



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, November 19, 2024

Day 69

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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

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Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
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Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
Brar, Gurinder, Calgary-North East (NDP)
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Party standings:

United Conservative: 49

New Democrat: 37

Vacant: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 19, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Statements by the Speaker

Member for Calgary-West's 10th Anniversary of Election

The Speaker: Hon. members, it is a great pleasure and honour to recognize at least one and possibly two members of the Chamber today. I would like to begin by recognizing an hon. member who has served 10 full years here in the Chamber. He is the hon. Member for Calgary-West, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, who was first elected on October 27. He was elected in a by-election in 2014. The minister has served with 237 different members of this Assembly over the past decade. He has personally tabled five pieces of legislation that have received royal assent: three government bills and, uniquely, two private member's bills. I'd invite him to rise and please come to the dais to be recognized by his colleagues.

Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat's Fifth Anniversary of Election

The Speaker: Not that I would ever reference the presence or the absence of a member, but it is also my great pleasure to acknowledge that the Premier is celebrating her fifth anniversary today. First elected in 2012, the Premier served as the Member for Highwood until 2015. After being sworn in as Premier on October 11, 2022, the hon. Premier was re-elected to the Legislative Assembly for a second time in November 2022. The Premier recently passed her fifth anniversary just a couple of weeks ago, and I invite her to come and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, on this auspicious occasion of the hon. minister's 10th anniversary, he is joined by a number of folks in the gallery today. Members, all of us know the special price that our families pay for our service. The minister is joined today by his wife, Hollie Ellis; daughter Simone Ellis; sons Mason and Keaton Ellis; his mother, Doreen Chobzay; his father-in-law, Dave, and Doreen Graham; grandmother-in-law Nancy Graham; uncle and aunt Henry and Heather Navis.

Also joining us as part of the delegation: I'm honoured to introduce the former Minister of Justice Mr. Jonathan Denis and his mother, Marguerite Denis. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

It's also my pleasure to introduce to all members a former Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, Mr. Andrew Percy. Andrew

served as an MP for 14 years as the member for the constituency of Brigg in northern England. During his time as an MP he served as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Canada under Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May. He was also an active member of the UK-Canada friendship group, which is where I had the pleasure of meeting him. Andrew now calls Vancouver home. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

It's also my honour to introduce a former member and former minister, the hon. Christine Cusanelli. Ms Cusanelli is the 794th member elected to the Assembly and served as the Member for Calgary-Currie from 2012 to 2015. She also was the minister of tourism, parks and recreation from 2012 to 2013. She is the current chair of the former member association. I invite her to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: I also have a number of guests joining us today. It's my pleasure to introduce to all members a delegation visiting the Legislature, advocating for the Flourish centre and proposed positive sport and recreation centre in Calgary. Among the delegation are two former members of the Assembly: the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, Mr. David Dorward, and the former Member for Calgary-Shaw, the hon. Cindy Ady. Mr. Dorward is the 795th member elected to the Assembly and served Edmonton-Gold Bar from 2012 to 2015, and Ms Ady is the 709th member, who served Calgary-Shaw from 2001 to 2012. They are joined in the Speaker's gallery by members of the Flourish centre: Shauna Ockey and Mr. Scott Hill, CEO of Flourish centre. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Stephan: Mr. Speaker, I stand to introduce young men and young women, students from Red Deer and central Alberta. I invite them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview to introduce students from St. Maria Goretti school, multiple grades, from grade 4 to grade 6. I'd like to encourage them all to rise and please receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose is next.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Bruce and Sylvia Dahl, Don Forestier, Sue Hosford, Mirko Papuga, and Razvan Costin. It has been my pleasure hosting you all and showing you and introducing you to friends of the Legislature. I'd ask that you all please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Chamber.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all the Members of the Legislative Assembly Max Fritz, Justin Thompson of the Regional Land Trusts of Alberta. They were brought here today by a friend of many, former MLA elected in 2019, previous caucus whip, minister of environment and parks, associate minister of the status of women, the hon. Whitney Issik. It's a pleasure to see you here, my friend, in the House again. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce

to the House guests from The Prairie Land school division board: Chair Holli Smith; trustees Marsha Tkach, Scott MacPherson, Lindsay Bond, Shauna Davies, and Shandele Battle. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

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

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you Ren Lavergne, Carly Moore, and Sarah Jackson, members of the Bow Valley and Edmonton pride communities, here to bear witness to our debate on Bill 27 this afternoon. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce folks who are here from right to life, a group first of all sharing great news about what's happening with prescreening for folks who might be at risk for lung cancer, and advocating for it to be continued. These folks are: Diane, Tim, Lindsay, Stacey, Patrick, and Cailin. Please rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

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

1:40

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce 16 nonacademic staff from across Alberta from SAIT, Medicine Hat College, University of Calgary, Red Deer Polytechnic, Bow Valley, University of Lethbridge, and NorQuest. They've come to see what the heck is going on in the Legislature, and I invite them to rise and please receive the warm greetings.

The Speaker: Are there other introductions? The hon. the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly Ray Hutschal. Ray is the mayor of the summer village of Ross Haven and a dedicated community builder and volunteer. I would ask that he rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The real sad part is how disappointed Josie is going to be with me.

Members' Statements

Government Policies

Member Brar: Mr. Speaker, the UCP loves to tout itself as business friendly, but the reality for Alberta entrepreneurs, workers, and investors couldn't be further from the truth. Renewable energy, AIMCo, inflation, crime, and especially health care are just a few failed policies that have been disastrous to Albertans. Their reckless moratorium on renewable energy projects is one of the most antibusiness decisions in Alberta's history. Communities both urban and rural were benefiting from renewable energy projects that drove economic growth, but the UCP slammed on the brakes.

Then there's AIMCo; the government fired the entire board and took the entire operation in its own hands. Businesses rely on financial stability to grow, but the UCP is focused on gambling with the hard-earned pensions of teachers, nurses, and other workers. Why would anyone trust them to create a sound economic business environment in Alberta?

The rising crime in our communities is directly impacting businesses. Storefronts across the province are facing vandalism,

theft, and unsafe environments. Instead of addressing the root causes of crime like poverty, mental health, addictions, this government has taken a punitive approach, and that does not work.

And, finally, let's talk taxes. While the UCP handed out massive corporate taxes to their wealthy friends, they have done nothing to ease the tax burden on small businesses. Small businesses are left struggling to pay their bills while big corporations reap the benefits. Mr. Speaker, Alberta businesses deserve real leadership; under the UCP they have gotten the opposite, a government that seems more interested in making headlines than making progress. It's time we stand up for small businesses, workers, and investors, who are the true drivers of our economy. The UCP aren't just bad for business; they are bad for Alberta, and the people of this province deserve so much better.

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

Home Construction

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A top priority for our UCP government is ensuring that all Albertans have access to housing that meets their needs. On this side of the aisle we know that the best way to stabilize costs and make housing more attainable for Albertans is to increase the housing supply. That is why last week our government announced a new online portal called Stop Housing Delays that will allow developers, municipalities, and other housing partners to report red tape and unnecessary home building delays. Our government is listening to those on the ground. This portal will give our partners a mechanism to stop unnecessary red tape directly to our government so we can take action.

I also want to highlight the incredible progress Alberta has made under this government when it comes to increasing our housing supply. Mr. Speaker, according to the CMHC housing starts in Alberta have risen to nearly 38,000 so far in 2024, a 34 per cent increase from the same period last year. We know that as Alberta's population continues to grow, Albertans need more housing options, a testament to the work our government has done in eliminating red tape, unleashing the potential of Alberta's developers, builders, municipalities to get more homes built faster. In fact, the first half of 2024 saw over 9,900 apartment unit starts, the highest in any half year in Alberta's history, breaking the record from 1977.

Mr. Speaker, a key part of maintaining the Alberta advantage is our government's commitment to keeping the dream of home ownership alive, a reality for Albertans across the province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Family and Community Support Services

Ms Renaud: Family and community support services, or FCSS, is an essential provincial program that reaches into over 200 communities across the province, from Lethbridge, Picture Butte, Coaldale to Gibbons, Redwater, Morinville in Sturgeon county, St. Albert, Bonnyville, Fort McMurray, and the big cities of Edmonton and Calgary. FCSS funding agreements with municipalities and Métis settlements are based on an 80-20 split, with 80 per cent from the province, 20 per cent from the municipality or settlement. Municipalities continue to tell us they are forced to use shrinking transfers from the province to fund more than 20 per cent.

FCSS funding is used for preventative social services from birth to death, and the leadership of these municipalities and settlements are best positioned to identify the unique needs of their residents. That is the strength of FCSS. The range of services is vast, like counselling, parenting support, early intervention, snow removal, even tax clinics. The UCP is all about, "do more with less," regardless of the data and

anecdotal evidence that demonstrate the explosion of unmet needs due to shrinking funding.

The last significant increase to FCSS's budget was made in 2015, bringing the total to \$100 million. As we approach 2025, Alberta's population has grown by 527,000 people, or 11 per cent, and the FCSS budget has only grown by 4 per cent. Pressure is building on stretched FCSS supports while people are waiting for specialized services. Alberta Municipalities recently passed a motion made by Airdrie and seconded by Crossfield calling on this government to address the huge funding gap that continues to increase in the FCSS budget. They are asking that it be put up to \$161 million in order to address the unaddressed inflation and population growth that we have seen as a result of this government's failure to properly fund.

So, like Alberta Municipalities, we too urge the government to fund people and community properly.

Grassy Mountain Coal Project

Mr. Rowsell: Mr. Speaker, after hearing opinions from Albertans across the province on the proposed Grassy Mountain steelmaking coal project, the main concerns raised have been about water quantity and selenium concentrations affecting water quality. To better understand the project I toured the site, and I urge all MLAs to do the same and speak to the CEO of Northback to better understand its plans for land reclamation and the benefits the project would bring to Crowsnest and southern Alberta.

First, I want to make it clear that the project uses small amounts of water inasmuch that less than 1,000 acres of irrigated land uses more, and much of it will be treated and returned to the environment in a clean state.

Although many have expressed concerns, this mine abandoned 60 years ago has minimal selenium issues. Selenium is naturally occurring and essential for humans and animals. When selenium in waste rock is exposed to air and water, it can leach into the surface waters and in high concentrations over long exposures cause long-term reproductive effects on fish.

Alberta's regulatory standards for selenium in water are set to a high standard and permit a very low amount to ensure environmental safety, well below drinking water and livestock limits. If this project is eventually approved, the redesigned mine will keep waste rock out of the Gold Creek watershed to protect aquatic life, implement a multilayered selenium management plan with proven treatment from day one, and fully comply with environmental regulations to ensure safe drinking water for southern Alberta.

On November 25 Crowsnest Pass residents will vote on the Grassy Mountain coal mine project. Based on my discussions with the community, there is strong support for the project. I urge those who detract from it to listen to the community and let the Alberta Energy Regulator do their job as they assess the project independently.

Automobile Insurance Rates

Mr. Dach: Well, here we go again. In the fall of 2019 the UCP government lifted the auto insurance rate cap on the Friday of a long weekend. They hadn't campaigned on it. They gave no notice, no warning, but they had been lobbied by their former campaign director to lift the cap. Rates jumped in some cases up to 30 per cent. Between 2019 and 2020 rates increased by 24 per cent.

The Minister of Finance dismissed concerns about the increases, saying that Albertans could just shop around. The UCP Premier at the same time didn't see the issue because his rates went down. So what happened? For three years the UCP government ignored the crisis as Albertans' auto insurance rates skyrocketed. Since 2018 Albertans' rates have gone up 38 per cent while the national average was 15 per cent. Then, right before the election, the UCP saw the

damage that their failures were causing on their polling numbers and reintroduced a rate cap. But now, after the election, we see them ready to once again lift the cap, planning to once again subject Albertans to climbing rates, making an affordability crisis even worse.

1:50

Four years ago the UCP chose to value insurance companies over Alberta drivers. Now they're ready to repeat the same painful policy decision. Alberta deserves a government that puts them first, that doesn't force them to choose between paying for their mortgage or paying for their auto insurance. They need a government that walks the walk when it comes to affordability, a government that cares about addressing the rising cost of living, not about cashing in on free skybox tickets. Albertans can see that they can't trust this government to make their lives better. They failed over and over again to make this a more affordable province, and that is why in the next election they will choose an Alberta NDP government.

Thank you.

Oral Question Period

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

Automobile Insurance Rates

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, the UCP unfroze auto insurance rates, which led to the second-highest auto insurance premiums in the country. Next door in B.C. and Saskatchewan, two provinces with very different governments, rates are so much lower. Ask anyone who's moving here from B.C. or Saskatchewan, and their rates will triple, quadruple in some cases. With the highest inflation in the country, 50 per cent higher than the national average, and with auto insurance already too expensive, why on earth would the Premier now allow auto insurance companies to raise their rates even more?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would urge the members opposite to just be patient. We are going to be releasing the full report of what our plans are for auto insurance in the coming days. Rather than reporting on just one thing they may have read in a CBC story, I think they will see that the holistic approach is to address the concerns that everybody in this Chamber shares. We have seen reports that show that our auto insurance rates are higher than the rest of the country. We went through a very comprehensive review, very comprehensive consultation, and now we've got some ideas on how to fix it.

Ms Gray: Albertans are the ones who are impatient, and they are the ones that across five years have been asked to spend more and more.

Now the media reports are saying that the government wants private no-fault insurance and the elimination of the rate cap, making things more expensive for everyone at the worst possible time. How can the Premier put this forward as a plan right now? Albertans may also lose their legal recourse to sue if they're in a serious accident that is the other driver's fault. Why is the Premier bringing in a car insurance scheme that costs Albertans even more now and leaves injured Albertans stranded?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have been attempting to balance the multiple inputs that we've received from different

stakeholders. Of course, there are stakeholders who want to preserve the right to litigate. There are others who want to bring the rates down, and there are others who want to have better access to a better quality of care across the board. So we have been listening to all of that feedback, and we want to make sure that we are able to achieve the dual goal of preserving people's rights and preserving people's access to be able to get the care that they need and also bringing rates down.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition can help. The Premier should listen to Albertans. This Premier has never seriously considered a public auto insurance option for Albertans. She's ideologically opposed to a system that would bring down rates for Alberta drivers. Now, she could ask her minister of environment, who was the manager for media relations for the publicly owned Saskatchewan Government Insurance, about just how affordable public insurance options could be. Media is reporting that this government will introduce the worst possible option. Why is the Premier so opposed to considering a public option that can save money?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, we engaged Oliver Wyman to examine different insurance models around the world, and we did get a recommendation about what it would look like if we did move to a public model. It would cost \$3 billion, with a "b." It would end up reducing the amount of employees in the private sector by 4,500, and it didn't appear to us that that was a reasonable option. So what we have done is looked at all of the input that we have received, and in just a couple more days the members opposite and the public will see how we've balanced all of those competing asks.

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

Affordable Housing

Ms Gray: As well as the cost of insurance the cost of housing is on everybody's mind when they're trying to find a place to rent or own. In Alberta the cost for a home is skyrocketing faster than overall inflation. The Premier knows that her policies have led Alberta to have the highest inflation in the country, and now on top of that housing costs are even higher, nearly double the annual inflation rate. With so many people struggling to make ends meet, why has the Premier not made affordable homes her priority?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, in fact that has been our singular focus in the last two years, how we can eliminate red tape and barriers in order to get more homes built, and we've been successful. Housing starts between January and October 2024 compared to the year prior are up 34 per cent province-wide, including 47 per cent in Edmonton and 24 per cent in Calgary. Together with our partners we're making \$9 billion in investments into affordable housing, which will add 25,000 additional low-income households by 2031.

Ms Gray: Today's housing starts are not enough to meet demand. We're falling further and further behind. For every Albertan that's looking for a place to rent, vacancy rates are staggeringly low, and it is now winter across this province. Time is of the essence to make sure that everyone gets a roof over their head, but this Premier's policies are failing Albertans, which is why we're seeing an explosion of more folks living on the streets. Nobody wants their neighbours to struggle. Why has building affordable, stable housing never been a priority for this Premier?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, this government won't be lectured to by the NDP about affordable housing when they did nothing and watched affordable housing wait-lists grow by 76 per cent when

they were in. We have done everything we can to work with the business community, to work with our partners in the municipal sector to make sure that we are clearing away red tape, and it's working. We have also seen an increase in the number of purpose-built rentals. That has gone up from January to September 2024, up 32 per cent. That's going to provide more affordable housing to more families.

Ms Gray: The NDP government made historic investments in housing, and now we see the Auditor General telling us that this government can't even bother to make sure affordable housing is safe. In a report yesterday he stated that there is over a billion dollars in deferred maintenance, meaning housing that is dangerous for families. The report said, "Vulnerable Albertans who require support to afford housing may be living in deteriorating housing with potential health and safety problems." Winter is here. The government must not leave Albertans freezing in poorly maintained homes. Why has the Premier failed to take action and keep up the housing stock?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the moment that this Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services got into the position, he looked at the deferred maintenance and said that we need to address it, which is exactly what he has done. We have gone through a process to make sure that we're not only investing on a regular basis but also monitoring the quality of our rental stock. We're going to continue to increase the amount of our rental stock. We've got 25,000 additional homes that we're going to build for affordable housing by 2031. We appreciate that the Auditor General flagged this a couple of years ago, and I'm very pleased to say that my minister has acted on it.

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

Health Care Wait Times

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, we all know health care is in crisis in this province. The Premier's policies have left patients waiting in agony for desperately needed surgeries. It's so bad we're now hearing that some Albertans are fleeing the province, paying tens of thousands of dollars they can't afford for private surgeries. The situation has gotten so bad that some patients are flying to Lithuania, 7,500 kilometres away, to get private hip or knee replacements. Why has this Premier not made sure that Albertans can get the surgeries they need right here in a timely manner?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, when they had an opportunity to fix things, they chose not to. Instead, we saw waiting lists across the board go up. Open heart surgery increasing 50 per cent; cataract and hip replacements went up 30 per cent; knee replacements went up 23 per cent. I can tell you the approach that we have taken: investing \$313 million over three years in 10 projects at our public hospitals to increase operating room space, partnering with the members in the independent sector to provide charter surgical services. We have increased the number of surgeries, 294,300 completed in 2022-23, and we're going to go up to 310,000 this year.

2:00

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, in the first quarter of last year the province performed 1,204 hip surgeries. This year that dropped to 1,085. Last year in that time the province did 1,051 knee surgeries; this year just 718. What are these more surgeries the Premier is talking about? It's no wonder people feel like they need to fly to Lithuania to privately get the care they need. Will this Premier commit today to finally truly invest in public health care,

reduce the wait times, hire surgeons, hire health care support staff needed, and get Albertans the care they really deserve?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, yes, and yes. We started off with 294,300 surgeries in '22-23. It increased 3.4 per cent to 304,595 in '23-24, and it's going up to 310,000 this year. Those numbers keep getting higher and higher and higher. As of May 2024 74.4 per cent of hip surgeries were completed within the clinically recommended time period. We've entered into agreements with chartered surgical facilities in Edmonton and Calgary for more than 6,000 orthopaedic surgeries, and we'll also be contracting in central and south for 4,000 more. We're headed in the right direction.

Ms Gray: When you talk to Albertans, you know what keeps going higher and higher? Wait times. Now, the government seems to have lots of time to plagiarize a logo for a new health care organization but no time to invest in getting Albertans the care that they need. This time last year the average wait time for a surgical consultation on hip and knee replacements was 47 weeks. Now it's 10 weeks longer at 57. That's two and a half months of additional waiting just to get a consultation with a surgeon. Why does the Premier believe that waiting more than a year to see a surgeon is acceptable for an Albertan living in chronic pain?

Ms Smith: Look, Mr. Speaker, where we are heading is we want every single person awaiting surgery to be able to receive that surgery within the medically recommended period of time. When we're looking at hip and knee replacements in particular, we know that we started off with the 35 per cent who were receiving their care within that period of time in May of 2022. It increased to 56 per cent in May of 2023, and it's gone up to 74.4 per cent in May of 2024. We did have a two-year disruption because of COVID. It impacted surgical backlogs. We've caught up, and we're getting ahead of it.

Automobile Insurance Rates (continued)

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, the UCP's long-awaited attempt to fix their failure to address the skyrocketing insurance rates is by removing Alberta's right to tort. This will lead to the worst possible model for auto insurance. A private, no-fault insurance model hurts Albertans who are seeking compensation for damaged property, personal injury, and lost wages. Those will be capped so the insurance companies can continue to pad their bottom line. Why is the Premier's solution to the skyrocketing insurance rates removing Albertans' personal rights?

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

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier said, we're going to have to wait just a few more days so we can fully lay out our plan on auto insurance, which will include short-term reform and the full vision for the long-term reform. What we've done over the past year is undertake the most extensive consultation on auto insurance that this province has seen in 20 years. We have the two commissioned studies, we have hours of consultation with every partner in the landscape, and I can't wait to be able to really lay out the defensible decisions we're making on behalf of all Albertans.

Mr. Haji: The average Albertan's car insurance rate has gone up 38 per cent under this government, over double the national average. The UCP removed the insurance cap and did not reinstate

it up until before the 2023 election. Mr. Speaker, it's clear that this government is again siding with the profitable insurance companies of Albertans by forcing through a for-profit, no-fault model. Since the Premier is clearly focused on being an advocate for insurance companies, does anyone on that side advocate for Albertans to actually have affordable options for auto insurance?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I would just remind the House that we're doing this for Albertans. That's the way it was laid out in my mandate letter. We're not doing this for insurance companies or injury lawyers or the brokers. We're doing this for Albertans. This is a sincere affordability concern. The data that the member just shared with you sounds like a great case has been made for major reform, and that's what we're about to undertake. It's true our costs are higher here. The models that are active in most of the other provinces are very different, and that weighed heavily on our decision.

Mr. Haji: While on the data, the UCP government's own reports built their recommendations to revamp Alberta's insurance from the models in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec, and B.C., all of which put the public option on the table. The reports also show the public model could save over \$1 billion for Albertan drivers, which is crucial when the cost of everything is going up. Will the Premier come clean and admit that their for-profit, no-fault auto insurance scheme will actually cost Albertans more?

Mr. Horner: Like I said, everyone's going to have to wait a few more days so we can clearly lay out the plan, but it sounds like the member is advocating for a public tort system, which I don't think exists anywhere in the country. I would also point to the fact that, you know, there are costs associated with building a public insurer, big costs, over \$3 billion to capitalize and a timeline to build and get operational that, frankly, wouldn't lead to savings for Albertans in the near future. That weighed heavily on the decision that we've made.

Health Care Wait Times (continued)

Ms Hoffman: Mr. Speaker, last week I was door-knocking in Lethbridge, and when I asked people what one thing the government could do to make their lives better, the top answer was: get me a family doctor. At the minister's announcement yesterday people hoped that she'd finally signed the contract that she and the Premier promised they would sign 189 days ago with doctors. But what did we get? A new CEO and a new logo that nobody asked for. Nearly 1 million Albertans need a family doctor, and 61 per cent of family docs say that they're considering leaving the province or their practice. Why has the government failed to deliver on the promise that they made to family doctors? Why haven't they signed the contract?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health has risen.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll just remind the member opposite and everyone here that we, in fact, have worked with the Alberta Medical Association on a new funding framework. The primary care compensation model is, in fact, something that has been worked on, off from regular negotiating. We negotiated a contract just two years ago with the Alberta Medical Association, which benefited all doctors, but we know more is needed to be done for family medicine and rural generalists. That is something that we've endeavoured to do. We continue to provide stabilization funding. We provided \$257 million over two years to get us to the point where we can then have additional . . .

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

Ms Hoffman: Given that long wait times lead to more health complications, which are bad for patient outcomes and also really bad for the health care system, and given that provinces have agreed that people should be able to get knee surgery within 26 weeks and given that the Canadian Institute for Health Information shows that the UCP has made things much worse because more than half of people needing these surgeries are left waiting more than six months – under the NDP our results were 13 per cent better – why is the UCP shovelling taxpayer money into private surgical centres and getting worse results for patients?

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

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier already indicated, utilizing all of our publicly funded health centres, including AHS as well as chartered surgical facilities, that are publicly funded surgeries, we are in fact increasing the number of surgeries that we are performing.

But if the member opposite wants to talk about records, I'm happy to go back to her record. Under her record cataract surgeries went from 10.6 weeks to 16.9 weeks. That actually went up, Mr. Speaker. In fact . . .

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

Ms Hoffman: Given that at yesterday's press conference the minister set the spin aside for a minute and she admitted that things are not good for folks who are currently getting diagnosed with cancer in terms of their treatment timelines and given that I always want to encourage the government to do things that will make a positive impact, ensuring that Albertans get the right care in the right place at the right time, will the minister act on these two recommendations? One, increase operational funding for cancer care. We've got a great Calgary cancer centre, but it needs the staff to match it. And, two, extend the lung cancer screening pilot or make it permanent. We know that it's saving lives, Minister.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, the member opposite doesn't want to talk about her record, where wait times went up for all surgeries, but I'm happy to say that we are in fact tackling cancer. As a cancer survivor myself I know the importance of early diagnosis and the ability to treat cancers quickly.

On the lung cancer screening program that started on September 1, 2022, they actually extended that pilot. It is a pilot, so we can review it. I've extended that program till March of 2025, where we can better determine what we will do in the future, because, in fact, we are seeing promising results.

2:10 **Governors' Coalition for Energy Security**

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, last week our government made history. Our Premier joined the Governors' Coalition for Energy Security, joining a group of 14 U.S. states. Our leader is the first member from outside of the U.S. to join this group of like-minded, top-elected officials, who share a clear objective: ensuring energy security and reliability, lower energy costs, sustainable economic development, and sensible management of energy resources and the environment. Can the Premier please tell this House: why is it important for Alberta to be at the table?

Mr. Jean: I thank the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for the best question so far today, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is far and away the biggest trading partner the U.S. has. We account for more than half of all oil imports to the U.S., twice as much as Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq combined. We are the biggest producer of natural gas in Canada and are in a position to expand our market outside, globally. We understand the importance of energy security; the U.S. and our allies understand the importance of energy security. Why do the Alberta NDP and their bosses in Ottawa not understand how important people's security is and the future of our world?

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

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that response. Given that on November 5 the U.S. elected a new President, which has dramatically changed the discussion on energy in North America. The President-elect has stated his priority to increase the supply of oil and gas in his country despite the challenges that may present. This is welcome news for Alberta. How does the government view Alberta's role in meeting this demand, and how will the Premier's involvement in this group ensure success for this province?

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, in 2023 Alberta exported more than \$133 billion worth of energy products to the United States – wow – and this year we're expecting the numbers to be even bigger. Every month since the TMX started, we have shattered records for production and exports, including exports to the United States. Alberta is seeking to double production, and under this Premier's leadership we will.

Mr. McDougall: Mr. Speaker, given that these are lofty goals, especially as we fight back against the Canadian federal government on a number of files, including emission caps, and given that we in Alberta have also committed to decarbonization even if our targets are different from the constantly shifting goalposts in Ottawa, can the minister tell this House how we plan to solve energy global security, meet our environmental targets, and meet the still-growing demand for oil and gas?

Mr. Jean: Well, Mr. Speaker, unlike the opposition and their NDP bosses in Ottawa, we understand the environment is a global issue, not just a provincial one. We have lowered methane emissions by 52 per cent. We have the least carbon-intensive heavy oil in the world. We are global leaders in carbon capture. But we know the greatest impact we can have is by helping other countries switch from coal to our clean and inexpensive natural gas. More natural gas to the world from Alberta means a better and cleaner world.

Consultations on Renewable Energy Development

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Speaker, this UCP government is getting in the habit of using taxpayer money to ask Albertans for their input, then hiding the information from them. We haven't forgotten that it has been almost a year since David Yager received sole-sourced contracts from the Premier's office and delivered a publicly funded advice-to-Premier report. To the Premier and her Minister of Energy and Minerals: where is this report? Why are the Premier and her UCP ministers hiding it?

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, what we do is take good care of Albertans' money. We saw for four years what happened when the NDP are in power. Not only did Albertans flee our jurisdiction, try to find jobs in other places, but our economy shrank. Things shut down. Things were not good. Fortunately, we have a new government here, we have a new Premier, and we have a new direction. Because of that,

people are flocking to Alberta. People are coming here, and they see real promise and real dreams coming to fulfillment.

Ms Al-Guneid: Given that this government has not only been hiding the advice-to-Premier report, it has also hidden the pension survey results, all paid for by taxpayer money, and given that it's currently hiding the renewable survey results completed this summer after banning renewables and after practically paralyzing investments in renewable energy development in our province due to their vague and random rules, why is this government plagued with secrecy, and when will the Premier release this publicly funded renewable survey?

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

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government is proud in our engagement with the public. We're here to serve Albertans. That's why we talk extensively with our stakeholders to make sure that we get things right. That's what we did with renewables. Far from a ban, we've seen more projects approved this year than the year before or the year before that, rivalling any other year in the history of Alberta, except we're doing it right, we're doing it responsibly, and we're lowering costs to all Albertans.

Ms Al-Guneid: Given that the UCP surveyed agricultural landowners, Métis settlement representatives, irrigation representatives, municipal leaders, and renewable companies and given that the AUC's report says, "the largest driver of agricultural land loss was expansion of pipelines and industrial sites (non-solar or [non]wind) . . . other key drivers . . . include urban residential development, mines and wells, and roads," is the UCP hiding this publicly funded survey because it adds more evidence to the AUC report and confirms the UCP's mismanagement of investments?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, Mr. Speaker, of course, Alberta's government takes its responsibility for responding to access requests under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act very seriously. I do want to note, though, that, of course, any FOIP request on government advice, proposals, recommendations, analysis, or policy options can be exempt from public release if we're working through those policies. Of course, that is what's happening right now. The Minister of Affordability and Utilities is moving forward with the agricultural-first approach. We're working together on this. We look forward to getting that out in the public soon.

Minimum Wage Rate

Member Eremenko: Mr. Speaker, a new living wage figure was released this week for the city of Calgary. The number is \$24.45 per hour. That's the hourly wage a person needs to earn to cover their essential costs. Sadly, this government has not once raised the minimum wage. They have frozen the minimum wage even though Alberta's inflation rate is a brutal 3 and a half per cent. Why has the minister refused to raise the minimum wage while Albertans earning it struggle to put food on the table and pay the rent while living with the highest inflation rate in Canada?

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

Mr. Jones: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The first thing we did, which the NDP did not do when they were taking care of the minimum wage, is that we looked at who's actually earning it, and it turns out that it is youth, primarily youth under the age of 24, who are seeing high unemployment; 14 per cent. We also know that 47 per cent of minimum wage earners are living with their parents. So

it very much is a wage for first-time job seekers, for Albertans to get into the labour market, to get some experience while they get additional education or skills so that they can move up and earn the highest wages at the lowest taxes in the country.

Member Eremenko: Given that the minister's answer is incredibly predictable and given that there were 126,000 minimum wage earners in Alberta last year and given that in 2023 the Minimum Wage Profile highlights that more than 80 per cent of minimum wage earners were over the age of 18 while 9 per cent were over the age of 55 and given that two-thirds of minimum wage earners are not students, will the minister admit that whole families rely on these low earnings under the UCP's frozen minimum wage, and when can they expect a minimum wage increase to ease their burden? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased that the opposition has found the minimum wage report, which states that 93 per cent of minimum wage earners work one job. So this narrative that they're working multiple jobs to make ends meet, which they said in the last question period, is absolutely false. Fifty-seven per cent of minimum wage earners are under the age of 24. The largest category of minimum wage earners are students or are working part-time for other reasons. In fact, only 10 per cent of minimum wage earners are working part-time because they could not find full-time employment. This is a wage for first-time job seekers. It's a wage for students, for Alberta's youth, and we will not compromise their ability to get in the workforce. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Member Eremenko: Given that the living wage is a proxy for the cost of living in a given area and that it's calculated for three different family types – single people actually have a much higher living wage rate – and given that it is also calculated for other regions such as the Bow Valley, where the living wage is \$38.80 an hour, and given that there are two options to close the \$10 gap between the minimum wage and Calgary's living wage – raise the minimum wage or reduce the cost of living – why, with the highest inflation in Canada, is the government refusing to do either? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

2:20

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, 50 per cent of minimum wage earners have been at their job for a year or less, which tells you, again, that it's a transitional wage: first-time job seekers, Alberta's youth who are looking to get into the labour market to get some experience while they get additional education or skills so they can earn higher wages. We are not considering a living wage. That's not what a minimum wage is, nor is it a mandatory wage. Albertans have the best job opportunities with the highest wages and lowest taxes. We've set them up for success. I can assure you that they're in better shape under this government than the failed NDP. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Camrose.

Arts and Culture Funding

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For years Alberta has not been receiving fair funding from the Canada Council for the Arts. Last year Alberta received only 6 per cent of CCA funding despite being home to 9 per cent of our nation's artists. Alberta receives the least funding per capita, \$4.80, well below the national average of

\$8.54. Alberta would need a 32 per cent increase in CCA funding to align with the number of artists in the province. To the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women: what is this government doing to stand up to Ottawa and demand fair federal arts funding for Alberta?

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

Ms Fir: There you go. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is correct. Alberta is not receiving fair federal funding for the arts. As the minister responsible for the arts, I will continue to advocate to Ottawa for fair federal funding, to Minister St-Onge, the federal Minister of Canadian Heritage, because on this side of the House we will always stand up for Alberta, for our arts sector, our energy sector, our agriculture sectors, and all sectors. And I would ask the members opposite to stand up to Ottawa with us although I know this is highly unlikely.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this government is already standing up for Alberta to demand fair federal funding for the arts and given that the members opposite will never stand up to their kingpins in Ottawa and given that the arts still need to be supported within the province as they contribute to Alberta's economy and quality of life and further given that the NDP seems to be misinformed about how this government is supporting the arts, to the same minister: can she please enlighten the members opposite on the investments made into the arts by this government?

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

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me list off just some of the investments this government has made: a \$4.5 million increase to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts – additionally, AFA funding will reach historic levels of funding by 2027 – \$8 million for the Alberta media fund, \$103 million for the Arts Commons transformation project, \$12.8 million for the Winspear Centre, \$11.7 million for the Glenbow museum, \$42 million for projects that engage youth with the arts, and so much more.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the answer. Given that film and TV is part of the arts sector and given that the film and TV sector is a vital part of the province's economy and given that since the launch of the film and TV grants and film television tax credit in 2020 267 projects have been funded, which has contributed over \$1.2 billion into the province, to the Minister of Arts, Culture and Status of Women: can she please tell Albertans how this government is supporting the film and TV sector?

Ms Fir: Mr. Speaker, on March 22, 2017, the then NDP minister of culture stated in main estimates that Alberta only had a certain capacity to accept productions into the province due to a lack of production space and trained staff. What our government did was that we increased production and postproduction capacity as well as the number of trained production staff within the province, something the NDP neglected to do. In conjunction with the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade Alberta's film and television industry continues to grow and thrive, and speaking to producers and directors on several film sets I visited in Alberta recently, they continue to have high praise for our film and television sector.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Mr. Eggen: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's colleges, universities, and polytechnics have suffered the worst cuts in history under this UCP government. While nonacademic staff have tried valiantly to keep things functioning, it is becoming clear that the institutions such as SAIT, Medicine Hat College, the University of Calgary will soon no longer be able to maintain services and physical structures at these facilities. Will the minister please commit to properly funding postsecondary in the next fiscal year and reverse the deeply damaging cuts that have placed Alberta's postsecondaries in such a tight spot?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, Advanced Education's budget is \$6.4 billion. The portion that the provincial government controls is just over \$2 billion, and \$1.8 billion goes directly to the postsecondary institutions. We are at the same level as other jurisdictions in Canada. In fact, a lot of heavy lifting was done by the postsecondaries, but I'm confident that Budget 2025 will address any gaps. But right now our budget is very sound, and I'd be happy to have more conversations with our postsecondary partners on this.

Mr. Eggen: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that schools such as Red Deer Polytechnic, Bow Valley College, University of Lethbridge, NorQuest are literally in danger of jeopardizing the integrity of their buildings, labs, and support services because this UCP government couldn't bother to fund postsecondary education properly, given that the same UCP government acknowledges there are more than thousands of students now in grade school that require spaces to learn, when will this government wake up and build capacity in postsecondary institutions to be ready when those students graduate and need to go to college?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I know there are people here in the gallery from NAIT and SAIT, and I just want to remind the Chamber today that we are investing \$43 million as of Budget 2024 in their Advanced Skills Centre, and SAIT over the next three years, as part of our capital plan, is going to be receiving \$16.4 million. The capital investment over three years is over \$360 million, and that is going to result in over 15,000 seats, so that investment is sound. It is there, and for those folks who don't know that, I'm happy to be able to share that again.

Mr. Eggen: Well, given that postsecondary staff are essential to maintaining the quality of education in our schools for students and for staff and given that the general public relies on nonacademic staff to provide the safety and security and quality of the education experience, given that many of the members working in nonacademic jobs are working full-time and having to access food banks because their wages are so low, when will this UCP government start showing respect to nonacademic staff and start bargaining with them in good faith?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, we value the work that faculty and staff do at postsecondary institutions. Obviously, I can't talk about the bargaining as it's under way, but most certainly the investment in targeted enrolment expansion of \$225 million over the next three years is going to help faculty and staff do the work – the very important work – that they do.

Thank you.

Coal Development Policies

Mr. Rowswell: Mr. Speaker, coal continues to be a lightning rod issue in this province, whether it is thermal or metallurgical coal. We

see this debate raging in the southwest corner of the province on the eastern slopes of the Grassy Mountain, which is a metallurgical coal mine. There are strong proponents who see the economic lift it will be to rural communities while there are those who are concerned about environmental challenges. To the Minister of Energy and Minerals: could you give us a briefing on how we got here?

Mr. Jean: It's true, Mr. Speaker. The NDP caused this mess, billions of dollars of liability to the people of Alberta. And why? Because the NDP minister stood up and said: "Let's get billions of dollars of investment from foreign companies here on coal and let them dig. Dig, baby, dig." That's what they said, and that's why we're here today. They declared open season on coal mining. We're not going to allow that. In opposition they're actually saying now, "We want all coal mining banned; coal mining is bad," but we need coal to build buildings. We need coal to build affordable buildings for people to live in. We're going to do it. We're going to do it right. The NDP did it wrong. Count on us to get . . .

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

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the province has phased out coal-generated electricity in Alberta but steelmaking coal remains a valuable resource needed in the construction of everything from buildings to wind turbines – this includes Grassy Mountain, which needs to be reclaimed – and given that there are still other mines in operation and abandoned mines throughout this province that need to be reclaimed, to the same minister: what is the province's record on reclaiming mines, and are there opportunities in reclaiming them?

Mr. Jean: That's something I don't understand, Mr. Speaker. When they were in power, they didn't directly look at reclamation and the possibility of how we can do things better here in Alberta. They wanted the foothills mined. In fact, they allowed for it to be mined or applications to happen in category 2 lands. It had never happened before. We're making progress on reclaiming thermal coal mines in central Alberta right now. In fact, the success story is the Sheerness mine, which is shifting to producing Humalite, which is a natural fertilizer. Not only are we going to clean the planet, fleeing reclamation problems of the past from the NDP, but we're going to feed the world.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for his response. Given that our government is still in the coal business and understands the economic benefits derived from coal, there are many environmental concerns out there, including selenium getting into the water, affecting its quality. Could the Minister of Energy and Minerals explain what strategies the government is employing to ensure that any future mining approved by the Alberta Energy Regulator will be safe and environmentally sound?

Mr. Jean: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're going to focus on reclamation as people are there, reclamation as they go forward, and reclamation to make sure that none of this happens to harm Albertans in the future. Selenium is actually a needed mineral for mammals, but in high concentrations it can harm fish eggs. We're going to make sure it doesn't get to any level that could harm fish eggs. It's called monitoring. It's called making sure that the AER, which is an independent organization that makes sure that Albertans are protected, continues to do the great work they do and making sure

that this government supports it. I would just ask the NDP to come forward and tell the truth and support Albertans.

Health Facility Workplace Safety Training

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, Alberta nurses are ringing the alarm bell. On September 19 this government cut the training requirement for employees on joint workplace health and safety committees from 16 hours to just two, this despite objections from United Nurses of Alberta. Why was this requirement cut? Is the minister not concerned that it will ultimately weaken the effectiveness of this committee and put both workers' and patients' safety at risk?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course we're going to make sure that nursing requirements are up to our standards. Safety is always of the highest paramount need for us, and we want to make sure that our nurses are doing what is required of them, when it's required of them. What the member opposite is putting forward is not accurate, but we will definitely look into it.

Mr. Shepherd: Given the fact is that they cut it from 16 hours to two, Mr. Speaker, and given that according to a 2019 government of Canada report, the standing committee on health and safety of workers said that they have a fourfold higher rate of workplace violence than any other profession – that's health care workers – and given that in a 2024 survey of unit members more than 40 per cent report experiencing physical violence like pushing, hitting, or having things thrown at them and given that this number rises to 70 per cent if you include name calling, insults, threats, and intimidation, why has the minister undermined these committees, which provide recommendations to prevent those kinds of incidents?

Mr. Jones: If any worker is feeling unsafe in the work environment, they should report it to their supervisor, or if they're not comfortable doing so, they should report it directly to the Alberta government. I'll work with my colleagues in Health to make sure that health care workers always feel safe when providing the very valuable service that they do to Albertans each and every day.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Shepherd: Given this government clearly has no clue what they're even speaking about, Mr. Speaker, because in other jurisdictions such as Saskatchewan they provide five days of training for their employee members of a joint workplace health and safety committee and given the UCP government set the table for this cut in 2020 with Bill 47, that removed the requirement for 16 hours of training, replaced it with a two-hour online course, does this government seriously expect to solve the staffing crisis they've created in health care and attract, train, and retain staff if they show such disrespect and contempt for something as basic as workplace safety?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, nothing can be further from the truth. We here, in fact, really believe in workforce safety. I have ongoing conversations with the nursing association, with the nursing unions to make sure that we do have the highest level of safety and training for our nurses. It is something we're going to continue to improve upon, and the member opposite brings forward a good recommendation that we can look at. But we are constantly, constantly looking to improve our services for nurses, and we'll continue to do that because we value the work they do.

Funding for Complex Classrooms

Ms Hayter: Alberta's Commission on Learning released a report, Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds. It urged the government to establish and implement province-wide guidelines for average class sizes. I'm hearing from concerned families that these guidelines are being ignored, with overcrowded classrooms. Classrooms are becoming more complex. I have classrooms in my riding with 27 students, when the recommendation is 17, with no educational assistant. Why has the minister failed to follow these guidelines for reasonable class sizes for students and ensure that we have the right number of teachers and EAs?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister of environment.

Mr. Nicolaides: Education?

The Speaker: Or Education.

Mr. Nicolaides: All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's okay. We all have an off day, you know. It's no big deal.

Mr. Speaker, we are taking those conclusions very seriously, and we are very concerned with making sure that our students have the most optimal conditions in their classroom. That's exactly why our government has made a historic investment of \$8.5 billion to build over 90 new schools across the province, modernize over 24 schools, and expand spaces with other providers, to make sure that every student has access to world-class facilities and ample room for a positive learning environment.

Ms Hayter: Given that I'm talking about staff and not buildings and given that I have families write me and share with me on the doors how desperate they are for proper supports for their children and given that I have tearful moms, like Zoia, who come to my office to tell me about their high-needs-coded child who does not have an educational assistant at all and given that some children do not even have access to psychoeducational assessments, can the Minister of Education tell me why he won't work at passing Bill 208 with me?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, as it turns out.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Happy to continue to debate the member's bill, as we have during private members' business. Working to support our youngest learners is a top priority of this government. That is why we have mandated additional screening in literacy and numeracy starting in kindergarten – that'll start this January for the first time ever – and in grades 1, 2, and 3, a move that has received a positive recommendation from groups like Dyslexia Canada and others, and they have encouraged other provinces to follow our lead. We will be there for our youngest learners.

Ms Hayter: Given that in Alberta the educational assistants workforce is made up of 94 per cent women and these women are working a very high-demand job that is essential for our children and their education and given that the average wage of an EA is \$26,000 while Alberta's living wage is \$45,000 – everyone should be able to have a decent wage – given that we need to properly value the work that these women do in our classrooms, will the minister of status of women join me in my call to give educational support workers a raise, showing that you value and respect the work of women in the industry?

Mr. Nicolaides: Mr. Speaker, we absolutely do value the incredible work that our educational assistants, teachers, and other staff are

doing in our world-class education system, and we will be there to make sure that our education system responds to the incredible growth that we're seeing, unlike the members opposite. They've never had to experience these kinds of challenges because when they were in government, they closed businesses, they jacked up taxes, they drove investors away, and they had to deal with the opposite concerns of people fleeing the province. Actually, they went so far as to tell Albertans to leave Alberta altogether and find jobs elsewhere. We've reversed the trend, and our province is back and booming.

Health Services in Rural Alberta

Mr. Wiebe: Mr. Speaker, health care has become a concern for Albertans all across the province. Albertans, including those in my constituency, are worried about the increasing wait times for emergency room services and access to family doctors. Those living in rural and remote areas require tailored solutions to address issues like primary care access as well as the availability of specialists and specialized services. To the Minister of Health: how does refocusing our current health care system benefit all Albertans, including folks living in rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The four new organizations will oversee acute care, primary care, continuing care, and mental health and addiction. Within a fully integrated, high-functioning system refocusing will ensure Albertans receive world-class health care no matter where they live or when they need it. We are firmly looking to make sure that we establish a dedicated rural health care branch that is tasked with applying a rural lens to health care policies, strategies, and initiatives to enhance and improve rural health outcomes. This is the first ever in Alberta.

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

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that the NDP consistently spread misinformation during the election periods, claiming that our United Conservative government would impose charges on universal health care, and given that Albertans continue to receive the necessary physician services without paying out of pocket and given that the Alberta health care insurance plan provides eligible residents with full coverage for necessary physician services, to the Minister of Health: could you elaborate on how our government has upheld its promise to keep central physician services free for all Albertans?

2:40

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member. Our government is firmly committed to the principles of the Canada Health Act and the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act, which prohibit providers from charging or collecting additional amounts for insured services or as a condition for receiving insured services. In fact, Alberta's health audits and – they have an audit and compliance assurance unit which routinely monitors and reviews practitioners' claims for benefits to assess compliance with the legislation. We continue to audit, make sure that people are following the rules, and we'll hold them accountable if they don't.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and, through you, to the minister. Given that rural communities make up close to 20 per cent

of Alberta's total population and further given that only 6.6 per cent of Albertan physicians practise in these rural communities, could the Minister of Advanced Education please explain the advantages of training medical students in rural areas and how it will benefit northern communities in the long term?

Mrs. Sawhney: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for that very important question. Students who train in rural areas are more likely to practise in these areas. That is why Budget 2024 includes almost \$100 million to train more physicians in rural areas by partnering with local postsecondary institutions. We are developing rural medical education training centres in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge, which will provide an additional 60 new undergraduate seats to train doctors over the next three years. We are also increasing international medical graduate residency positions, and as a result, more than 100 additional physicians will become ready to practise.

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

Members' Statements

(continued)

Elder Abuse

Ms Sigurdson: November is Family Violence Prevention Month in Alberta. We know that 10 per cent of seniors experience elder abuse in our province. Sadly, this number is low as underreporting of elder abuse is common. Seniors themselves may feel shame or guilt and thus not report. Other factors that account for underreporting of elder abuse include ageism, society's acceptance of violence, and social isolation.

Abuse may be in many forms. A common type is financial. Seniors may have personal possessions, property, or money misappropriated. Relatives who are in close contact with seniors such as sons, daughters, or spouses may be the abusers. In addition, friends, neighbours and staff who have easy access to seniors and their affairs may be the abusers. Other forms of abuse include physical, emotional, or psychological harm. When this happens, seniors may appear confused, depressed, or anxious. Seniors may have physical injuries and display signs of fear when around certain people. Seniors may also experience neglect. This is when the basic necessities of life are not provided. If you notice any of these common signs of elder abuse, be sure to report them to the police. No senior should be subjected to elder abuse.

Seniors are the fastest growing demographic in Alberta. As Albertans become more aware of the signs of elder abuse, there is an increase in the number of reports of abuse. These two factors mean that the demand for services is increasing. Tragically, elder abuse shelters are beyond capacity. More shelter space is needed to support vulnerable seniors. Insufficient mental health supports are an issue, as I have heard directly from shelter workers of long wait-lists. Seniors in these circumstances need immediate support, not months later. Finally, seniors are increasingly born outside of our country. Being culturally sensitive to diverse values, beliefs, and experiences is essential in ensuring seniors are served appropriately.

Despite our growing diversity, the UCP has removed inclusion, equity, and a diversity lens in policy development. The UCP is failing seniors on many accounts. It's time for them to commit to eliminating elder abuse.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter being sent to the Minister of Advanced Education, talking about serious issues around postsecondary education and nonacademic staff. Many of our nonacademic staffpeople across the province are living in poverty while working full-time.

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

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table two documents today. One is from Children's Healthcare Canada, that is entitled Support for Access to Healthcare for Transgender and Gender-diverse Youth. The other is from the Alberta Teachers' Association, entitled Transgender Policy Sparks Safety Concern. It's specific to Bill 27. I urge all members of the House to read both articles.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the five requisite copies of an article that calls out why we need to strengthen property rights in Alberta, calling out the fallout of Trudeau's gun grab. Crime is up; the number of responsible areas to use them is down.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. For the information of all members of this Assembly I went to the nontorqued data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information around wait times for knee replacement surgeries. When the NDP was in government, when the UCP is in government: you can see that they have gone up under the UCP.

The Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Edgemont, followed by Edmonton-McClung.

Ms Hayter: Thank you. I rise to table the five requisite copies of an e-mail from Dianne Dodsworth, a resident in Calgary-Edgemont Ranchlands, to the Premier, just urging the UCP to abandon their legislation to remove access to vital health care as well as all of her facts and reasons for wanting you to do so.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite five copies of an article from the website of the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association that I quoted from yesterday, wherein the minister of transportation and his department were called an unreliable business partner.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies of e-mails from seven of my constituents, including one trans member of my constituency as well as a number of teachers who are concerned about the decision of this government to bring forward legislation that will place trans children and adults at risk.

The Speaker: Are there others? The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much. I rise to table three e-mails with the five requisite copies of each on behalf of constituents Jannie Edwards, Caedance, and Anthony, all expressing their deep concern about the proposed legislation restricting gender-affirming care.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, pursuant to section 21(2) of the Child and Youth Advocate Act I wish to table the requisite number of copies of the 2023-2024 Child and Youth Advocate annual report.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of hon. Minister LaGrange, Minister of Health, pursuant to the Health Quality Council of Alberta Act Health Quality Council of Alberta 2023-24 annual report.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there were no points of order today. Gold stars for everyone.

Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 27 Education Amendment Act, 2024

[Debate adjourned November 5: Mr. Sabir speaking]

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the second reading of Bill 27? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has the call.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many members will know that I'm here because of public education. My parents met in a staff room and fell in love. They had me, continued to work in public education. I was really proud to be the daughter of a principal and a kindergarten teacher.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I spent most of my free time with my parents at the school in pursuit of my academic goals and in sport. I had a lot of fun in a small town. For those who don't know, I grew up in Kinuso, a very small village of between 200 and 300 people. I think we're at about 200 people now. If you wanted to do something, you needed to convince everyone that they wanted to do it, too. I spent a lot of time playing badminton and volleyball and even did track, even though I wasn't very good, because we needed a full team. It was a great experience growing up in public education and feeling like I belonged.

That was something that, I have learned over my time after leaving Kinuso in the late '90s, is not a universal experience for many, many students. As a product of public education – it was the late '90s, as I said, when I was finishing high school – when I talked to my parents about future career paths and said, "You know, maybe I should become a teacher, too," they said, "Don't do it." They said that teachers in this province aren't respected.

2:50

At that time they were both forced to take 5 per cent rollbacks. My dad and the custodian had every other light bulb taken out of the school. I think the custodian did the work, but my dad definitely didn't make that decision lightly. It was literally a dark time for

public education in our small school, right? I got glasses the following year if there's any connection in that. Causation or correlation: it's hard to know what it was, Madam Speaker.

I also want you to know that I pursued, eventually, despite my parents' urging, a career in public education. I received my bachelor of education degree 20 years ago. It's hard to imagine. During that time when I was studying, it was the same time that the coalition on learning guidelines came out. It was very clear that if I wanted to be successful in terms of connecting with students and helping them learn math, I needed to make sure that I knew their names, I built a relationship with them, and they felt safe and respected in my classroom. A lot of that was on me. Of course, even as the teacher you're only one person in that environment, and you need to make sure that everyone treats each other with respect and kindness.

I will say that a number of my friends who are still teaching – and there aren't a lot. The minister is well aware that the majority of teachers certainly don't stay in the profession for 20 years. I'm an example of that, and so are many of those whom I graduated with. But some still are in the classroom or in schools in other leadership roles. I will say that the tone that has been set by activists and by government in response to those activists has left a chilling effect on many classrooms and many individual children in school. I know that every teacher wants a kid to be able to show up to school, hang up their coat, and focus on literacy, numeracy, options, and pursuing their full academic potential. That certainly isn't the case for a number of students right now.

Last night I was at Ross Shep. There was the Edmonton public advocacy network meeting, a group of parents and some other staff who work in schools, present. The key topics that they raised that they wanted the government to be able to address: this seems like a perfect moment to raise those, Madam Speaker, because they relate to the education statutes or should be in this bill, I would say. The number one issue they wanted to talk about was school overcrowding and lottery systems for high school spaces right here in Edmonton public schools, the fact that to be able to attend the closest public high school to where you live, many students are now forced to enter a lottery. Hopefully, they're one of the lucky ones that doesn't have to cross the Henday to get to high school. Very, very difficult times.

I know that at Centre High they've added additional blocks, and at many other high schools, too, stretching the school day to more hours to be able to accommodate more students in the limited capacity that they have. They would love for the government to focus on actually building the schools that they've been promising and to act quickly to get that capacity online. Instead of playing around with P3 contracts, we know that the fastest way to get schools built is through a traditional procurement process, where school divisions facilitate that process for the vast majority of projects, Madam Speaker.

The second thing they want to talk about was staff compensation and potential labour unrest. I think anyone who remembers how difficult it was to have students at home when everyone was forced to go home during the time when former Premier Kenney had schools closed – he was consistent with what was happening across North America, Madam Speaker. But a very difficult time of having kids at home when we know that they learn better at school with face-to-face opportunities for interaction for the vast majority of students and the potential to be able to learn first-hand and have teachers there to support them in their learning in person as well as educational assistants, admin assistants, custodial staff, everyone who works together to make sure a school is operating successfully. They really wanted to talk about staff compensation and potential labour unrest in this province because they don't want to see that same impact to students or to staff that they had when, again, many

educational assistants and other admin assistants were laid off through a tweet.

They also wanted to talk about rejigging the funding formula. I think that we all know that the weighted rolling average is not equity and it's not fair for school divisions that are growing quickly and seeing increased enrolment. They don't have anything against school divisions that have declining enrolment having a cushion to help them have to adjust less abruptly, but when you have more students showing up each and every year and the funding doesn't keep up with that increased enrolment, what we're seeing is that where once we were a leader in terms of educational outcomes and educational funding in the country, we are a lagger. We're still ahead of most other jurisdictions in terms of standardized test results, but we certainly are not leaders like we used to be when, for example PISA, we would be among the top two in the world on math and science on a very regular basis. That isn't the case anymore. I know the minister will very proudly say that we were the highest in Canada, but we used to be the highest in the world.

I know that the parents that I was talking with last night would like to see a focus on that as well as disability supports for students to be fully included in the educational experience in their school and class size, of course, as my colleague the Member for Calgary-Edgemont just referred to a few moments ago. Madam Speaker, these are the things that most people would expect a responsible government to focus on to ensure that students could have the best outcomes.

Instead, this government is focused on targeting a very vulnerable group of students who already face greater academic barriers than most, who already face greater safety barriers in society than most, who already have higher rates of self-harm than most. To actually see a vulnerable group in society and instead of acting with love and compassion to make everyone in the school feel safer and included and focus on the things that the vast majority of Albertans would love the government to focus on, the government is focused on targeting this small and vulnerable group of students. It is going to make life a lot more difficult for these students and also for all of the adults who work in these schools, who are just there trying to keep everyone safe, keep everyone on task, and people like me, who just want to be able to show up, teach math, and have kids be successful in acquiring the skills they need.

I will say that when I was on the Edmonton public school board, which was after I finished that educational degree – in 2010 I was there – there was a North American wide movement around a campaign that was focused on It Gets Better. It was queer adults telling youth: "Don't worry. I know high school really sucks, but it gets better. Your life won't be awful forever." While it was of great intent and it was in response to high, high rates of suicide and physical attacks against queer youth, one of my colleagues, Christopher Spencer, who was on the Edmonton public school board with me, said: "You know what? It can get better, but it can also get better now. We owe it to these kids to make sure that we are working to make our schools better places for everyone to learn."

And it is for everyone to learn. Research is very clear that when you have inclusive policies that support the most vulnerable in your school – for example, when you create opportunities for students to form a GSA or a QSA free of barriers – all kids in that school report a higher sense of feeling safe at the end of the day.

When you create a standard where everyone is included and can be successful, like I felt when I grew up in this very small community in northern Alberta, with two parents who worked in the school system – I felt safe and included, but that certainly isn't the universal case. We need to make sure that it is. That should be the goal of government, to ensure that every child in this province benefits from an amazing public

education, where they can reach their full potential, where they can give back to their communities using all of their skills.

We are already losing kids: kids who are not finishing school because they don't feel safe there or don't feel that they are included and accepted, kids who are already dying of suicide at much higher rates, and kids who are just experiencing so much that have to engage in all sorts of behaviours to be able to survive. Every kid should be able to feel safe and have an opportunity to be successful in our schools. That is what I wish this government was taking this opportunity to focus on: to focus on overcrowding and class sizes, to focus on staff compensation, ensuring that everyone who works in that school – as was mentioned, most full-time educational assistants are making \$27,000 a year. That is nowhere near a living wage.

3:00

Imagine if we had everyone who works in a school full-time be able to afford to live in that municipality and work that one full-time job to the best of their capacity and be able to focus on those students that they're working with, knowing that they're doing everything they can to help them be successful and not having to think about – there are a lot of people who work in this building and in other government buildings around here who have worked in schools during the day and then come here to work at night. A lot of the custodial staff, if you stop and chat with them, will tell you that they're working two jobs, most of them full-time jobs or as close to full-time hours as they can get.

I believe that we can do a great service to all students if we pause, if we reflect on this bill, and if it actually reflects what you're hearing when you talk to your constituents or constituents in places like Lethbridge. I imagine I'm not the only person who's been door-knocking in Lethbridge lately. How many of the doors you knocked on did people say: this is my number one priority, to roll back . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but please direct your . . .

Ms Hoffman: Through you, Madam Speaker. Yeah.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Hoffman: My question to the members opposite is I wonder how many doors that they knocked on in Lethbridge, Madam Speaker, would have said: my number one priority is making sure that queer students and trans students in particular feel less safe in school, and let's make sure that we amend the education statutes amendment act. I'm going to guess it was zero or near zero.

I can tell you that the dominant thing that people are talking to me about in Lethbridge is wanting to be able to find a family doctor. Guess what? A lot of these kids could become family doctors if they went to school, felt safe, felt respected, could focus on learning math and science and all of the other amazing opportunities that they have at school. They could reach their full potential and help us address so many of the gaps that we have in terms of providing amazing services to students, staff, families, and to all of us in this province. I know that our Official Opposition wants students to feel safe and be safe and reach their full potential.

We want the government to bring forward education bills but education bills that are going to make things better, not make things worse. This bill, Madam Speaker, certainly makes things worse. We've already seen the UCP roll back human rights protections. Now to bring forward targeted legislation and to choose to do it in three separate bills, like, they could have done one bill where they addressed the three egregious ideas that they are bringing forward. Instead, they decided to bring it forward three separate times. I think

it is just not becoming of the work that we do in this place, and I think that this bill is highly problematic.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there others that wish to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 27, the Education Amendment Act, 2024. I rise to speak to you today as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA-plus community. I stand before you today as a c-i-s gay man.

I understand that as I'm saying that, the queer community is not a monolith. We are a spectrum. Humanity is a spectrum. I also understand that as I stand here and tell you that I'm speaking as a gay man, I don't fully understand the experience of being trans or being nonbinary. But I do get what it is like to be different. I do get what it is like to be the other. I want to talk about that a little bit. I want to talk a little bit about kids being safe, where they feel safe, and where it's okay for them to be kind of empowered as well as working along with their parents.

As I said, kids want to be safe. I think we all want our kids to be safe. As we say these words, that we want all of our kids to be safe, I think we need to be giving deep consideration to kids who don't feel safe. I can give you some examples, even as adults.

I've been really lucky in that I am a member of the queer community. I had trans friends before I became a politician, certainly have gotten to know a ton more trans people since becoming a politician. I can say to you, you know, some of the things that have happened with the introduction of these policies over six months ago and now the introduction of this legislation, even with adults that are trans. I'll give you an example of, like, being safe. I went to a trans rally just a couple of weeks ago, and I had friends of mine in the trans community that, even going to a trans rally, didn't feel safe going there alone. The only way they would go is if I picked them up and brought them there with me. These are adults that we're talking about, adults that have already transitioned, that are telling us stories about how they no longer feel safe going to and from work, they no longer feel safe walking down the street as who they are, they now feel compelled to cover up who they are when they go out in public. Why? Because of how they are now being treated in public. I think it's important to understand that the legislation here is having profound effects on kids and the broader queer community, that this legislation, I'm going to say, has empowered people to not be kind in public.

I want to talk a little bit about parental notification. Within this education statutes amendment act a teacher would be compelled to out a child to their parents. You know, the only people who should have the power to come out to their parents are the kids. The only people who should have the power to come out, when they are ready, to who they are ready, is that individual. No one else. I can say that there's a whole lot going through their minds, and I think we can all appreciate that being a teenager is tough. You're going through a lot when you're a teenager. When you're a queer teenager, you're going through a whole lot more. There's a lot going on and, like I said, it's only them that get to say when they're coming out to others.

Trans and nonbinary kids, they're not experimenting or exploring. Kids are growing up. All kids are growing up and discovering who they are. Trans kids are discovering who they are. Kids don't want to be trans; they are trans. And these trans kids, they have always been with us. Trans people have always been with us. Nothing is going to make that go away.

We've gone through an evolution in our world. There was a time when I certainly would not be able to stand in front of this House as a gay man and debate an act like this, but I can today. We are

moving forward, and we must keep moving forward. Moving forward means that kids can have conversations with teachers and have conversations with their parents when they're ready. This legislation holds us back. This legislation stops us from progressing as people and as a society here in Alberta, and I say shame on this legislation for that. Shame on the government for that.

My colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora was talking about how she grew up in Kinuso and feeling safe in the schools and in the community of Kinuso and coming to understand that when she left Kinuso and came to a larger place, meeting more people, not all kids necessarily felt safe where they were growing up or the environment that they were in.

I grew up in Valleyview, the thriving metropolis of Valleyview, which has about 1,600 people. By the way, Madam Speaker – I've said this before – three members of the Legislature today are from the town of Valleyview. You know what? Growing up in a rural, remote community in northern Alberta as a gay kid: not so easy. I didn't always feel safe. I get what it means to not feel safe and to find your people and talk to the people who you know have your back when you're ready. Again, kids don't want to stand out. They just want to fit in, and they want to be themselves. This legislation is holding them back.

3:10

I wore a pink shirt today on purpose. It's not Pink Shirt Day. I get it. It's not Pink Shirt Day. Pink Shirt Day, of course, is raising attention to bullying. Madam Speaker, you know who is bullied in schools? Queer kids. This legislation is not helping those queer kids who are being bullied in schools, and we should be helping those queer kids who are being bullied in schools. We should be making it okay for those queer kids to go and talk to their teachers. If that's who they want to talk to about who they are, that should be okay for them. They'll talk to their parents when they're ready.

I wasn't timing myself. Let's go back to kids being safe. Queer kids can be understandably anxious. Trans kids can be understandably anxious. Even when they're growing up in a loving and caring home, they will still feel anxious and afraid because they know they are different, and they know that this world is not always accepting of differences. They also know that trans and queer kids are a disproportionate number of kids who are homeless and living in the streets. Why do they know that? Because they have seen their friends get thrown out from their homes. If you already know that one of your friends has had an uncomfortable conversation with a parent and that parent has not necessarily responded the way that they were expecting them to respond and now they're living in the streets or they've gone to live with an uncle or they've gone to live with another friend, don't you think that sends a message to other kids that maybe they want to be silent? We shouldn't be silencing them. Again, we should be opening the spaces for when they're ready and who they're ready to speak to at that time.

I'll reiterate that even in caring and loving homes kids are still going to carry that anxiety. When you're a trans kid, even when you're in a caring and loving home, you will worry about the reaction that you get from your parents, from your siblings, from others when you start to share who you are. Why? Because those other people, even though they're caring and loving, you know, on the best of days, they're also going to be really confused and they're not necessarily going to know how to be supportive. There's no chapter in the parental book of how to be a parent, like: oh, my kid is trans; I flip to page 72. That's not how this world works, and kids know that. They know that even in a caring and loving home – but they do know also that their teacher has probably been talking about, like, a diversity of topics and subjects in school. Their teacher has probably been exhibiting to them that they're taking

every kid who comes to them, whatever their circumstances happen to be, and the kids see that teacher as being safe.

Madam Speaker, why are we bringing forward legislation that is taking that safe place away from kids? It's not right, and we shouldn't be doing this.

I'm going to ask that every member of this Legislature take a moment to think about what it is like to be that kid. Put yourself in their shoes in that moment and know how they are feeling. Try to understand how they are feeling and what they are going through and what this legislation is doing to them, what this legislation is doing to all other kids who are now wondering: "What happens next? If I'm also different, is this government going to come after me, too?"

We can talk about the statistics and the surgeries, but what we really need to be thinking about is the emotions of these kids and where they are in their life and what we are doing to keep those kids safe. We should be thinking about the parents who want to support those kids when those kids are ready and asking for that support. If this government is so concerned with parental rights, why are we taking away the rights of those parents who want to be supportive of their trans kids? I think we need to give some deep consideration to that.

Again, when you're living in that loving community – I want to also share in this Chamber, you know, an expression that we have in the queer community, again, to express, like, where we feel safe, where trans people feel safe. We have an expression in our community, "chosen family." In our community our families are not always the families that everybody desires to have. When we don't necessarily have that family that everybody desires to have, we go out and we find it. We find the people who are with us, who are attempting to understand us, the people who are going to love us no matter who we are.

Again, I'll bring it back to, you know, that the starting point for that, of that chosen family, might be the teacher in the school for that kid. So I'm going to implore that everyone in this House thinks about that kid and how their teacher might be their safe place and that this legislation is taking that away from them. How dare we?

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I truly am honoured to be able to rise up and speak to Bill 27 today. There are several essential steps to strengthen and improve Alberta's education system in this bill. I'm very thankful to the minister for bringing this forward. The minister has done his due diligence in bringing this bill forward. I'm very thankful for that, so thank you for allowing me to stand and talk about this.

Madam Speaker, the first part of this bill really just engages some of the challenges that we faced in COVID-19. It hit the world hard. It was a significant event not just here in Alberta, not just in Canada, but across the world. It changed how we view so many things. Every single person in this room experienced the challenges of COVID-19. For myself and my family during COVID-19 some of the challenges, being in small business, just starting up, were obviously quite challenging as we continued to grow and tried to move those businesses forward.

Part of that also is some of the challenges of family, trying to see my nieces and nephews in their education be challenged in that experience, being pushed to be at home and also seeing how teachers are engaging with them. Thank you to all the educators for going and teaching and going above and beyond during that period. It was significant and substantive.

But, Madam Speaker, during the pandemic evidence also shows that the disruptions brought on by the pandemic also had significant negative impacts on students' learning along with their social and emotional development. It's become clear just how vital it is to have very clear, very supportive policies from our government to protect our children's education, expand our children's education, keep high-quality education here in Alberta, especially during public health emergencies.

Here in Alberta, Madam Speaker, we know that education should not be a luxury. It is a priority for this government. Excellent education is a priority for this government, and we are committed to ensuring that we treat it accordingly. We've seen excellent marks put out recently by our educators. We have seen Alberta students continue to learn and have some of the best academic outcomes. I believe our Minister of Education has continued to put forward policy to grow and make sure that we continue to see some of the best education, both in Canada and across the world, right here in our great province of Alberta.

3:20

To that end, Madam Speaker, Bill 27 introduces amendments to the Education Act and related regulations that will better prepare Albertan schools for any future emergencies, to continue to have great academics and great performance in that way. These amendments reflect the findings of the Public Health Emergencies Governance Review Panel, which reviewed our COVID-19 response as a government and gathered feedback directly from Albertans from across Alberta. We have reflected on that. We have brought amendments to better engage with future – well hopefully never – public health emergencies that may arise.

Out of this report, Madam Speaker, two key themes emerged: our need to reinforce the importance of education and our need to establish clear expectations that students must receive education during emergencies, with a priority on in-person learning whenever possible. Our goal is very simple in this. We want a structured, proactive approach that allows us to navigate future challenges while keeping in-person learning as the core priority whenever possible. We know that students learn best when they are in person. It's a great opportunity. It's something that we have done well here in Alberta. This government has done well in allowing students to have great education.

Now, Madam Speaker, these amendments also recognize the children's right to their education, to be able to grow and flourish, be able to read, write, and do arithmetic, while also setting clear expectations that ensure all students receive the high-quality education we offer regardless of their external circumstances. The proposed amendments in Bill 27 would require school authorities to develop publicly available policies for temporary shifts to at-home learning. These include options to accommodate students, criteria to a temporary shift to at-home learning, and continuity of learning plans. Our government wants Alberta parents and schools to know exactly what to expect if or when our government needs to input these shifts.

Madam Speaker, these policies are very important. They're very vital. They also give expectations to both educators and parents on what would happen. We need to ensure that our guidelines are clear and a proper understanding of when these measures are appropriate. We've done the research. We've done a good job in bringing forward appropriate measures and also bringing clarity to these. Our government is committed to giving parents and schools the transparency they deserve and the transparency they want. This includes a clear understanding of any health measures in place. This also helps respect the relationship between parents and teachers as they engage in any health measures. It helps clarify and also makes

sure that we can continue to see great relationships between parents and teachers as they continue to educate their kids together.

Madam Speaker, if Bill 27 passes, these changes will come into effect on January 1, 2025, impacting public, separate, charter, francophone, and private schools alike. This includes providing clear guidance on government reporting so that both parents and educators can stay informed about their roles and their expectations. We have committed to working closely with school authorities across Alberta, providing them the support needed to smoothly implement these changes.

Now, beyond responding to public health concerns, this bill strengthens another critical area: parental involvement in education. Madam Speaker, Alberta's parents absolutely want to be involved and informed about their children's education. This is so important. I've heard this over and over in my constituency. Parents want to know what's being taught in schools by their teachers, and they also want to be involved and understanding what is being taught. Our government has listened to that call, listened to that conversation. I'm thankful for parents everywhere for bringing this up. Bill 27 addresses this by affirming parents' right to be engaged in key areas of their children's lives at school.

Under these proposed amendments, Madam Speaker, any name or pronoun changes for students under 15 will require parental notification, and for students aged 16 and 17 parental notification will be required. Additionally, any instructional content or presentations focused on gender identity, sexual orientation, or human sexuality will need both parental consent for participation and ministry approval to ensure curriculum alignment.

Madam Speaker, our government, this government recognizes the importance of supporting students who identify as transgender or gender diverse, and our government has consulted with a broad range of voices, from educators and parents to health care professionals and members of the transgender community. Our government understands the importance of hearing from those directly involved from the communities who will be affected. In doing so, these policies are thoughtfully designed to preserve choice for children and youth while involving families in decisions that impact their children's education and personal development.

Our government is fully committed to providing schools where every student feels safe, feels cared for, and feels respected. By creating policies that foster transparency, consistency, and communication requirements, we are setting a foundation that allows both schools and families to work together for the success and well-being of their children. This partnership between schools and family is so vital, Madam Speaker. To continue along this path of growing our young people, growing our teens, growing our children into strong, young Albertans is so imperative.

Now, in closing, Madam Speaker, Alberta's government believes in an education system that respects families and keeps the best interests of students at heart, and this is what this bill does. This bill reflects our commitment to policies that are clear, our commitment to compassion, and a response to the needs of today and of tomorrow. Alberta's future depends on the success of our children, and it's our duty to ensure that they have the environment and support they need to thrive and to be able to grow into the future leaders of our province.

Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to my colleagues for standing up with us in making Alberta schools safer and more transparent here in Alberta. Together we can build an education system that is prepared for challenges while staying focused on what matters most to the success and well-being of our children, and I encourage all members of the Assembly to support Bill 27.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Williams: Madam Speaker, I rise to seek unanimous consent of the House to move to one-minute bells for any division on second reading of Bill 27.

The Deputy Speaker: Would you like to waive Standing Order 32(2)?

Mr. Williams: Yes.

The Deputy Speaker: Wonderful.

[Unanimous consent granted]

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

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak against – and I strongly speak against – Bill 27, Education Amendment Act, 2024. The UCP government brought forth a bill that's going to increase barriers to sex education. They are adding more red tape and asking parents to opt in to sex education instead of the current process of opting out of sex education.

We are all very busy parents here in the Chamber, and there are many, many busy parents outside of this Chamber. I reflect upon my own Sunday night prep: the crazy evening of preparing dinner, laundry being done, pets running wild, and digging out the forms from my kids' backpacks to be signed, taking the time to read through them, and then signing them. My daughter does get a gold star. Hers went directly into the backpack. The boys, well, that was a different story as it ended on a different counter, and a few nights later it made it into the backpack.

I now have to hope that these forms get to their teachers. That's the thing. The form needs to make it home, the parent needs to understand and comprehend what they're signing, but then it's got to make its way all the way back in the backpack in hopes that it'll see daylight in the hand of a teacher. I thought that right now this was the government of red tape reduction.

Currently, children have the right for information and education, and parents have the right to pull their children out of class. So why change it? There are so many reasons Albertan students should have access to sexual health education programs. First, it leads to better sexual health outcomes. It reduces the rates of sexually transmitted infections and teen births. It also leads to reduced bullying and increased appreciation of gender equality. It also decreases domestic violence. Educating young people is a long-term solution to end gender-based violence. Sex ed isn't just about sex. It is meant to promote health and the well-being of respect for human rights and gender equality, and it empowers young people to lead safe and productive lives.

Sex ed that is early, ongoing, and comprehensive is key to providing youth with the information and the skills needed to understand and prevent gender-based violence. It teaches us that all forms of gender-based violence are wrong and a violation of our human rights. If our youth are not getting sex ed at schools, we all know who's actually going to be picking up the slack: the Internet. How will a child know if it's wrong if they don't understand what's happening to them? Albertan children having access to sex education will promote a safer and more equitable province.

3:30

So why is the UCP so determined to attack kids instead of addressing real issues in our schools? I know my constituents would rather the UCP focus on addressing classroom sizes and go back to reporting on them. In Ranchlands they would appreciate a new

playground for the kids to play on during their breaks. They would rather the government hire more educational assistants to support those kiddos and their learning, but now we are putting another burden onto those teachers and the support staff.

If a youth talks and shares or comes out to a teacher or an educational support person, it's because they trust them. They feel safe. It should feel like an honour for any adult, not fear on: how are they going to follow the government rules but also keep that youth safe? No child should be afraid to go to school and be around trusted adults like a teacher and worry that they're going to be outed. I would love for all kids to grow up in a supportive family home, but unfortunately not all children are provided that opportunity. Some kiddos do not have a supportive family environment at home, yet this government insists on outing kids by notifying their parents because they've asked school staff to refer to them by a new gender-related name or a pronoun.

This legislation put forth will be incredibly harmful to so many youth here in Alberta. This UCP government is violating the human rights of transgender and diverse youth. Why are we denying access to crucial health care when parents were giving consent?

Amanda, one of my constituents, wrote to say this about this legislation.

It will actively harm kids in our community. It has been proven time and again that denying access to gender affirming care increases the risk of suicide in young people.

These decisions need to be made by individuals in discussions with their doctors – not [the] governments.

These policy changes are even making it harder for youth to have the time to reflect and think about these decisions by denying their right to puberty blockers until . . . the age of 15 – clearly a move meant to restrict them completely. This is appalling legislation and I am ashamed to live in [this] province where it is being proposed.

As we talk about people wanting one-on-one conversations with family doctors, I can't help but wonder how many families don't even have access to a family doctor, a family doctor that they know, that they can trust and have a conversation with. When I was door-knocking in Lethbridge, I was shocked at how many folks told me that they didn't even have a family doctor, and if they did, they were travelling. A young mom of three kids told me that she drives for two hours up to High River just to have a doctor's appointment. We've had our attack on doctors in this province, and now we are attacking vulnerable youth and the families that love them.

In my own riding, in Dalhousie, when I was out door-knocking during constit break, I had two moms crying in one afternoon on their doorsteps, begging me to stand up for their children and oppose this harmful legislation. Many, many more doors were appalled by the bullying of this government, and not once did I hear that the UCP is doing the right thing.

I had so much gratitude coming home from a trans rally in Calgary a few weeks back and seeing how many constituents had joined me and thousands of others, all of us saying: leave our kids alone. To quote our leader, when hate is loud, love must not be silent. Well, that rally was not silent.

Jesse, another constituent, wrote, saying that she was also opposed to this legislation. "This is a waste of time, and an infringement on the freedom you pretend to be standing for. Instead, you hypocritically lead a culture war instead of addressing the real issues we are facing [here in Alberta]." Albertans want a government to address real issues here in Alberta like affordability, housing, and not attacking people. They want a government that will take care of people during a mental health crisis, not make it worse.

Lisa from Dalhousie wrote me to say:

Research shows that inclusive policies—such as access to gender-affirming healthcare and protection from discrimination—improve

mental health outcomes for transgender individuals. In contrast, anti-trans legislation correlates with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide within these communities. Alberta's legislation mirrors policies in [the] U.S. states that have led to substantial increases in mental health risks and suicide attempts among trans youth. Jurisdictions . . . up to a 72% increase in [their] suicide attempts. We should be striving to create a supportive environment where all individuals can thrive, regardless of their gender identity.

Recently I tabled a letter from Reverend Tracy Robertson, my minister from St. Thomas United, from my riding. She writes:

I am a very concerned citizen of Alberta – lived here all my life – and a proud Minister of an Affirming United Church. I strongly disagree [with] your government's plan to restrict health care to the Queer Community and [I] am asking you to reconsider.

Action is needed now, before the Legislature returns, because lives are literally at risk. What you call Gender-Affirming Care is, for me, simply Health Care. And your proposals mean you're ripping the basic right to health care away from the Queer Community. This is a targeted attack on a vulnerable population and our government should be protecting everyone in Alberta, not implementing legislation that will harm them. What you are doing is against human rights and works in direct conflict with God's love and [the] care for all God's children.

Gender-Affirming Care = Health Care. Period.

The government has no business restricting me from the health care I need, or anyone else needs. What I discuss with my health care providers should not be restricted and certainly should not be banned.

This decision will result in many lives being at risk and your government will be responsible for a rise in hate crimes, self harm, and suicide.

Please reconsider.

I feel so naive that I believed that I live in a province where everyone wanted our kids to be safe. Over the summer I had a beautiful opportunity to watch my daughter be so unencumbered. I turned to see her passionately dancing and singing freely along with Pink, and it was the words: I'm perfect; I'm so blanking perfect. And this moment will be forever in my heart, to see her get to express her true self and her confidence. I do realize I still need to talk to her about her language.

I want to wake up where kids can be confident in who they are and be themselves. It is heartbreaking to wonder how many kids are waking up feeling unsafe and needing to hide. I want all children to be able to dance like no one is watching. No child should wake up wondering: why is their government attacking them? I appreciate the note from Veronica.

This . . . is a dangerous stunt that will continue to make our province an unsafe place for many different people. Diversity makes us strong and successful.

Stay in your lane and work on everything that is actually wrong instead of harming a small percentage of [our] population. Further, if you continue to crack this patriarchal door open, I fear that all women in this province will be the next target of this small group of radical 1950s revolutionists.

Julie also cautioned:

These policies do not protect women and girls. The only women Alberta's women and girls need protection from [is] the UCP cabinet legislating away human rights. These policies actively harm trans youth and adults and their families. These policies actively waste tax dollars on legal bills when the province is sued over and over for contravening the charter. These policies further erode the safety of schools as places kids go to learn and be themselves. These policies will increase homelessness as more and more trans youth have fewer and fewer . . . spaces. These policies will increase the burden on the healthcare system you are dismantling and increase the backlog of people needing care. These policies will repel qualified doctors and allied health professionals from coming to Alberta.

The United Conservative policies are an infringement on autonomy of families. The government does not belong in any of our households or our doctors' offices. Families have a right to collaborate with their children and their family doctors about their health care, including gender-affirming care. The UCP is bullying transgender and marginalized Albertans.

I loved one of the T-shirts that I saw at a rally on Saturday. It says: you will have to go through me. Well, you're going to have to go through me and all of us on this side of the House and many families and medical professionals who care about youth. I will not be supporting Bill 27, the education statutes amendment act, and you're going to have to go through us.

3:40

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to start by speaking to all those who are impacted by this terrible suite of antitrans legislation. You know, the teacher in me, the member of the 2SLGBTQ-plus community in me: this bill, Bill 27, hits and all the bills really hit. I know that if they impact me, they impact so many out there much more, especially those who identify as trans, nonbinary, or two spirit. I know we have some wonderful community members in the gallery, and thank you for being here.

But I have to ask, like so many of my colleagues have today: how is it that we got here? How is it that instead of focusing on the issues that we know matter so much to our constituents – health care, housing, funding of education, good jobs. How is it that instead of all that, we're faced with a government that is focused on attacking some of the most vulnerable in our community? I have to ask: why is it that this UCP government even cares about how trans people live their lives? Why does it bother you that people want to be who they are?

As I've asked already many times in this Chamber, I'd ask the Premier again: what happened to that Premier of 10 years ago, that so-called libertarian who wanted people to live and let live, who pleaded in this very Chamber for queer and trans kids to be safe in schools? What happened? We're all elected here, in this Chamber, to represent all of our constituents, and believe it or not, to the Premier, she represents a whole lot of people who care and who want trans folks to be safe and to be loved. Believe it or not, she represents trans Albertans as well, and all of you on that side of the House do.

We're here to be here for our constituents. Those government MLAs, those on that side of the House: they're failing. Trans people exist, trans people deserve to live freely, and trans people aren't going anywhere, no matter how hard the UCP tries to legislate away their existence.

I loved hearing from my colleagues on this talking about their own upbringings in rural Alberta, the Member for Edmonton-Glenora from Kinuso, the Member for Calgary-Foothills from Valleyview, which happens to be my mom's hometown as well. Well, Little Smoky. And, you know, I've got to add my voice as a kid from Barrhead, Alberta, and, as many of my colleagues will know, someone who taught in Bawlf and Forestburg, Alberta.

I've talked about this a lot, you know, in this Chamber, about my own background, and I know I shared this a lot. When I taught, I know that there were kids who weren't safe. There were kids who couldn't be themselves, kids who were bullied, and I didn't do enough to be better and to be there for them. I know I didn't. I wasn't out. I wasn't brave. I wasn't courageous. I can't change the past, but I can commit, just like I did when I was elected in 2019, to do all I can to ensure that no kid – no kid – goes to school wishing they were someone else or wishing they were dead.

Let's talk a little bit about some of the specifics of this bill, Bill 27, the education statutes amendment act. What does it do? It amends various sections of the Education Act, some of those

changes that were made under the NDP to very much strengthen and protect students, and we see in this bill that the changes being proposed do very little other than further restrict the rights of queer and trans students particularly. Some of the specifics are around parental notification, around an opt-in system, which I want to talk about in a moment, and around mandating parental notification and consent for name and pronoun changes for students under 16 and for those students who are 16 to 17 requiring parental notification but not consent for students.

Why are these changes so alarming? I think my colleagues have done a pretty good job at outlining some of them. You know, we've been through the outing conversation already in this Chamber, and I really didn't think we'd be back here only five years later. I know many folks watching at home and even in the gallery remember the fight that we had with Bill 8, Bill Hate, wherein the UCP made themselves the first provincial government to actually roll back 2SLGBTQ-plus rights, and they were proud of themselves, so proud of themselves for forcing through that bill that they frolicked in the Legislature fountain afterwards.

[The Speaker in the chair]

We warned them how unnecessary and unfair their legislation would be. Why risk outing kids? Why make it harder for young people to access a safe space in schools? The very question the Premier asked herself in this Legislature in 2014. Now the UCP are back at it, with their focus on making things more difficult for trans kids, for those kids who might not have a safe space at home where they can be themselves. We know that schools across the province and teachers and support staff are doing all they can under pretty tough conditions to make sure that kids feel safe and welcome to be who they are, but the UCP seems so focused on making things a whole lot worse for them. What problem are they trying to solve by risking outing kids to unsafe home environments? It doesn't make sense, and it's dangerous. As I said, I talked about this a lot in the Chamber in 2019, and I hate that we're back here.

I want to talk a little bit as well about the proposed opting-in requirements for sexual health education, and, you know, I have some – I mostly taught high school social studies, a little bit of high school English in rural Alberta, but sometimes – and the fellow teachers here in the Chamber will understand – you get given junior high health, teaching junior high health . . .

Ms Hoffman: Question box.

Member Irwin: Question box. That's right. Sexual health education: what a time.

You know, people should know that parents can already opt their kids out of sex ed, but by making it an opt-in, not only does it add a whole lot of administrative burden for teachers and parents; the impact is felt by students, students who, as my colleague from Calgary-Edgemont talked about, deserve access to comprehensive sexual health education. Anyone who's been a teacher, or, heck, a parent – I mean, I haven't been a parent, only to furry sons, but I've been a teacher and I've been a school administrator as well, and you know how hard it is to get a form back from young people.

I think it's important to note that there's been push-back on this piece from so many, and it's quite timely. This morning I joined many colleagues, including colleagues from the other side of this Chamber, at the Alberta School Boards Association fall general meeting. They were proud to report to us, at least members on this side of the House, that just yesterday they passed a resolution urging the UCP to rethink this very policy on opting in. They said:

therefore be it resolved that sexual health education remain an “opt out” option for parents in Alberta and that school board autonomy be respected with regards to their own sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression policies.

So school board trustees don’t want this policy; teachers and support staff don’t want this policy . . .

Mr. Stephan: Parents want this policy.

Member Irwin: If the members opposite want to join the debate – it’s interesting to me that so many of them aren’t standing up and joining this debate – they’re welcome to, especially the member from Red Deer there. He can join debate, and he can defend this bill, because I’ve not heard him defend it yet, Mr. Speaker.

So who are they listening to? We know that kids will be harmed by this policy. I’ve got a whole lot more to say on this bill and on the other of the UCP’s antitrans bills. There’s more to come on that. It’s not too late for the UCP, for all members to do the right thing and to kill these bills because trans rights are human rights.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is second reading of Bill 27. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate?

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

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:50 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

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

Against the motion:

Al-Guneid	Ellingson	Kayande
Batten	Elmeligi	Loyola
Boparai	Eremenko	Metz
Brar	Ganley	Notley
Calahoo Stonehouse	Gray	Pancholi
Ceci	Hayter	Renaud
Chapman	Hoffman	Sabir
Dach	Ip	Schmidt
Deol	Irwin	Shepherd
Eggen	Kasawski	Tejada
Totals:	For – 48	Against – 30

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a second time]

Bill 25

Early Learning and Child Care Amendment Act, 2024

[Adjourned debate November 5: Mr. McDougall]

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds or less we will continue to the remainder of second reading.

Order. Hon. members, before the Assembly is Bill 25, the Early Learning and Child Care Amendment Act, 2024. The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has seven minutes remaining should he choose to use it.

Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Acadia has the call.

Member Batten: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise and join the debate for Bill 25, Early Learning and Child Care Amendment Act, 2024, now in its second reading. My debate of course builds on the thoughtful arguments brought forward by my colleagues on this side of the House and allows me to speak to some of the misunderstandings that the government has brought forward.

The Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs did a fantastic job of reminding the House last week of the utility and the necessity of a robust, thoughtful legislation to keep Albertan children safe. She reminded the House of the almost 500 Albertans who were poisoned in September 2023. She reminded the House of the unacceptable delay of action from this government and that it was the Albertan voices raised together in outrage that finally triggered this UCP government into action.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

In fact, action and communication were so badly handled that, and I quote, by the time we were notified, we were already admitted to hospital with a positive E coli test and had personally notified the daycare of this. End quote. This is one of hundreds of e-mails my office received from scared and disappointed parents during the E coli outbreak in September 2023 in Calgary.

The Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs noted the creation of a government-selected review panel, aptly named the Food Safety and Licensed Facility-Based Child Care Review Panel. It just kind of rolls off the tongue. Their mandate was: make “recommendations on how to better protect children.” This panel consisted of infectious disease specialists, food science experts, food industry, and child care providers. With the consultation of other experts the panel was able to provide recommendations to improve food safety in kitchens that provide food in licensed child care facilities.

Now, the panel reviewed not only this particular act, the Early Learning and Child Care Act, but in addition, they took a look at the Public Health Act, the institutions regulation, and the early learning and child care regulation, with the purpose that “this work will help strengthen the food safety system and will be instrumental in preventing future outbreaks.” The resulting report from the review panel provided 30 recommendations, and I quote, the recommendations serve as a comprehensive road map for reforming legislation, regulations, policies, and inspection practices to foster an enhanced framework where food safety is paramount. End quote. Arguably, a road map where the safety of children is paramount would be most appropriate, but I digress.

This UCP government implemented a single recommendation of the 30 available. That is just over 3 per cent of the recommendations, Mr. Speaker. Of all the recommendations the only one present in this proposed bill is to add a clarifying line buried deep inside the legislation that redirects accountability away from, well, whichever ministry happens to be responsible for it at the moment to the Ministry of Health.

Now, obviously, the Ministry of Health should be greatly involved when it comes to keeping Albertan children safe. However, by redirecting accountability and technically following the recommendation but, certainly, not the spirit – the recommendation, by the way, reads, and it's section C(1)(3), "Within the Early Learning and Child Care Act, make clear reference to the requirements of food safety legislation, (i.e., the Public Health Act, Food Regulation, Food Retail and Foodservices Code.)"

4:00

Why is this important? Well, let's chat a little bit about E coli. E coli is a bacteria. It thrives in the guts of mammals, so it's incredibly common, and it is found in the stool of mammals. E coli is an important scientific vector used for research, so much so that it was actually one of the first bacteria ever sequenced. Now, I realize that today we 3-D print almost everything, but back in the day sequencing an organism was a big deal, and it was very, very expensive. Suffice to say that the scientific world has invested in getting to know E coli specifically: how to grow it, manipulate it, how to contain it. Do you know the easiest way to prevent E coli from spreading to where you don't want it? Soap and water, hand washing, good hand hygiene.

Now, the E coli outbreak of September 2023 in Calgary, Alberta, was connected to food served in several child care centres, and the presumed cause was the meat loaf, both the standard meat loaf containing meat but also the vegan meat loaf. Thinking back to E coli, which, again, is a bacteria that lives in mammalian guts and is present in the feces of said mammals, E coli poisoning occurs typically in two ways. One way is contaminated foods, so raw or uninspected or undercooked, where typically ground meat products are not cooked to the correct temperature or not held at the correct temperature long enough to kill the E coli. This product then becomes a likely transmission vector. Or it is spread by what they call fecal-oral transmission. Yes, Mr. Speaker, it's exactly what it sounds like, where mammalian waste is orally consumed, usually from poor hand washing and/or poor manufacturing practices.

How does a vegan meat loaf, which contains zero meat, egg, or dairy, get contaminated with E coli? Now, I'm sure there are a number of scenarios we could come up with, but the fact remains that a food item that does not naturally contain E coli should then not be related at all to an E coli outbreak, unless there were poor practices in place that permitted the E coli to be transferred from the source to the vegan meat loaf to the children and the families. Lucky Calgary; in 2023 they had transmission both ways.

Knowing this, I'm very concerned that there's no mention of hand hygiene of any sort in the proposed bill. Sure, it references the giant Public Health Act and the equally impressive Safety Codes Act. Having spent some time navigating these acts, I am more than ever underwhelmed by this bill.

You first need to find the food regulation act, which tells food handlers only in section 30(1)(d): "wash hands as often as necessary to prevent the contamination of food or food areas." Now, to be fair, the food regulation act does mention hand washing a total of three times, but it is exactly the same helpful verbiage without any further guidance. How would you evaluate that your hand washing wasn't enough? Do you wait till people get sick?

E coli is not something you can see with your eyes. They are micrometres long, and depending on the specific strain, you might need to ingest a million colony-forming units. But there are specific strains, like the shiga-toxin producing one from September 2023 in Calgary, where you need only to ingest about 100 colony-forming units, only 100. They are micrometres long and invisible to the naked eye. And it's not just E coli for which we need to practise good hand hygiene. There are a number of pathogens that pop up

when the environment is appropriate. There didn't appear to be any other mention of hand hygiene in any of the mentioned acts.

Going back to the mandate of the panel, "the recommendations serve as a comprehensive roadmap," a road map this UCP government decided they didn't need. It's not clear whether the government disagreed with the recommendations or they simply thought they knew better. We've heard from this government in both the first and second readings, saying things like "all of these changes would allow government to respond quickly when there are concerns about children's safety." I appreciate the Member for Airdrie-Cochrane having provided this clarification: after something bad happens, we'll do something. Well, something bad did happen, Mr. Speaker.

More clarification, offered once again by the same Member for Airdrie-Cochrane: "In addition, the proposed changes will make the certification of an early childhood educator available to the public so parents can rest assured that their children are in the care of trained and certified professionals." Well, that's fantastic. The government wanting to reassure parents that their children are being cared for by trained and certified professionals: like, this is gold. So where do we find that in this bill?

For background, a quote from an article written by Bornfreund and Goffin:

There is no recognized early childhood education profession. The early childhood education field does not conform to the standards of organized professions nor is it held accountable as such, as reflected in the variability in teachers' knowledge and skills. Consequently, although central to its aspirations, the early childhood education field cannot yet claim status as a profession. To pretend otherwise is a disservice to families and their children.

Now, I understand there needs to be a lot of collaborative work to get all of our child care providers to that certified professional level to fulfill the directive now provided by this government, so one would think there would be investment. Shouldn't we be seeing amendments to other bills that maybe speak more directly to the quality of the training and certification for the providers? Should Albertans be expecting consultations, you know, the ones where you actually sit down and have a conversation and maybe do that a couple more times, maybe with the providers themselves, maybe the parents, maybe the centres they serve or the schools that provide the early learning programs?

Will there be financial investment from the Alberta government to ensure the necessary changes to the current curriculum so that food safety is emphasized and good hygiene is explained, expected, and demonstrated? Will there be an investment in the workers themselves, a wage grant to ensure that highly valued early childhood educators are being appropriately compensated for their specialized skill and knowledge? Will the government work with educators who have already started to gather in hopes of creating an association that is consistent with the requirements of being a profession? The Ontario government has done so way back in 2009, 15 years ago, Mr. Speaker. So will Alberta look east and learn from this specific effort, or will we wait another 15 years, another handful of outbreaks, and just shrug off responsibility as this government is so good at doing?

A quote from Elizabeth Gilbert: so many early childhood educators who are trying to educate millions of children are our least educated professionals. End quote. Will this UCP government acknowledge the need and take steps to support early childhood educators, to empower the very people we trust to take care of our children? Will this government help create their profession here in Alberta? Will they support the early childhood educators so they have the necessary training and certification to be held accountable to provide reliable, quality, safe early childhood education?

Will this government take a step back and reflect on the impact of their downgrading of the necessary training for early childhood educators? Has this government learned their lesson? Lowering the threshold, reducing red tape: however you want to spin it, these actions should not be done in a vacuum. There are real-life consequences for placing workers in positions for which they are not sufficiently trained nor given the necessary resources to gain that training.

Would've, Could've, Should've: yes, it is a title of a Taylor Swift song, but it is also what we are going to hear when the next outbreak occurs. We would have provided the necessary resources to child care providers if only we knew what they needed: hand washing. We could have used this proposed amendment to create a robust, comprehensive strategy to avoid the next outbreak or at least lessen its impact. We should have implemented all 30 recommendations from the Food Safety and Licensed Facility-Based Child Care Review Panel. Instead, we have a proposed bill lacking in any initiative that would actually support the early childhood educators to create a high-quality, safe child care system or that would provide confidence to parents that their children will be safe.

This bill is completely reactive, with no word of prevention. This government, even when pressed with easy solutions, rallies against Alberta's best interests, and they waste time in this House with nothing bills, which they then pat themselves on the back for. We should be putting concrete solutions into legislation that would not only be able to react when a situation should arise but also provide upstream, proactive resources to keep Albertan children safe.

Albertans are tired of being taken for a fool by this government. Do better.

4:10

The Acting Speaker: Any others wishing to speak?

The Minister of Infrastructure to close debate.

Mr. Guthrie: Waive.

The Acting Speaker: Okay.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a second time]

Bill 31

Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

The Acting Speaker: The Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise here this afternoon and move second reading of Bill 31, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

If passed, Mr. Speaker, this bill would make changes to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, the Public's Right to Know Act, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, and the Alberta Evidence Act. Amendments included in Bill 31 would help update legislation to address the current needs of Albertans. It'll help increase access to justice, secure crime data to assist with decision-making, and increase transparency and clarity for all.

Mr. Speaker, I'll start with the important changes proposed to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act. As all hon. members in the Assembly know, Alberta's population is rising at an incredibly fast pace, and a fair distribution of electoral divisions is absolutely essential to the democratic process. Under the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act the general rule is that each population of each electoral division in Alberta must not be more than 25 per cent above or 25 per cent below the average population of all proposed electoral divisions. Currently, with more and more people coming to this great province, the populations of nine electoral divisions in

Alberta are greater than the 25 per cent of the average electoral division population, so it's necessary to update Alberta's electoral map to reflect the current demographic realities of our province.

To be clear, Mr. Speaker, the government does not draw electoral boundaries. As you know, it is done through a regulated and legislative process that occurs every eight to 10 years. An independent Electoral Boundaries Commission is established to review the existing boundaries and make proposals to this very Assembly about area boundaries and names of the electoral divisions.

Amendments in Bill 31 would direct the Electoral Boundaries Commission to add two new electoral divisions to the province as part of its review of Alberta's electoral map. This would mean that Alberta would have 89 divisions. The next commission could be appointed as early as this fall or as late as October 31, 2026, to ensure the new boundaries are in place before the next provincial election. Mr. Speaker, I want to point out that effective representation involves more than just ensuring a fair distribution of population. The commission can consider a number of factors when making the recommendations, and the addition of two new electoral divisions will give them increased flexibility to do just that.

Bill 31 would also provide some updates to the factors that the commission can consider. A few minor changes would update the language to reflect the current realities of Alberta communities. For example, updates would replace the reference to "existing road systems" with a broader reference to "the availability and means of communication and transportation between various parts of Alberta." Amendments to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act would give the Electoral Boundaries Commission added flexibility to ensure that our electoral map is reflective of Alberta's current landscape.

The Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, also contains amendments to the Public's Right to Know Act, which legislates public reporting of crime data to make it easier for Albertans to know how crime impacts their communities. Mr. Speaker, I think we can all agree that Albertans have a right to know what's going on in their neighbourhoods and in their communities, and this legislation ensures that Alberta's government can get the crime-related data that it needs to keep Albertans informed about what is happening in their communities.

It'll also help with government decision-making. Accurate data is essential in ensuring that appropriate budgeting in areas such as police services, corrections, the court system, community watch groups, and other agencies is allocated appropriately. Bill 31 would amend the Public's Right to Know Act to allow the Minister of Justice to require government departments, municipalities, and police services to provide up-to-date data as required. This would enable greater information sharing and more informed conversations between government, municipalities, police forces, and others regarding crime and policing in this province.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 31 also contains amendments to the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. As all the hon. colleagues here will recall, this Assembly passed the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act to protect critical infrastructure from damage or interference caused by blockades, protesters, or other similar activities. We subsequently added certain prescribed health care facilities to the definition of essential infrastructure via the critical infrastructure defence regulation. The amendments in Bill 31 would incorporate prescribed health care facilities to the definition of essential infrastructure into the act, eliminating the need for the regulation itself. This amendment would ensure that the definition of essential infrastructure is contained in one place.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Bill 31 includes amendments to the Alberta Evidence Act. These amendments would give Albertans a simpler and more modern process for confirming the truth of the information they provide to the courts. The Alberta Evidence Act sets out a process for individuals to give evidence to the court either orally or in writing. The amendments would allow Albertans to submit written documents to the court using an electronic system designed by the court to electronically certify the information that they're providing to be true rather than visiting a courthouse or paying to swear or affirm an oath in person. This would save Albertans time and money and increase efficiency at the courts as staff could store information electronically and would not have to spend time administering oaths or affirmations, allowing Albertans to electronically certify information as part of this government's red tape reduction efforts to save Albertans, businesses, and government time and money. Removing red tape in the justice system will make it easier for Albertans to access court services while reducing workload for court staff.

Processes will still be available for those who prefer in-person and paper-based land transactions.

Mr. Speaker, proposed amendments would also give Albertans a simple choice between swearing a religious oath or making a secular affirmation, which would improve their experience of the justice system as a whole as well. Currently the law requires Albertans who do not wish to swear an oath to first object and make justification as to why they would prefer to make an affirmation.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Bill 31, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, contains essential and important amendments that would increase access to justice for Albertans. It would save Albertans time and money, and it would ensure that our legislation is up to date and reflecting the current realities of our province. I encourage all members in this Assembly to support the amendments in Bill 31.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Are there others wishing to speak? The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 31. As the minister indicated, it makes changes to four different acts: Alberta Evidence Act, Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, Public's Right to Know Act, and Electoral Boundaries Commission Act. For the most part, I think I don't have any issues with the changes that are proposed although some of them were exaggerated way too much in their impact; for instance, changes to the Alberta Evidence Act. Sure, that will help people certify documents electronically, and that will save some time and create some easy processes for people filing those documents, but the minister also claimed that it will increase access to justice and all those things.

4:20

I would suggest that the minister should visit the courthouse someday and see the wait times that our court system is facing, see the bail process that our court system is running and how people's matters are just being put over every day instead of getting the opportunity to present their case before the court and seek bail. In that sense, I think the minister's claim that it will somehow increase access to justice – I don't think that will have some major impact on access to justice.

If they really want to make sure that people have access to justice, they need to provide resources to the court system, they need to invest and not cut programs like legal aid, and they need to support organizations like Calgary Legal Guidance, community-based

organizations like ABC Foundation, and other grassroots initiatives who are trying to provide access to the court system.

The second thing the minister indicated about was making the secular oath available along with the religious oath without asking anyone for the justification why they won't take the religious oath. I think government can take credit that this is the first progressive secular policy they have ever introduced, and I fully support that change.

Then they said that there were some changes made to the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, where they consolidated all the definitions in one place instead of a regulation. Again, that change may give more certainty on what's included. But what we have seen previously from this government when our critical infrastructure like the Coutts border was blocked – I think government didn't use this Critical Infrastructure Defence Act and didn't come to our rescue. Instead, some government members even visited the Coutts blockade to support blockaders.

Then government talked about changes to the Public's Right to Know Act. Again, that will give the minister some more powers to seek data. The minister also mentioned that this will help with greater information sharing and inform decision-making. Further, the minister mentioned that Albertans have the right to know about crimes and what's happening in their communities.

It would have been much better had the minister said that Albertans have the right to be safe in their communities. Government should be putting in place programs and initiatives that make sure that people are safe in their homes, in their communities, and across this province. If we look at the data from the last five years, in the government's own report violent crime has gone up, property crime has gone up, and government investment in fighting those things has gone down.

We have a lot of studies, studies upon studies, that show that social determinants of justice, social determinants of crimes are the same. If you want to make sure that communities are safe, Albertans are safe, you have to invest in those things. Those things include income, employment, access to housing, access to education, access to health care, mental health supports, all those things.

Then we look at the government record. Just for example, take education. Alberta spends the least amount of money on a per-student funding basis in the entire country on our education system. When we look at affordable housing in the last five years, we have seen rents, mortgages go through the roof and government investment not keeping pace with that. And now we are seeing more homelessness than ever in this province. Similarly, access to health care: the government's own website shows that at any given time more than 30-plus emergency centres across this province, in particular in rural Alberta, are shut down. People's access to health care and mental health supports is worse than ever before.

Those are the things that this government needs to focus on, because Albertans not only have a right to know what's happening in their communities, but with respect to crime Albertans also have the right to be safe in their communities, and that's not what we are seeing from this government.

Generally speaking, I'm not opposed to the changes that are made in this piece of legislation with respect to the Alberta Evidence Act, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, or the Public's Right to Know Act.

Now I will speak briefly about the changes with respect to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act. These are important changes. We have seen significant growth across the province and population. I think it's the right thing to do, that we are seeing that government is responding to that by adding two more constituencies to make sure that we have representation in this Legislature and fair representation in this Legislature. That's not the part that we disagree with. We think

that it's important that Albertans are fairly represented, and given the population growth over the last few years we would need more electoral boundaries if we want to keep that 25 per cent number below or above the threshold consistent across this province. As the minister mentioned, there are nine ridings right now that are above that threshold of 25 per cent.

However, we have issues with the changes that government is making to the criteria that can be considered to determine these new districts. Prior to this change the legislation section dealing with that criteria reads that the commission

shall take into consideration

- (a) the requirement for effective representation as guaranteed by the . . . Charter . . .
- (b) sparsity and density of population,
- (c) common community interests . . .
- (d) wherever possible, the existing community boundaries within the cities of Edmonton and Calgary,
- (e) wherever possible, the existing municipal boundaries . . .
- (h) the desirability of understandable and clear boundaries.

Prior to this change the legislation provided specific guidance to the commission that that's the criteria they should follow. The word "shall" is used, which represents that it was not at the commission's discretion but that they have to consider that.

What government is doing in section 14 here is that they are saying, "In determining the area to be included . . . effective representation as guaranteed by the . . . Charter." That mandatory provision uses the word "shall." Then it says, "in doing so may take into consideration," and then it lists a number of things.

4:30

First, I have three issues with that change, that now they are leaving it to the discretion of the commission, that they may consider these things. Second, they are also getting rid of that provision which says, "wherever possible, the existing municipal boundaries" and "wherever possible, the existing community boundaries within the cities of Edmonton and Calgary." They're getting rid of both those criteria, and that is deeply concerning given this government's record around elections. I think the concern is that they might want to do some U.S. Republican-style gerrymandering with these boundaries.

Some members over there are laughing, but I would ask anyone who wants to weigh in to give us some logical, some rational reason why they needed to take that criteria, make it not mandatory, and take out municipal boundaries – Calgary, Edmonton boundaries – as consideration. We didn't hear from anyone, any Albertan that was asking that to be taken out. Sure, population increased – they are increasing the number of ridings – but we do expect that the way these boundaries be drawn should make sure that Albertans' right to fair representation is protected and actually enhanced through this process. If they didn't have anything else in mind, they wouldn't change that criteria.

We do not want the UCP to play games, political games with communities and constituencies instead of making sure that Albertans are represented fairly and properly in their Legislature. So that change is deeply concerning, and government should either explain why it's necessary or not change that criteria because that criteria has worked well in the past. There have been no complaints.

I also note that the previous section didn't have any discretionary power for the commission. Everything was written in the legislation. Now it also added "any other factors the Commission considers appropriate." I think this boundary redraw has implications for our Legislature, for institutions of our democracy, and we as legislators should be able to provide certain criteria that need to be met in this process and not leave it to the commission to think of other factors that they think are appropriate. The factors that were included in the previous provision were quite detailed and well thought out; for

instance, "the requirement for effective representation as guaranteed by the . . . Charter of Rights and Freedoms." That statement gives enough flexibility to the commission while making sure that they are doing everything with a view to preserving effective representation as guaranteed by the Charter.

The criteria also talked about sparsity and density of population. I do understand that there are ridings in this province which may be less than a five- to six-kilometre radius, and there are ridings that span hundreds of kilometres, in particular in rural Alberta. So that criteria was there, and they were required. Before they were required; it was not discretionary. It was required of the commission that they shall take that into consideration. Now government is saying that they may take it into consideration.

Then before was "common community interests and community organizations, including those of Indian reserves and Métis settlements." Now they're changing it to "communities of interest," whatever that means, "including municipalities . . . Indian reserves and Métis settlements." Again, prior to this change there was something that the commission was required to consider. Now this change is making it just something that they may want to consider.

Similarly, "wherever possible, the existing community boundaries within the cities of Edmonton and Calgary." What can be the rationale to take that out, that mandatory consideration, and turn it into something that they may consider? Just because government thinks that that's the way things should be and they'll be able to gerrymander as they see fit. And "any other factors the Commission considers appropriate." That's a broad provision which was not there before. It would be helpful if government was to explain why they think that such a broad provision was needed instead of a set criteria that the commission was required to consider in redrawing the boundaries.

Those are the concerns that we have with this change. We are certainly and strongly opposed to government changing this criteria without providing any rationale whatsoever. At stake is our democracy, and I don't think we will let the UCP play games with it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Member Kayande: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. "Packing" and "cracking": these are terms that are unfamiliar in the Canadian context, but they're extremely – extremely – familiar in the United States. Both pairs of these words, "packing" and "cracking," relate to how governments in the United States are deciding to choose their voters rather than voters choosing the government. You would think in a democracy that it should be the voters who choose their government, yet there are ways to place their thumb on the scale that this government is using with this very, very poorly thought out Bill 31, or actually very well thought out for their purposes of denying basic, fundamental democracy.

4:40

It's extremely unfortunate that the previously mandatory requirement required to take into account municipal boundaries, especially in Calgary and Edmonton, is now simply a suggestion. While the Minister of Justice said, "Don't worry about it," this is, like, a commission that's actually going to do the dirty work of creating a map that is highly likely to result in the voters' views not being adequately taken into account. Even though somebody else, an independent commission, is going to do the work, we know that the members of that commission – three of them will be appointed by this government and two will be appointed by the Official Opposition.

So this is a scenario in which the government gets to choose its map and ultimately choose its voters, which is the purpose. Clearly, there is nothing in simply adding two seats for population growth. In fact, population growth does not require the addition of any seats at all. It merely requires a redistribution.

Given that two seats have been added, fine. It doesn't necessarily mean that the criteria for redrawing the map need to change. Previously one of the mandatory criteria was that city boundaries were to be respected. This matters, and over the last few decades, certainly starting with the arrival of impressively potent, very expensive data analytics by elections consultants in the United States – and I'm not saying that these are Republican or Democrat. The Democrats gerrymander in their states, and the Republicans gerrymander in their states.

The result of this constant battle, this ever-escalating battle of gerrymandering, means that the number of contentious, competitive seats in the U.S. House of Representatives – the U.S. House of Representatives has 435 voting members. Of them, the number of competitive seats in this last election cycle was 42 according to the *Cook Political Report*. Less than 10 per cent of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives were competitive. A big reason for that is this competitive gerrymandering effort that has completely taken sway and means that the voters' right to be heard is getting pulled away from them. It's getting cut away.

In Canada we've been fortunate. In Canada we have had norms, democratic norms in which elections are supposed to be fair. Elections are supposed to reflect the will of the people, and when elections represent the will of the people, that means that governments end up respecting the will of the people. Where elections are not as free and fair as they are here such as in the United States, what happens is you end up with an environment in which various different governments and political parties make outreach to their core supporters as being the highest responsibility, the thing that they're always focused on. If you followed the course of Alberta politics over the last year, it would not be surprising, maybe, that with this kind of change in the works, this is, in fact, a government that has decided to focus on a very, very small number of Albertans in order to hold power, for what purpose I do not understand.

We are in an affordability crisis, and in an atmosphere of free and fair elections in which voters have the say, the government would be treating the affordability crisis as an actual crisis. Yet this government has done nothing. It has done nothing to reduce housing costs. It's done nothing on the cost of groceries. It, in fact, is going to raise the price of auto insurance, making everyone's affordability crisis all that much worse. How can this government be so confident that it will be re-elected in 2027 with an agenda that proposes nothing and, in fact, makes life worse for all Albertans? The answer is this bill; it is packing and cracking.

Let me explain what that is. The city of Austin in Texas is a perfect example of this approach at work. In the United States, in Texas, it is not necessary to manage to keep election boundaries to within city limits, so for many, many, many years the city of Austin incorporated a hinterland of people who voted in a very different way than the people of Austin do. By diluting a particular vote by drawing very strange boundary configurations, it was possible to create districts in and around Austin, federal districts – these are very large districts of half a million people – that will reliably vote for one party over another.

Then Austin grew, and it grew bigger and its vote more concentrated into one political party. So when the districts for Austin were cracked into many other districts, when the vote of Austin was cracked, it led to, like, a particular result. And then when that government is still in power, it found that it was no longer able to generate the kinds of

margins that they wanted to generate to feel comfortable that they would always win every election in this area.

So then what they did was that they packed Austin; they created one or two districts that were very reliably for the other party to make sure that everything around would stay reliably with the one party. I'm not mentioning who the parties were because it doesn't matter. This is a principle that has been employed by many governments of all stripes, Democrat and Republican, throughout the United States. What that means is that the Americans' voice is not heard.

The core principle here – now, here's some good news. Because this has been going on for so long, folks who are very smart in mathematics and statistics have taken a look at this problem. It has traditionally been seen as very hard to identify what a partisan gerrymander actually looks like. It's basically followed the rule of "I'll know it when I see it," which is what a Supreme Court justice said about various different art forms. The issue here is that we have gone beyond "I'll know it when I see it" because there are actually statistical methodologies that can now be used to determine whether this algorithm of packing and cracking, of creating gerrymandered districts, is actually being employed.

One of them is that if the vote share in the overall region in the province of Alberta is to change, does that mean that the number of representatives for each party also changes? It's a good test that can be used, and this test has been accepted by courts in the United States. Another has been to evaluate the vote margin in every single seat. When packing and cracking has been employed, when massive partisan gerrymandering has occurred, there are patterns in the data that show, when you put one riding next to another, exactly what is going on. What you end up seeing is that, rather than a smooth curve of ridings going from, you know, very conservative to very progressive, from very UCP to very NDP, as we tend to see in this map, NDP ridings would become substantially more NDP leaning. What that would mean ultimately is that by packing voters of one party into specific and reliable vote blocks, what that does is that it distributes the Conservative vote across many, many, many other ridings that enable them to more reliably form government and, by the way, completely invalidate the voice of the people.

4:50

This is a massive, massive democratic threat. If we believe that democracy is the best form of government for all of us, if we believe that democracy and capitalism are the core of our success in our society, that first piece of it, that importance of democracy, cannot be taken for granted. Unfortunately, what Bill 31 does is that it makes it all the more likely that partisan gerrymandering is coming to Canada that will over time make our democracy worse.

This should be an issue irrespective of parties, irrespective of who is the government, irrespective of who sits in a particular chair. How we elect our representatives is so incredibly foundational to our democracy and, as we are finding more and more, the process of how we elect our representative is built on democratic norms, on ideas just on, like, the way things are done, that are not written down.

I myself in Calgary-Elbow have an incredibly good example of how this played out in real life. You see, on October 11, 2022, Danielle Smith – apologies, apologies, apologies. Names; apologies. The Premier was sworn in on October 11, 2022 – my apologies, Mr. Speaker – as the Premier, and October 9 of 2022 she was elected the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat. In that time period there was another riding that did not have a member. There was another riding where a by-election should have been called given that there was a riding for which a by-election had been called.

Member Irwin: Which one?

Member Kayande: The Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has asked me which riding that was. That riding was Calgary-Elbow. I bring this up because it's an example of how violating democratic norms can still meet the letter of the law and how this is a government that has chosen, when it is possible and available to protect democracy, not to.

As a result, the people of Calgary-Elbow were unrepresented for a great deal of time, up until the next election call in May 2023, at which time – congratulations – the voters of Calgary-Elbow brought me here, for which I am truly, truly grateful. We have seen an example touching me in which this government has completely violated any norm, completely violated the culture of this House, and this bill is creating another outlet for that very same thing to happen.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Any others wishing to speak? I'll recognize the Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak to Bill 31, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. This is a bill that doesn't come as a huge shock that this topic is up for consideration because we know that every two election cycles in Alberta we update electoral boundaries. The primary reason why we should be updating them is to ensure fair and adequate representation because a lot changes in eight years. We see that population in some areas increases and in others decreases, and ensuring that we have fair representation and boundaries that reflect where we're at but also where we're going, I think, is important and timely.

Many of you, I know, were at the Alberta School Boards Association breakfast with MLAs this morning, and of course if you had a chance to work the room and talk to folks around the room, population growth in the urban centres was raised as probably their number one issue because they don't have enough capacity to be able to serve students in their existing buildings. If you chatted with some of the trustees representing rural areas, many of them talked about declining enrolment being a significant issue that they're facing in their communities. Wanting to ensure that they can continue to provide quality, adequate public education opportunities for students who live in their regions was really important to them. I imagine you probably started your day hearing about increased enrolment growth pressures or decreasing enrolment pressures and how those impact folks throughout the province.

I am going to continue a bit on that thread here today because it clearly relates to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, which is probably the main area of amendment that I'm going to speak to here today at second reading, and I may have more to say about other sections of the bill at a later date.

This is the piece of the bill that is creating the biggest opportunities for gerrymandering. I talk often about my work with the nieces and nephews in my life, and I remember one of them asking me about gerrymandering and what that meant when we were talking about some of the things that we do in the Legislature and some of the different types of work we do here around bills. It's a funny word, right? It's, you know, a conjunction of a person's name and an animal.

Elbridge Gerry was the vice-president of the United States, but before that he was the governor of Massachusetts. In 1812 he changed electoral boundaries in a Boston riding. If you squinted at the map, it looked kind of like a salamander, and everyone knew that it was an obscure shape for an electoral riding, that it made no sense. You can find it on the Internet if you google gerrymander Boston, the original gerrymandering. There's a head and there's a tail and there are these weird little limbs sticking down. Like, it does

not look like a riding that follows natural boundaries of, you know, geographic boundaries like rivers or mountain ranges or now significant roadways or waterways. It's clearly a map that was created to ensure that one party would be able to manipulate what was happening in that specific riding and some of the surrounding ones to line themselves up with a better outcome after the election in Massachusetts by the former governor. So this is his legacy.

Again, I say this because I think it's important for us to have integrity in our electoral process to ensure – oh, another thing that I did not expect. Usually when you meet with folks at the Alberta School Boards Association, they raise things like class sizes, funding, autonomy, the ability to be able to address their capital needs. They definitely raise those, but they also raise things like electronic voting and that the current government is going to download costs onto a number of those school boards to have paper ballots that get counted, often multiple times because matching up the count is more difficult.

If anyone wants an example – they also raise this. You know, I trained as a high school math teacher. You do multiple-choice tests. You run them through the Scantron because they are faster and more consistent in marking, and then you can spot-check because you keep those tests later to go back and confirm that the data makes sense, but the original count is done by Scantron, just like they can be for election voting. This was something that they brought up because they're going to have to carry these increased electoral costs because of government changes that have already been made.

But back to gerrymandering. The section of the bill that is the most problematic, in my read, and could lead to this outcome much more easily than the current legislation we have that is governing elections in this province – and we all got here, so I think we all believed in the integrity of the electoral process when we were elected.

5:00

Under what is being proposed as section 14 – I'm going to reference the original section 14, and specifically, it reads:

In determining the area to be included in and in fixing the boundaries of the proposed electoral divisions, the Commission, subject to section 15, may take into consideration any factors it considers appropriate, but shall take into consideration

and then there are a number of different criteria, and I will go into some of those, but the importance and the distinction between “may” and “shall” is by design and intention.

If your child says to you: “It's time for supper. I'm really excited. What's for dinner?” and you say, “Well, you shall have some vegetables, but you may have dessert and a whole bunch of other things as well,” the conditions are very clear. You shall have this thing that's been predetermined, but you can choose to add other things to round out your meal in a way that works for you. That's the way the legislation currently reads, and the proposal from the government, from the Justice minister on behalf of the government and the Premier is to instead say in that section:

In determining the area to be included in and in fixing the boundaries of the proposed electoral divisions, the Commission, subject to section 15 shall take into consideration the requirement for effective representation as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, . . .

Fine.

. . . and in doing so may take into consideration all the things that used to be “shall.” So let me explain to you what some of those are.

- (a) the requirement for effective representation as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The government believes that one must be a “shall.” That’s the most important thing by the government, that one stay a “shall,” but other things that used to be in the bill were things like:

- (b) sparsity and density of population.

That used to be a requirement. Now the government is saying that the commission can look at sparsity, density – oh – and they added rate of growth of the population. You might want to possibly, maybe consider this; not exactly legal language that we’re used to seeing in bills.

You know, often when students come, they have a little session on how an idea becomes a bill, becomes a law. Usually a law is seen to have teeth, and the government is significantly watering this down with the “may” language as opposed to “shall” language.

The third one, currently

- (c) common community interests and community organizations, including those of Indian reserves and Metis settlements.

Section (c) now becomes

- (b) communities of interest, including municipalities, regional and rural communities, Indian reserves and Metis settlements.

Again, before it was important that they must take this into consideration, that you not cut a First Nation in half and maybe have half in one riding and half in another riding, that you take this into consideration, “including municipalities, regional and rural communities.” I will say, having been somebody who grew up in Big Lakes county, that making sure that those regional communities of interest are considered in consolidation is something that currently is under the law but again, will be something that they might possibly, maybe, kind of want to look at, not a requirement for the Electoral Boundaries Commission, which I think is a huge disservice to many groups that already often feel underrepresented. Not guaranteeing that common communities of interest will be kept together, I think is a significant problem.

Again, I want to say that it’s a “shall take into consideration,” which means that they must consider it. That doesn’t mean that they always have to follow it.

Let’s go to the next one.

- (d) wherever possible, the existing community boundaries within the cities of Edmonton and Calgary.

Well, they just took that out altogether. So right now, we say, “wherever possible,” which means that there can be exceptions, but the norm should be that the two big cities have ridings that are contained to the two big cities, that they not be straddling into outlying areas or communities.

Let me say why I think this is an important piece and why I am very frustrated that the government doesn’t seem to understand that or respect that. In the city of Edmonton, we know that every single riding is currently represented by one political party, and in Calgary the majority of the ridings are also represented by that one party. For the government to say, “well, maybe we’ll possibly consider creating ridings that don’t have to take into consideration that somebody lives in that specific city,” it says to people in other communities that their voice and their autonomy to be represented by people in their region who live in the same municipality as them will be kept whole wherever possible. It doesn’t even acknowledge that is something that needs to be considered.

The fact that the government already watered down the language by taking out “shall” and putting in “may,” which, again, you can drive a truck through, but then that they specifically took out the boundaries within the cities of the two largest municipalities, feels very clearly like an attempt to lay the conditions for gerrymandering.

- (e) wherever possible, the existing municipal boundaries.

Again, not even in here. Oh. Municipal, regional, and rural communities but municipal boundaries removed, item (e), from this piece of legislation.

They do still have in, but, again, now watered down to “may,” geographic features. It used to say

- (g) geographical features, including existing road systems.

Now it just says geographic features.

Well, again, I will say that when you must take into consideration, that doesn’t mean that you can’t straddle a specific road. It means that it’s possible to acknowledge that there are some major physical barriers that change the way people engage in their communities and in our province, that those be taken into consideration.

For example, when I was with Edmonton public schools and we had to redo the boundaries there as well, it was important to us that we look at how families navigate within the city to get to eventually a high school. Of course, there are fewer high schools than there are elementaries and junior high schools in the city. We tried to look at the way families commute so that the people who were elected could represent the people in that geographic area that had like interests. If your kid goes to Jackson Heights and eventually goes to McNally, it’s important to try to have those communities of like interest be together.

The government also moved over from “shall” to “may.”

- (h) the desirability of understandable and clear boundaries.

Again, why wouldn’t we want understandable and clear boundaries to be a “must” rather than a “may” piece? Then, of course, they added an additional piece at the end, which was kind of in the beginning before. The only thing that was a “may” previously was “may take into consideration any factors it considers appropriate,” and the government has put that in the list among everything else, basically saying that sparsity, density, and rate of growth of the population is the equivalent to anything else that this group chooses to say is important to them.

This is one of the weakest pieces of legislation, in terms of its clarity, to the people that it is intended to govern, that I have seen in this House. Our job as electors in our representative democracy is to give clear and understandable direction to the people that are receiving the laws that we pass in this place. It absolutely is being set up for a very clear intent to gerrymander. Mr. Speaker, that is of grave concern to me for a number of reasons. The biggest is that I want to be able to say to everyone that we have great integrity in our electoral process, that our electoral map makes sense, that we ensure that there is strong opportunity for representative democracy in this province that takes communities of like interest and keeps them whole and doesn’t try to water them down.

I will say that some of my colleagues grew up in the suburbs. I didn’t; again, I grew up in a small town. If my small town was part of an obscure map that included a large city, it would not feel like common interests in terms of how that map was drawn, and a number of folks who grew up in the suburbs would not want a map that’s obscure and that waters down their regional voice as well. I will say that I know my colleague from Sherwood Park is very proud to be from Sherwood Park and to represent Sherwood Park, and if it was an Edmonton- Sherwood Park riding, I worry that it wouldn’t enable everyone to have the opportunity to be able to realize the integrity of that map. And I’m sure it’s the same for members on the other side of the House. We have Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. Certainly, it has a distinct community.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Are there other members wishing to speak? The Government Deputy House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s been a terrific and substantive debate on the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2024,

and I move that we adjourn debate on this bill, planning to bring it back again later.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 34 Access to Information Act

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

5:10

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move second reading of Bill 34, the Access to Information Act.

This act, along with Bill 33, the Protection of Privacy Act, would replace the old Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, or FOIP.

Updating Alberta's FOIP Act to align with modern realities is long overdue. The FOIP Act came into force back in 1995. That was the time before the commercialization of the Internet, before smart phones, cloud storage, and social media. So just to put that in perspective, Mr. Speaker, when we first came out with FOIP three decades ago, you might have read about it on Windows 95. That was at a time when we could not have foreseen things like Google, or cloud computing, or social media, so it was time to modernize this legislation.

Our digital environment has changed dramatically over the past few decades and while the world has moved on, our legislation has not. Albertans have made it clear that it's time to update these laws to align with today's realities. As our world has shifted from paper to digital so have our expectations for access to information. We recognize that Albertans want a system that reflects these modern needs.

Despite the emphasis on change and modernization, I want to assure members that we remain true to the principles of the FOIP Act. Although many changes are being made, much of the FOIP Act remains intact within the new Access to Information Act. The Access to Information Act will replace Part 1: Freedom of Information of the FOIP Act and will clarify the rules under which people can access records from the government and other public bodies. As a distinct act, Bill 34 would ensure government gives access to information the attention it deserves and stay nimble to adapt to future developments.

The proposed legislation will update definitions such as recognizing electronic records, update timelines and processes for responding to requests, and clarify the ability for public bodies to proactively release information. This means a more straightforward, transparent, and responsive process for accessing public information.

[The Speaker in the chair]

The legislation would improve Albertans' ability to understand what, how, and when they can access government records.

A key feature of this legislation is that it empowers public bodies to proactively disclose information. In other words, Albertans would be able to receive more information without having to go through a lengthy access request process. The government of Alberta already proactively discloses a lot of government information, including ministerial office expenses, sole source contracts, and a variety of data sets and publications on the open government portal. But existing legislation has not always been clear how that can be done while respecting the requirements in the act.

The new legislation would make it clear that public bodies can proactively disclose information outside of a formal FOIP request, subject to certain conditions such as ensuring records do not contain

personal information. And this is important because we know that there are certain public bodies that are going to get the same FOIP request over and over. So if we know that, why would we make Albertans pay \$25, or whatever the fee is, and make them wait 30 days to receive it? Mr. Speaker, let's just proactively disclose this information and make life better for Albertans because we know that when we promote openness and when we promote transparency, we're promoting better government, and that's what we support.

The act would also better define cabinet confidentiality and streamline processes in a way that allows government officials to focus on good governance. With respect to confidentiality, many of the changes in Bill 34 clarify existing rules or formalize what was being done in practice already. Cabinet records or information revealing deliberations of cabinet would be withheld.

As an elected official, I can tell you that frank, robust discussions at the cabinet table are key to the decision-making process. You have to look at an issue from a 360-degree perspective. That means making sure that all points of view are heard, even the ones that you don't want to hear, and sometimes saying the things that need to be said. Sometimes you get sent back to the drawing board and that's okay. That's a good thing. The point is, without cabinet confidentiality you're not going to have that exhaustive level of deliberation if members are concerned that their conversations and decision-making materials may be disclosed. In fact, the Supreme Court of Canada has recognized cabinet confidentiality as being essential to good government. Records subject to solicitor-client privilege, such as a legal opinion pertaining to a potential policy, would also be withheld.

On a related matter, there has been some confusion in the past as to whether the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner can force public bodies to turn over privileged records as part of an OIPC investigation. The proposed legislation makes it clear that the OIPC cannot compel records that are subject to cabinet confidence or legal privilege. Only the courts can do that. Now, that said, we also recognize that the OIPC requires some assurance of transparency and good judgment. As such, an attestation for cabinet records will be outlined in regulation. It is a process that would be provided to the OIPC to help the commissioner confirm that the exception was correctly applied.

At the heart of it the proposed legislation strikes the balance between Albertans' desire to quickly access government information and the confidentiality required to deliver good and effective governance to the people. I would also add that some of these legislative changes will make it easier for the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner to do its job. For example, the OIPC would have more latitude to require public bodies to address complaints and dismiss complaints that lack sufficient grounds. Currently the OIPC must investigate every complaint that it receives, and that's a drain on their resources.

The act would also provide clear timelines for the commissioner to conclude an inquiry. The proposed legislation would allow public bodies to extend processing timelines for access requests during emergencies. This change would allow public bodies to focus on more urgent tasks related to emergency management and public safety while still addressing access requests in a timely manner once the crisis has passed.

Let's take a look at what's happening in other jurisdictions. Alberta is not alone in updating its legislation. In fact, we're a little bit late to the party. In 2019 a joint resolution from Information and Privacy Commissioners across Canada urged all provinces and territories to update their access and privacy legislation. The resolution recognized the same digital realities that I alluded to earlier and reinforced the notion that legislation

needed to be updated across the land to align with those realities. Since then all other provinces and territories have updated their laws except Alberta. So, yes, Mr. Speaker, we took a little longer to do it, but it was important to get it done right, and that's what we've done.

Now, although access to information legislation varies from province to province, they are all built on the same principle of ensuring that the public has a right of access to records in the custody or under the control of a public body, subject to specific and limited exemptions. Alberta's approach of a stand-alone access to information legislation sets us apart from other provincial governments and aligns with the federal approach.

The introduction of Bill 34 is a big step forward. The proposed changes would protect Albertans' right to information and the confidentiality that's required to ensure good decision-making and effective governance. With the introduction of this bill, we are doing more than catching up. With mandatory review of the act every six years, we are setting the stage for the continued evolution of access to information in Alberta. Updating the legislation is only the first step. Further clarity would be provided in the spring, when we expect to bring forward supportive regulations. Information and resources would be shared at that time to help public bodies learn about and align with the new requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans want access, transparency, and accountability. They want to be able to understand the rules, and they want to be treated fairly. I believe that Bill 34 achieves those outcomes, and I look forward to debating the bill in the House. I invite the support of the House to give second reading to Bill 34.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is second reading of Bill 34, the Access to Information Act. Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 34 is a fairly technical piece of legislation, and I don't think anybody is better off listening to the minister explain this.

5:20

I will try to talk about this bill. The minister claimed that it will protect Albertans' right to information. The minister claimed that it will improve access, transparency, and accountability. Nothing can be further from the truth. We do understand that access to information, FOIP, needed changes, needed upgrades with modern realities. Again, the minister mentioned Google Cloud. Again, it has nothing to do with Google Cloud whatsoever.

It has everything to do with the records that government public bodies have in their possession and making sure that Albertans have access to those documents. It's an important feature of democratic governments, transparent democratic governments, accountable democratic governments. When it comes to this government's record, in 2020 the Canadian Association of Journalists gave this government an award: the code of silence award for outstanding achievement in government secrecy. That was the award that was given to the UCP government in 2020.

We thought that they might have learned something, that they might try to do something to fix that FOIP, Access to Information Act, and try to make information more accessible, but that's not happening in this bill. In fact, there is academic literature, there are recommendations and writings of Information and Privacy Commissioners in Alberta and across Canada, that whenever there

are exceptions to access to information, this should be narrow. This should be limited. That's the principle.

What this bill is doing is that they are expanding those exceptions. They are expanding those exceptions in many ways. For instance, prior to these changes the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner had the ability to ask for cabinet records other than legally privileged documents, but now I think the government will make sure that nobody has access to that. Not only that; they are blocking access to legally privileged information or advice.

They added another restriction, a very interesting one, Mr. Speaker, that even background factual information cannot be FOIPed. I don't know what can be the reason, if government uses their own facts, that they are so afraid to share with Albertans, but they are even creating that exception there.

Then they are also creating an exception for documents under the custody and control of prosecutors. Previously I think those documents were not FOIPable for a certain period of time, but after 10 years they were certainly FOIPable. The government is making it more difficult to access that information.

Then they are creating another exception, a really broad one, that any record of communication between political staff and members of Executive Council, a long list there – they left it to the regulations, how they will define political staff.

So the government, through this bill, is insulating itself from any kind of access to their records. They are not making information accessible.

If anyone has read this bill, they would see it for themselves. They are saying that they're making access better. The previous legislation has a section which says that government must provide records within 30 days; the government changed it to 30 business days. That change alone adds another 15 days to that process. Clearly, the government has no intention of making information more accessible to Albertans.

Then in section 7 they are also adding another interesting provision. If anybody is following, I am on section 7(3). They are saying that if a request for information to a public body is too cumbersome, if they can't find that information in a reasonable time or reasonable effort, I think they can either ask for another 30-day extension, another delay, and section 9 also gives them power to disregard that request just because they think that it will take more than reasonable time or effort.

So now the test for the government body to provide information is reasonable time and effort. Before that power to disregard requests was vested in the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner; now the head of a public body will decide whether they want to process a request or not. This is government making access to information harder and difficult and not easier by any stretch.

Similarly, there are now provisions for extending the time limit for responding. Now that's also just within the purview of the public body who has been asked for that information; before the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner was involved in that process as well. Then they are adding a few other things; for instance, that "the head of a public body may refuse to disclose information to an applicant if the disclosure could reasonably be expected to interfere with, prejudice or otherwise harm a workplace investigation." A workplace investigation is not defined in this act or anywhere else, so it's not clear what information the government is trying to withhold and for what reason.

Then cabinet and Treasury Board confidences, that were already protected as necessary. I do understand that certain things should be protected for good governance, good decision-making, but here we have a government that is even refusing to share the factual information that cabinet relies on to make a decision. Unless they

get their facts manufactured somewhere that they don't want to share with Albertans, I don't think that facts should ever be in dispute. I don't think that there is any logical reason to restrict that information from Albertans.

5:30

This is a government that is hell bent on insulating themselves from any kind of accountability. That's what this provision is doing for this government. This test, for instance, that reasonable effort and time now will be used by the public bodies to determine whether they should make some information available to the public or not: every time a public body thinks that it's not within that reasonable time and effort, they would be able to refuse information without any oversight from the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner.

This bill is interfering with Albertans' right to access information in a huge way. It will make it even worse than where it stands now, far worse. They will not have any access. Nobody will have any access to cabinet documents, whether they are privileged or not, whether they are factual, whether they are advice or not. It will also put an end to access to prosecutors' records, that were available after 10 years and were used in many academic writings to improve the criminal justice system or the justice system in general. Same thing with cabinet confidentiality. Sure, as I said, there are things that needed to be protected, but for the most part I think not everything is confidential. Albertans have a right to know how decisions are made.

The difference between democracy and other regimes is that people who are making decisions: they are accountable. They make sure that their decision-making is transparent. That's what differentiates democracy from other kinds of regimes. But with this kind of secrecy I think the government is moving in the wrong direction. The government is moving in a direction that is away from democracy and democratic, transparent decision-making. That is dangerous for people's right to access information, not just people's right to access information but to the institution of government and democracy itself.

I urge all members of this House to take time to read this bill. I'm sure the minister was handed some notes, but that has nothing to do with the actual provisions of the bill. The actual bill completely says otherwise. It completely erodes access to information. It erodes transparency. It erodes accountability. It creates a new test even to access information, reasonable time and effort, and that will be determined by the head of a public body, not by the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner.

If government really wanted to be transparent, if they really want Albertans to believe that this bill is about their access to information, they could have implemented any one of the recommendations of the former Information and Privacy Commissioner. There were a number of recommendations that were made by the former commissioner. For instance, one of the recommendations was that they should include those entities, provincial entities who are provincially publicly funded, within the purview of this freedom to access information.

But what we have seen from this government is that they created the energy war room, gave \$120 million over four years to that entity to steal logos from other companies, to chase cartoons and make headlines and international embarrassment for the province of Alberta. In four years I didn't once see the energy war room making headlines for any legitimate reason other than that they were caught copying something, they were going after cartoon movies, or something along those lines.

That \$120 million, Mr. Speaker, nobody has any access to. Those were public funds, but no one had access to the records of that

entity. The public was paying for it. On top of that, the government put a failed UCP candidate in charge of that entity. That's the record of this government when it comes to access to information. What they could have done with this bill is that they could have included that entity, mentioned that entity and that Albertans will now have access to the information of that entity, which was funded publicly by Albertans.

In short, Mr. Speaker, this bill is a terrible piece of legislation. I urge the minister and all members of this Legislature to read this bill. This bill will make access to information difficult. This will make government more secretive. This will damage people's right to access to information. This will damage the system of governance, the institution of democracy, and this bill should not be passed in this House under any circumstances.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak to Bill 34, the Access to Information Act. I am opposed to this act as it is currently written, and the reason is that I tend to agree with my colleague that it makes access to information more difficult.

FOIP is an important feature of democracy that promotes transparency and accountability. Why is this idea important? Well, we're all here elected to serve the people of Alberta. We all also represent people who didn't vote for us, and our responsibility as MLAs is to represent all of the people in our constituency. People need to know that their government is doing their job and doing what they said they were going to do to serve them. FOIP as a process really ensures that public bodies are open and accountable, and that openness and accountability is essential to democracy. It's what gives our constituents the ability to ask us questions about what we're doing, and it provides the legislative framework that requires us to provide those answers.

When I'm spending time in Banff-Kananaskis, in my amazing riding, which is definitely the prettiest riding in the province – just testing to see if the members opposite are listening, Mr. Speaker, just testing – I'm often told by my constituents that I'm an unusual politician because I'm up front, honest, and authentic. They're surprised by this, and that makes me a little bit sad. I think that's a reflection of the state of our politics today, that people don't often think politicians are being open, honest, authentic, and transparent. But we should strive to have those characteristics. We should be the poster children for these attributes because we are elected, and in that we need to be accountable.

5:40

But this act makes changes to FOIP that make it harder for Albertans to get the information to hold us accountable. It's a self-serving act by this UCP government to make information about government decisions less accessible, and that is not good. I mean, I can think of lots of other words to describe it, but I'll just stick with "not good" for now.

This legislation expands cabinet confidentiality to include messages between ministers and political staff, but it doesn't really define who political staff are or what this means. I'm imagining a FOIP request for information. If, say, a minister's chief of staff is copied on that e-mail, would that e-mail then not be included in information provided to the public because a chief of staff is copied? What about a deputy minister or an assistant deputy minister? I imagine there are a plethora of communications that include a minister or his or her chief of staff and a DM and an ADM. The content of those e-mails or those conversations may be of

interest to the public. That does not necessarily include cabinet confidentiality for me. So I question how this act will be applied and what that actually means for people who are seeking additional information from a minister's office in ways that maybe don't violate cabinet confidentiality.

Either way, regardless of how this transpires and what it ends up meaning in its implementation, it reduces the amount of information that people will be able to get, and there isn't a clear justification as to why. For me that's just really disappointing because people have a right to ask us questions and we have a responsibility to give them answers. It makes people question what this government has to hide. I think there are already issues with people trusting this government. I think there are issues with people trusting politics and politicians in general, and this act doesn't help us move towards a space where the public can trust us as politicians and trust this government to serve them. But, you know, it's not the first time that this government has passed pieces of legislation that don't foster transparency and accountability with Albertans.

FOIP requests have definitely increased over the last few years, and this increase in FOIP requests means there's more staff time required to review them, more administrative time required to get that information out, and it's a lot of work on both sides of the equation, Mr. Speaker. As somebody who is fairly new to this political world, I have been a person who has submitted FOIP requests and received the thousands of pages of documents that I then had to sift through to look for the information that I was

looking for. It's not something that people go into thinking it's going to be easy. It creates a lot of work for everybody.

FOIP requests can take a long time to receive, and of course they take a long time to go through. But the solution for this is not to reduce or make it harder for people to have FOIP requests succeed or go through the system. The solution is to be more transparent up front so that people don't need to submit requests in terms of FOIP in the first place. That we have a government that is transparent and accountable and honest and authentic just in the way that they do business: that is what we need in FOIP.

With that, I think I'll take my pause. Thank you.

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

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After this very substantive and thoughtful debate on the Access to Information Act I move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With this substantive contribution to the democratic endeavour this afternoon, I move that we adjourn the Assembly until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow, Wednesday, November 20.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:45 p.m.]

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