dependent on AISH.

When this government and when this Premier say things like, "You know, it's not onerous; it's small; it's a drop in the bucket," I can tell you – and I'll be the first to admit it; I don't know how much I should say – that we definitely should have done more. We know that. We started to do good work to support low-income Albertans, and I will say, because I don't mind being fully transparent, that I think there was more that needed to be done, absolutely. But for the members opposite to say, "You waited this long, and it's just going to be a delay, and it's not going to be onerous," it's absolutely false. A few dollars a month makes a significant impact for folks who are struggling.

In fact, I had someone message me just yesterday, someone who is on AISH, someone who is severely disabled, and she's worried. She said: I'm already struggling day in, day out. I'm not someone who wastes money. She said that she manages her budget as closely as she can, and she's worried. I'm sure many of my colleagues in this House have heard similar stories. I know some of the ministers have the habit of saying to us to come visit their ridings and hear from people in their ridings. Well, you know what? I would like to extend that offer to the Finance minister. I could probably set him up with 20, 30, 50 meetings with folks who are going to be severely impacted by the choices that this government is making, and they'd love to be able to talk to him about that face to face. Please, the offer is out there, Minister. Consider taking it up.

9:40

Now, with this omnibus bill, in addition to AISH, I mentioned that affordable housing is impacted, because the indexing of benefits also impacts income support, the seniors' lodge program. I, too, have the benefit of having a number of seniors' lodges in my riding, many of which are for seniors on fixed incomes. Now, let's look at some of the attacks. This is another attack on seniors. We've seen that their drug plans for dependants have been stripped back. Again, I can point to a whole heck of a lot of seniors in my own riding who would say that the cuts to the seniors' lodge program are going to impact them quite severely.

Where else? So far we've talked about attacks on folks with disabilities, AISH recipients, attacks on folks living in affordable housing. Postsecondary students: this was another one that the minister just tried to again minimize. I just heard him say – I'm not sure if I captured all of what he said there – that, you know, the

student loan increase is hardly going to make an impact on our postsecondary students. I think he said something like: oh, it's only \$15 a month. Again, if you're a postsecondary student who's facing a whole heck of a lot of expenses right now, any increases are not just minimal. I find it offensive that this government continues to minimize things. I don't know if they've just never been in that situation – I know I certainly have been there, and I think a lot of my colleagues have as well – when you are trying to get by at the end of the month and you're not sure how you're going to pay for things and how stressful, how unbelievably stressful, that is. So I find it quite offensive that this government continues to minimize these thousands of cuts that keep coming.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Bill 21 includes – again, I know folks are just starting to learn about some of the impacts of Bill 21 – increasing student loan interest rates by 1 per cent. Okay? It also ends the tuition freeze. You know, we heard the Minister of Advanced Education saying something along the lines that he heard students saying that they wanted this. Well, what a farce. We've got families trying to make ends meet, families sometimes that are trying to support their children who are in postsecondary education, and we've got students who are having to support themselves entirely, again, attacks on many students who are already struggling.

You know, I met, actually, with two folks, with students' union executives just a couple of days ago, and they were recapping some of the impacts of this government's budget. This was prior to seeing all the details of Bill 21, in fact, so I'm quite interested to hear what they have to say now.

In addition to the end of the tuition freeze, they also spoke about the tax credits – right? – which is in the other bill, Bill 20, the point being that this is, I think, a three-pronged attack on postsecondary students right there: the tuition freeze, a student loan increase, and the tax credits. I'm sure I'm missing things. My colleagues can certainly . . .

Ms Hoffman: STEP.

Member Irwin: STEP. Thank you. Yeah, so a lack of employment opportunities.

Not only are they getting – I've got to watch my language – hooped when it comes to affordability . . . [interjections] Yes, hooped. That's right. They are also getting equally hooped when they're trying to access employment opportunities. So it's, in fact, a four-pronged attack on postsecondary students. Again, I'm sure I'm missing some elements there as well.

So I can't imagine being in postsecondary. It was hard enough being a postsecondary student years ago. You know, even when I was a university student in the early 2000s, it was hard, but tuition was even a little bit more affordable back then. So I'm quite worried.

This argument, you know, that the minister mentioned, that it's because we're spending more than other provinces – we're spending more than other provinces; thus, let's gouge kids and their families – like, why is this the argument? Why is it: other provinces do it – or don't do it, depending on the case – so we should, too? Right? Why can't we just be world-class leaders in postsecondary education? Why can't we just be good for the sake of being good? Why do we have to lower our standards to match other provinces? I mean, taking the lead from provinces that have been named already this evening like Ontario and Saskatchewan: I'm not sure if we should be taking a whole lot of lessons from those jurisdictions. Again, this argument that, well, other provinces did it: I don't buy

that, and I certainly don't think postsecondary students should have to suffer because of this very low bar.

Okay. So where are we at now? We've talked about attacks on – I'm just going to keep recapping because this is a giant omnibus bill and we need to be reminded of all the elements within it – postsecondary students, AISH recipients, those living in affordable housing. Let's move on.

Ms Hoffman: Seniors.

Member Irwin: Seniors. Thank you. I missed seniors in that recap.

Workers. Now, one of the interesting things – “interesting” is probably not the right word. One of the elements of this large Bill 21 is allowing the government essentially to have greater oversight over collective bargaining. We've seen today the Finance minister talk about the need to restrict the salaries of civil servants, and as I noted on social media, mark my words: this is not simply an attack on a few civil servants. This is a sign of what's to come. This is an attack on the wages of the teacher that's teaching your kids, of the nurse who's caring for your loved ones, of the social worker who's protecting the most vulnerable, and a whole heck of a lot of other hard-working Albertans. We've already seen these attacks in a number of ways, and I very much worry that there's going to be further intervention over collective bargaining agreements and further attacks on the constitutional rights of Alberta's workers.

I could go on about a number of other things. I'd rather have some of my colleagues who are far more knowledgeable on a few of the other pieces like, for instance, the attacks on medical professionals and so on – I'm quite concerned about that. I know we've heard from some medical professionals who are already concerned about the government in Bill 21 having the ability to unilaterally terminate the doctor compensation agreement. I point out that example without a lot of specifics just to say that, again, we can add medical professionals, we can add doctors to the list of hard-working Albertans who are being attacked by this government under this budget and, in this case, Bill 21.

What I would like to do is end my comments by just again noting that Bill 21 is very much an attack on Albertans. It's an attack on my neighbours. It's an attack on many folks who I call friends, and I'm going to challenge this government to think about how much in this bill was actually in their platform. Judging by the feedback I'm getting from commenting on this government's budget, I would bet that many of the members opposite are hearing a lot as well, that they're hearing from those public service workers who are feeling that their rights are being stripped away, hearing from AISH recipients, hearing from seniors, and hearing from postsecondary students.

I would urge the members opposite to consider not supporting this bill. I mean, you were all told – we had this discussion earlier in the year – that you had a right to sort of vote by conscience. My conscience is definitely telling me that there are a lot of morally indefensible elements in Bill 21.

On that note, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this bill.

The Speaker: Hon. members, anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to the members for the opportunity to engage in debate on Bill 21. I definitely have a number of concerns that align with those raised by my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, who so accurately identified the AISH cuts and how problematic those are for many Albertans living on fixed income.

I want to tell you about door-knocking in 2015, actually. One of the buildings I went to was entirely occupied by people who are living on AISH income alone. They'd never had anyone door-knock on their building, they told me. They were very excited to have an opportunity to engage about political issues. They weren't exactly sure how and what to say, and one of their support workers who was there said: tell them about what it's like to live on AISH.

9:50

They told me that they don't have enough money to take a taxi to go see their mom on Sundays and that if they could take a taxi across town to go see their mom on Sundays, that would make a big difference in their lives. About 30 bucks. They can take DATS, and DATS can do their best to get there at the right time, but DATS is funded through provincial funding to municipalities. That's now being cut as well. So DATS, which was already very difficult and not as reliable as being able to take a taxi on a Sunday to go see your mom, has now gotten even more downloaded on them, and we'll see what the municipality does to determine how they will address their budget pressures that are being handed down to them by the province.

In 2015, when they told me that it would make a big difference to have just a little bit of extra money to do things like take a taxi, I brought that forward to the then Premier and the minister responsible for community and social services. It was clear that if we wanted to show respect, rather than nickelling and diming folks, we would find a way to make sure that their already quite tight cost of living would at least be indexed so that when the Conference Board of Canada says that there's 2 per cent inflation, they'd at least get 2 per cent more to be able to meet their needs, not a huge luxury but something that would make a tangible difference and not in a way that was demeaning or disrespectful to people about making their own decisions about their own money. We often hear folks say, you know, that a dollar in the pocket is more empowering for somebody to make their own choices if it's their own dollar. That's being taken away from people who are living on the necessity of AISH, which, again, is assured income for the severely handicapped. These are a lot of folks who don't have the ability to work a little bit more or to access another program, so I am very disheartened by that.

Also, the seniors' lodge program, income support and the seniors' lodge program. Again, these are things that I often hear members talk about, the importance of having seniors' lodges in their ridings. This is being eroded through this failure to index these programs this year. I think that it's quite cowardly to go after folks who require the benefits of the government to be able to live, quite frankly.

Excluding budget officers, system analysts, auditors, and employees who perform similar functions from the bargaining units: just another way of sort of hacking away at some of the folks who are part of a bargaining unit, have the ability to actually work collectively and be able to do their work as part of a larger team. Okay. Maybe not quite as vindictive, but again I wouldn't call that exactly something that was a big campaign promise or that somebody put in a platform.

Reversing the replacement worker ban on public sectors: I don't believe this is constitutional. There was a Supreme Court ruling. The government of the day acted in accordance with the Supreme Court ruling to bring in this replacement worker ban in the public sector. You know, I said it in the last session a number of times, and I don't want to have to keep saying it in this session, but this bill seems incredibly ripe for legal challenge, legal challenge that we will almost certainly fail in. I don't know why the government

seems so focused on spending so much money hiring lawyers to argue things that the Supreme Court has already determined.

That just seems like irresponsible fiscal management. When you're making an investment in a business, you would look at your business's viability. You would look at the market conditions. If I'm opening a small business, I'd look at similar small businesses and what they've experienced in the market and if there's enough room for them to succeed and, therefore, for me to succeed. If there's a small business that tried to open that had a similar model to mine and they were proven to have failed in that market, it would be irresponsible of me to take money, especially taxpayer money, and invest it in something that was exactly the same that had already proven to be a failure.

That's what we're doing here through this bill because jurisdictions already tried this, and the Supreme Court already made their ruling. All we were doing was complying with the ruling, complying with the order of the law, the letter of the law. Now we're going to change it, fight it, go back to court, spend a bunch of money on legal challenges, and almost certainly lose. That, to me, doesn't seem fiscally responsible or morally responsible. It certainly isn't fiscally responsible.

Ending the tuition freeze for three years. This I find, again, quite rich given that many members of this House – the Speaker of this Assembly was elected as a member of the government caucus. The Speaker of the Assembly, I know, was a member of this House when we brought in this freeze, and I believe it was voted on by all parties represented in this House – the members for Calgary-Fish Creek, Central Peace-Notley, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock, and the hon. Speaker. When these things were voted on, if it was never the intention to actually follow through on them, why did they vote in that way?

I can tell you that if they said, "Well, we have a different fiscal situation now," the difference is the \$4.7 billion no-jobs corporate handout. The difference isn't the market conditions because I think anyone who can read projections knew the kind of downturn that we were in and that it wasn't something that Alberta was isolated from. In fact, Alberta was rebounding more quickly than other jurisdictions. You know, when the conditions were very similar, in fact a little bit better – there were 27,000 more people working at that point than now – why was it okay to vote for a freeze at that time and now, today, tear up that freeze? Is it because that wouldn't be popular? Is it because that wouldn't be seen as something that voters would probably be keen to support?

Well, what about increasing student loan interest payments by 1 per cent? One per cent doesn't sound like a lot, right? Again, it was, I think, over \$600 per year when we sat down with Fajar and did the math. Right? Pretty significant when you're actually coming to the time when you have to repay, which is, essentially, right after you graduate, whether you have a high-paying job or not. Again, something that seems to be going after people who are choosing to invest in their own futures by going to postsecondary.

Ending the regulated rate option cap for electricity. Again, not something that any of the seniors in my riding or any of the families in my riding said: "You know what we need to do? We need to get rid of the cap on electricity prices. That would really fix things." Most of them say: I want my electricity to be more affordable; I want it to be lower. This bill is allowing the exact opposite to happen.

Here's the one I want to talk about for a little while, though, because I've spent a lot of time thinking about it from a number of different angles. That again is one that I think is setting us up for a legal challenge that we will lose. That's the allocation of prac IDs, or practitioner IDs, for new practitioners of medicine to be restricted in the province of Alberta. I know that all of us, I hope all

of us, want patients to be able to access a doctor or a nurse practitioner when and where they're needed. The right care in the right place at the right time, somebody once said.

To go through with this bill, which puts limits on that and actually says – let's imagine. Let's imagine that I am a young person living in the city of Calgary. Let's imagine that I work hard my entire schooling, that I'm successful and get into university, that I get an undergraduate degree, that I eventually become a doctor and that I want to practise medicine in my hometown, my home city of Calgary, Alberta. If the Minister of Health, which seems very likely, based on all of the back and forth there's been about this in the last few days, determines that Calgary isn't a place where the minister, he or she, may want me to practise, then I don't have the legal right to practise medicine in my home city. Insert the name of community here. It could be Athabasca; it could be Barrhead. Barrhead: lovely hometown. The lovely hometown of Barrhead.

I think one of the things that the Health minister is hoping is that by grandfathering existing practitioners, they won't push back. I want to say that I looked at the court challenges from other jurisdictions. I think it was B.C. where they almost didn't push back, but you know who did? The residents, the med students, and they convinced their association to go to court. When they went to court, the court said: "Absolutely, it's unconstitutional. You can't tell people where to live and where to work. If they want to live and work in their province in a variety of places, they have the right to do that."

10:00

Why wouldn't we look at these court challenges that seem very parallel – Quebec had a very similar one even more recently – and think: "What's our probability of winning? Before I hire a bunch of lawyers, before I create a bunch of chaos, before I cause a bunch of disarray, what's my probability of winning if I do this thing that so many have said is unconstitutional? Let's actually look and see if it is?" I strongly, strongly believe that it is. I think that this is ripe for lots of lawyers to be very busy for maybe a short time, maybe a long time, but I think that at the end of the day the government will lose.

I don't think it's just about Edmonton and Calgary. I know that some people are saying: well, this is about making sure that folks end up in rural Alberta. I think that there will be many positions – again, the minister has talked about wanting to control the bundle, control the compensation. I think there could be many conditions where prac IDs wouldn't be given in communities outside of Edmonton and Calgary as well. If I were that long-standing physician who the minister says will be grandparented into this system and I wanted to sell my practice in Barrhead, Alberta – let's say that I'm nearing retirement, I've been saving my whole life, I have a private practice, and the Minister of Health chooses not to allow a prac ID for a physician who chooses to come and buy my practice, then that actually impacts the physician of today in a very meaningful financial way as well as the community because the community would in turn lose their physician.

For a government that has so often said, you know, "Supply and demand, and let the market play out," in this situation to really constrain – I believe that is unconstitutional – where people work and how they work in this way I think is ripe for a legal challenge, and I think it's also ripe for disarray in our communities and distrust. I know that it can be tough. The buck does stop with the minister. This is putting even more on the minister, saying that we are going to determine where people work and if they can work. I don't think it will stand up. I think that there will be a lot of push-back both from the medical community as well as from communities right across this province. I imagine the minister has heard from some towns already that really want more physicians to be working in their communities, so putting on further limitations,

I think, is going to be highly problematic. Again, to that kid who's living in your riding, who aspires to become a doctor and work in their hometown, this is completely counter to their hopes and dreams. I think that that is highly problematic. I think also that allowing conditions on those new practitioners is something that, again, won't stand up.

I want to say that one of the other things is that it allows changes to the master agreement with the Alberta Medical Association, allowing changes, essentially, around unilateral implementation of an agreement. I want to say that I know it's hard and I know that this is a powerful collective that the government is negotiating with, but one of the reasons why they are so powerful is because they are so needed in our society. I have to say how concerned I am that these changes are being brought forward, and I don't think that the ramifications have been considered.

The Speaker: Well, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I just might note that I thought we were very close to playing a game of question period *Jeopardy!* there with the right place and the right time and the right care, for those who have been around for a little while.

We're at 29(2)(a), and I see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore caught my eye.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that very much. You know, I always appreciate the insights from the Member for Edmonton-Glenora. I especially appreciate her insights around education not only as a former school board trustee but as a school board chair as well. As folks know, Edmonton-Decore is home to 26 schools, three of them being high schools, and all of the high schools north of the Yellowhead freeway. When I look at Bill 21 and ending the tuition freeze and increasing student loans by 1 per cent, I'm just wondering what kind of conversations the Member for Edmonton-Glenora has had with the students that she's come in contact with, not only just over the last few months but over the last several years and including her time as board chair. I'm wondering how excited students are. Do they come running up to her, excited about paying extra for their student loans, having to pay extra in order to attend university after 12 years of school? I was wondering if she could share again some of those insights around that from some of the students in her area.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, a number of students have talked to me about their hopes and dreams for the future, and that's a good thing. Thinking about a career path and how one might be able to embark upon that is something that I was really proud to make part of our focus at Edmonton public when I was on the board and that they continue with to this day. I was in a grade 6 class recently where a student put up their hand and said: "What university should I go to? What should I do now to build my resumé to become an MLA?" I thought that was a really exciting question for them to be thinking about already in grade 6. "If I want to be on this career path, how can I set myself up for success?" I had a lot to say in response to that, and maybe that will come up another day, but today I will say that I told them we have the best public institutions in this province.

I had the honour of attending both a private university here, Concordia University – at the time it was Concordia University College of Alberta; I think now it's Concordia University of Edmonton – as well as the University of Alberta. I said: "You know, we have great institutions here. I don't think you need to move away to pursue a career in politics or, really, any other career." I think that we have worked to expand career options in the province. For

example, we recently brought in the vet program at the University of Calgary. You don't have to move out of province anymore to become a vet. A lot of kids want to be vets – right? – so that was something that they were very excited to hear.

Now, I will still talk with hope and optimism, but I have to say that the despair that I feel around the significant increase to tuition that is being unpacked through this budget, about 7 per cent a year for the next three years at least, is substantial. When you compound that, that's about 24 per cent in such a short period of time. When I think about the increase to tuition, when I think about the elimination of the tax credit, when I think about the differential rate in what students and nonstudents are paid at their jobs now, when I think about the elimination of the STEP program, which gave summer temporary employment opportunities to so many Albertans, something that is very rich in the fibre of this province – I imagine many of us in this House worked as STEP students.

I'll take a moment to tell you about my first STEP placement. It was the only STEP placement because it turned into long-term employment for me. It was with the Alberta Community Crime Prevention Association. I wasn't studying criminology. I wasn't studying to be a police officer, but I was in education. They said: this is something that we think would be an asset for somebody with an educational background to be a summer student here, and we also think it would be beneficial for you as a future teacher to understand the realities of crime and crime prevention in our province. I was really glad that they took that opportunity to invest in me. They were able to, as a nonprofit operating with a very, very tight budget, because they had a government grant through STEP to be able to do that. Down the road it was able to be parlayed into part-time employment that lasted for a few years, indeed. Actually, I was employed by the sister of the principal of one of the high schools you just mentioned, hon. member. Sue Bell's sister ended up being my employer at that time.

It's amazing how all of these come back together and how when we take away from the opportunities that students have, I think it really hurts us as a society. I'm deeply concerned about this budget in that regard.

The Speaker: Hon. members, anyone else wishing to join in the debate today? I see the hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, yes, Mr. Speaker. Just to bring some clarification about the amendments that would propose to allow the Minister of Health to issue prac IDs, or practitioner IDs, to physicians after April 2022, just to bring some clarity to that, I appreciate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora's concerns about Quebec, but this is something that has happened in other jurisdictions, most notably in New Brunswick, where it has been rolled out with some success. I suggest that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora research what is happening in New Brunswick with the prac IDs there and the success there so that a future Minister of Health here in Alberta could have the opportunity for us to ensure that as we see continued increases in physician supply, we can make sure that after 2022 the physicians that we have, depending on geography, depending on specialty, depending on any other condition that the Minister of Health or its designate may see, can allow us to ensure that physician supply is distributed throughout the province in the most efficient way and in the best interests of patients in the province.

10:10

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). If anyone has a brief question or a comment, you're welcome to make one if you'd so desire. The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to follow up on the comments from the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, just on one narrow issue in regard to the removal of the replacement worker ban. The hon. member suggested that this was unconstitutional. I just want to state that, you know, this is incorrect. The hon. member is correct, however, in stating that in response to a Supreme Court decision on the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, the previous government changed the legislation here in Alberta. In that change, where at one point in time government employees did not have the right to strike, they gave them the right to strike, but at the same time they ensured that essential services needed to be provided, and they put in place essential services provisions. That is all correct, and that was in response to the SFL.

What they also did was that they put a ban on replacement workers, and that was not noted in the Supreme Court decision. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of jurisdictions in Canada that have essential services legislation, which include Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick. These are all constitutional, and they do not include a ban on replacement workers.

In this legislation we are removing the ban on replacement workers. This was a campaign commitment that our government made, and we are following through with that campaign commitment. Promise made, promise kept.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else that would like to make a brief question or comment under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Calgary-South East.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the ministers for clarifying for the members opposite. I, too, had an interesting door-knocking experience, like the member opposite who spoke before the minister. I was door-knocking in real life – it's about as far away from Twitter as possible – and the person that opened the door reminded me of a quote from the previous and worst Finance minister in Alberta's history. His comment went something like: we will not balance the budget on the backs of Albertans. This person asked me a great question. He said: do you think the NDP will ever realize that the source of the fiscal restraint measures they're protesting is them? I just wanted to leave that with them to think about.

The Speaker: Anyone else have a brief question or comment?

Ms Hoffman: Just to get this straight, I think what I just heard the member say is that the reason why they're taking \$30 away from somebody living in their own riding who's surviving on AISH is because the last government gave an increase to that same AISH recipient in the final year of its term. If that really is what the hon. member is advocating for, I have to say that I hope that the next time he knocks on the door of somebody who's surviving on AISH, who can't afford to take a taxi to go see mom on Sunday, he says that to their face, because I don't think it would pass. I don't think they would say: yeah; you're right; the reason why I don't deserve increases here is because I got one last year.

I think that that is quite disrespectful both to Albertans who are living on such a fixed income as well as to Her Majesty's Official Opposition. I think it is our job to stand in this House and fight for ordinary families. I think it's the job of everyone in this House to stand in this House and fight for ordinary families, not make excuses for a \$4.7 billion corporate giveaway, that is listed on page 144 of the fiscal plan, that outlines specifically that the returns are not being seen in jobs or income.

So, you know, I appreciate that folks try to say, "Well, fear and smear; we're not going to cut AISH," but then AISH gets cut.

“Well, fear and smear; we’re not going to attack students,” but then students get cut. “Well, fear and smear; we’re not going to go after seniors,” yet we’re kicking 46,000 of them off the drug plan. Like, the list goes on. I will very proudly stand up in this place for people who deserve to have a government have their back in times of fiscal challenge as well as fiscal surplus.

Again, if this was done and the budget was going to be balanced any sooner, maybe those arguments would have some validity. But the budget is not going to be balanced any sooner. In fact, this year’s deficit is \$2 billion more than the projections were for it to be. I think that is a sad reality, that sometimes people try to misconstrue or divert blame or responsibility. The government today has made the choice to take \$30 away from somebody who is living on AISH, and I think that that’s disrespectful and shameful.

Speaker’s Ruling Question-and-comment Period

The Speaker: Hon. members, I’d just like to provide some clarification about the use of 29(2)(a), and to be very clear, this comment is not directed at the Member for Edmonton-Glenora but is more of a broader discussion around the use of 29(2)(a). The purpose of 29(2)(a) is a brief question or comment for the previous speaker. In this case that was the Minister of Health. This particular Speaker has taken a very wide swath on the use of 29(2)(a). If the House will roll into question period, where any member will ask any question, then perhaps the swath may have to be narrowed in order to maintain order inside the Assembly.

Debate Continued

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to join the debate this evening? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to join debate on the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019. In general, I think that over the last four years in particular, when you see the title of an act, you would guess that it would somewhat remotely be touching on what the title is. In this case it’s an omnibus bill that touches on many different pieces of legislation, policies, and services and fundamentally changes many things for many Albertans. All those changes could have been easily debated as stand-alone pieces in this House.

It reminds me of a bill that we brought forward in the Third Session, Bill 30, An Act to Protect the Health and Well-being of Working Albertans. Essentially, the bill was dealing with two areas. One was the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the other was the Workers’ Compensation Act. Many of the members who I see on that side now, when they were on this side, basically found every argument from the book *Beauchesne* and all those procedural books to argue how omnibus our legislation was and how we needed to split that legislation. Essentially, there were motions to that effect.

Generally speaking, I guess a bill will be termed as omnibus if it consists of a number of related but separate parts, but generally there will be some common theme when you add all of those in one piece of legislation. But when I look at this Bill 21, I think the only common theme in this bill is that through these changes, through all these amendments to these pieces of legislation, this UCP government is taking money away from Albertans and using it to pay for their \$4.7 billion corporate handout.

10:20

Let’s look at the list of acts that it’s changing, amending. It deals with the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act. It deals with the Alberta Housing Act. It deals with the Alberta Utilities Commission

Act. It deals with the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, and I will talk briefly about that.

When we were in government, we worked with Albertans, many advocates, many individuals who were living with disabilities on how their supports have not kept pace with inflation. Even when there were increases like \$400, even after those increases, the value of their benefits would erode with the passage of time because of inflation, and they would have to beg government after government, in particular Progressive Conservative, PC, governments, for an increase in their benefits. All they were asking was that we should index these benefits to the CPI so that over time the value of their benefits doesn’t erode and they don’t have to ask for these increases, beg for these increases every year or every election cycle.

Essentially, with the changes we brought forward through Bill 26 – that was the number of that bill – they were precisely doing that. They were indexing AISH benefits, they were indexing employment and income support benefits, they were indexing seniors’ benefits, and taking politics out of these benefits so that for these individuals, who are often among the most vulnerable ones, their benefits are protected from inflation.

During the campaign, when we were saying that this UCP would cut these benefits, again it was said that that was fear and smear. I even remember this Premier, then the leader of the UCP, making a video and essentially saying that whatever I had said about the UCP cutting benefits, that was not true, that that was not in their platform.

Ms Hoffman: It sure wasn’t.

Mr. Sabir: It wasn’t there.

I think the video ended with: shame on you, Minister, and whatnot; we will always stand with disabled people. What we are seeing here is that if these changes were not made, AISH would have seen a \$32 increase – this may not be huge, but for a person living on \$1,688, it’s a huge increase – on January 1. This pause, so far, is indefinite. There is no time limit. They are saying that it’s temporary, but there is no sunset clause in it on when it will end. So you are taking \$32 out of the pockets of these most vulnerable individuals. When I was saying that back then, I guess I was right, and shame on all of you for taking \$32 out of the pockets of disabled Albertans.

This act will also change An Act to Cap Regulated Electricity Rates. Under this piece of legislation the regulated rate for electricity was capped until mid-2021. This change will change that date to November 30, 2019. As early as in December Albertans can expect that their bills will be higher than what they ought to be because today the rate is capped at 6.8 cents to protect consumers. If we look at the August rates, they were somewhere at 10.17 cents or something. Even on that rate every Albertan household will be paying an average of \$20 to \$25 more. As early as November people can expect, Albertans can expect, that their bill will be higher by \$20 to \$25. That’s what this change is doing, again, taking money out of the pockets of Albertans, out of the pockets of families.

Then it also changes the Employment Standards Code, the financial services act, the Fiscal Planning and Transparency Act, and the Income and Employment Supports Act. I will speak to that Income and Employment Supports Act. The Income and Employment Supports Act will also deindex those benefits. Those benefits were kept low by successive Progressive Conservative governments for 44 years. When we became government, they were somewhere around \$640 for an individual. We increased them and we indexed them so that people, who from no fault of their own if they are not able to find employment or if they are in the category of barriers to full employment, where they have multiple other

issues, get the supports they need to live with dignity and be able to put food on the table, a roof over their head.

Even with that increase, I think that still those benefits were quite low, and it was still very difficult to get by with those benefits. But what this UCP government is doing, with those minimal increases, maybe \$10 or \$15 that they were supposed to get on January 1, they are taking that \$10 away from them so that they can pay \$4.7 billion in corporate handouts.

Then they're making changes to the Labour Relations Code, to the Police Act. My other colleagues have talked about it and, I guess, are better equipped to talk about it, so I will leave that, but I will speak to the Post-secondary Learning Act. In this province I think the Minister of Advanced Education was the only person who was told by students that they want their fees to go high, and they didn't like the tuition freeze. That's why they're removing that cap, so that tuition can skyrocket. Not only that, but they are making changes to the interest rate that is payable on student loans, making it more expensive for students to pay off their loans.

They're changing tax credits, how students were able to claim those taxes, and they're changing grants and all those things, thus making postsecondary education a luxury for few. That cap, when it was there, was there to make sure that postsecondary education remains affordable for all Albertans. It was saving students somewhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000 over the course of their education. Again, this government is attacking students and their parents, their families to pay for their irresponsible no-jobs \$4.7 billion corporate handout.

Ms Hoffman: No jobs.

Mr. Sabir: Yeah. Instead, we lost 27,000 jobs after that.

Then they're changing the Provincial Offences Procedure Act. Again, the fines, the larger portion of fines, will be kept by the province. They are changing the public-sector employment act. They are changing the Public Service Act. They are changing the

Public Service Employee Relations Act. They are changing the Seniors Benefit Act.

10:30

What the Seniors Benefit Act was doing was that it was indexing their benefits – that benefit is somewhere from \$150 to \$275 – and that senior would see an increase of \$6 to \$7. And they still refuse to pay that \$6 to \$7. On the \$315, that other benefit, another \$6 to \$7 increase, they are taking away that money from seniors. That's on top of other things that are in this budget where seniors will see their services cut, like seniors' drug plans. Wherever I look in all these changes, I think only one thing is common: through this piece of legislation this government is taking money from seniors, from their seniors' benefit, they are taking money from employees, taking money from municipalities, taking money from students, taking money from AISH recipients, taking money from income support and employment support recipients, and they are giving it to the wealthiest in the shape of a \$4.7 billion corporate handout.

One last thing, and then I will conclude. This year . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Would anyone like to add a brief question or a comment under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, is there anyone else that would like to join in the debate? I see the hon. deputy government whip.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. the deputy government whip.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me again. I move that we adjourn the Assembly until tomorrow, October 30, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:33 p.m.]

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