



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, April 24, 2024

Day 44

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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Party standings:

United Conservative: 48

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 24, 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.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, it's my great pleasure to introduce to all members of the Assembly Master Corporal Walter Bayrock, who's seated in the Speaker's gallery today. Master Corporal Bayrock joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 2018 as a reserve human resource administrator. Walter quickly advanced through the ranks, being appointed master corporal in December 2023. Master Corporal Bayrock has served at 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron for more than six years with exemplary service. Master Corporal Bayrock was awarded Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II platinum jubilee Alberta. I ask that you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. [Standing ovation]

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has a school group today.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you two classes from the fantastic Aldergrove school in my constituency of Edmonton-McClung. I ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ms Goehring: Mr. Speaker, I would like to introduce to you and through you Janice Thistle, Debbie Lavoie, Marg Haughstead, Jeanne Randell. These women are from the Canadian Armed Forces women's corps 7415, the first women in Canadian Forces to undergo the same recruit training as men, and they are celebrating their 50th anniversary this year. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to rise today and introduce to you and through you leaders and board members from the Alberta Gujarati Association headed by their president, Mr. Brijesh Patel. I'm proud to share with you that the AGA was established 45 years ago by the first-generation Gujaratis from India. I ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Chamber.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Zoe Harveen Kaur Sihota, a Calgary-based artist. Her vibrant work educates, empowers, and celebrates the South Asian community, including the Calgary Flames logo for their first-ever South Asian celebration game. I ask that Zoe rise to receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the military liaison I would like to reintroduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my esteemed guest, Master Corporal Walter Bayrock and his father, Terrence. He joins us here today from 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron. I would like them to again rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As part of the distinguished delegation I introduce to you and through you past president Mr. Bharat Zilka of the Alberta Gujarati Association, which has been serving for 45 years. I ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my delight to rise and present to you and through you my son Luke Johnson, my daughter Abigail Johnson, and friend Alyssa de Gier. Please rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you members of the Insurance Brokers Association of Alberta who play a vital role in our community, providing essential services and expertise in insurance matters. Their work ensures our citizens are well protected and informed. I ask that they please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has a statement to make.

Home Construction

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to rise today and speak on the incredible progress our government is seeing in building more homes for Albertans. The driving force behind the rising cost of homes in our province is a lack of supply. That is why we have been focused on getting shovels in the ground and getting more homes built faster, both attainable market homes and affordable homes for vulnerable members of our community and low-income Albertans. By focusing on cutting red tape and adding critical elements of predictability, our government has made it easier for our housing partners to build homes.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to say that the hard work our government is doing is delivering results. According to a recent report from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation this March our province has seen record growth in new homes. We are seeing 3,122 new homes being built across our province, an increase of over 50 per cent from last year. This brings us to a total of nearly 10,000 new homes so far in 2024 compared to the 6,200 new homes we saw at the same time last year, and we haven't even hit the peak construction season.

At the same time we have also seen record growth in new rental homes. In the last three years alone our province has gotten shovels in the ground on more new purpose-built rentals than in the 15 years before combined. This is important, and we're just getting started, Mr. Speaker.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has recently reported Alberta and prairie provinces are expected to continue doing well, citing our affordable home prices and strong economic outlook. That's thanks to the great work our government has been doing. Our province is leading the way in getting homes built faster. We will make sure that Alberta remains the best province to live, work, and raise a family, and the first step towards this is making sure that the dream of home ownership remains achievable for generations to come.

Thank you.

Women in the Canadian Armed Forces

Ms Goehring: I'm honoured to speak today to recognize the women of the Canadian Armed Forces women's corps 7415, the first women in Canadian Forces history to undergo the same recruit training as men, who are celebrating their 50th anniversary this year. Women have contributed to Canada's military service for more than 100 years, but they have only been fully integrated into all roles for just over 20. Throughout the '90s the introduction of women into the combat arms doubled the potential recruiting pool, allowing all Canadians to serve their country to the best of their abilities.

The women of corps 7415 said that being a woman in a male-dominated workforce was difficult, so difficult that some had no choice but to leave. Despite the many barriers they faced, they were 57 strong by graduation, led by two female corporals. Member Gail Toupin became the first female SkyHawk and had her first jump in 1978 in Edmonton. Some of the group members' other historic firsts include the first woman to be stationed on 415 flying squadron, the first supply to earn her airborne jump wings, and the first women-only guard of honour for Ontario's first female Lieutenant Governor, whose members had to fight for the right as women to wear the wedge cap.

Today women and nonbinary folks can enrol in any CAF occupation and serve in any environment. That change would not be possible without the sacrifice of the women of corps 7415 and the many women who bravely followed in their footsteps, breaking new barriers for each achievement.

There is a common narrative that in today's society feminism is no longer a necessary fight. These women serve as a reminder that the barriers women faced historically are part of Canada's very recent history. They serve as inspiration to continue that fight today to prove that women can excel in any and all spaces when given the opportunity. To the women of corps 7415, in honour of your 50th anniversary, thank you for your service, your bravery, and for breaking barriers for women across Canada. [Standing ovation]

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat is next.

1:40 Medicine Hat Mental Health Summits

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May 1 is an important day in the Medicine Hat region. It marks our third mental health summit. When the Canadian Mental Health Association of southeastern Alberta unfortunately closed last fall, it left a significant gap in mental health support for residents in my region. As the MLA I felt that it was crucial to quickly bring together the community of mental health service providers to discuss how we can collectively and collaboratively address these emerging gaps left behind. The meeting consisted of seven nonprofits in the city and became known as our first mental health summit. We identified several areas requiring attention, including suicide prevention services. As a result, Medicine Hat Family Service was awarded a contract to conduct a community scan to identify community needs around suicide prevention services and to assist the community in addressing this critical issue.

In February 2024 we hosted our second summit with a recovery support focus. We expanded again in the number of attendees and organizations, including the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction and the Premier. These conversations are critical to shaping a more comprehensive community-based approach.

Next week we are expanding the summit yet again to include more nonprofits and mental health professionals. The goal: collaborative continuation of identifying gaps and barriers to access the full spectrum and continuum of mental health supports that Hatters need and deserve. By bringing stakeholders together, we can remain responsive to the evolving mental health requirements of the region. I believe this model of hosting community mental health summits should be replicated by MLAs across our province.

Mental health is a complex issue that affects 1 in 5 Canadians, including my own family, as we lost my aunt to suicide. I'm proud that Medicine Hat is leading the way and setting an example for co-ordinated solution-focused leadership in this vital area.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has a statement to make.

Government Policies and Children

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I want to speak about our children. Alberta's children are our future. They are builders of tomorrow, the guardians of our shared legacy, and the heartbeat of our province. As government we are obligated to protect and uphold the rights of Alberta's children; to nurture their potential; and provide them with a safe, supportive environment so that they can thrive, grow, learn, and be the leaders of tomorrow.

It is clear to me and to the constituents across this province, Mr. Speaker, that the UCP government is incompetent and incapable of fulfilling this obligation and responsibility to our future leaders. UCP policies consistently undermine the well-being of Alberta's children, from cuts to education, health care, and neglecting the impacts of environmental degradation on their future. They have imposed barriers to opportunities, introduced divisive policies into schools, and continued to fail to listen to the self-identified needs of our children and our youth.

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the real threats to our children are not trans or gender-diverse children. The real threat to our children is a government that would rather politicize their identities than protect their fundamental human rights and well-being. The real threat is a government that fails to prioritize their education, their health, their safety, instead opting to focus on divisive issues for political gain.

We must stand up against harmful agendas and ensure that all children, regardless of their gender, their identity, their religion, their socioeconomic status, their cultural beliefs, receive the support and protection they deserve, whether they're in a small town, a big city, or on a First Nation. We know there are record numbers of children going to school on empty stomachs; there are record numbers of children dying in care. We know children are unable to participate in extracurricular activities because of the rising costs in this province. This government must do better.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka has a statement to make.

Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There's been much debate in this Chamber concerning mental health and addictions, and a renewed focus on these issues is certainly warranted at this time.

First, let's recognize all of the good work being done by the expert staff in our mental health system. These folks are making a real difference, saving lives in the face of a rising tide of desperation. We need to celebrate their successes and find inspiration in their efforts.

If we're looking for a true Alberta success story, I'd start with the Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury. The construction of this fine and first psychiatric hospital was officially announced April 19, 1907. Premier Alexander Rutherford personally inspected the site located near Ponoka, and its doors first opened in 1911. Built for 150 patients, the site also included homes for nurses and doctors as well as a water tower, a reservoir, and a farm that provided fresh produce for patients and staff. Over the years the centennial centre grew, adding new buildings and cutting-edge programs. Today the centre provides several services, including treatment specifically for opioid addiction as well as other severe addictions, acute mental health services, programs designed specifically for seniors, and even telepsychiatry services for underserved rural communities in Alberta. The site is also home to the Halvar Jonson Centre, which provides treatment and rehabilitation for complex brain injuries. It's believed every year about 5,000 Albertans suffer a head injury. Across Canada new cases of acquired brain injury are 30 times more common than breast cancer.

As this Assembly debates the best path forward, I ask that we recognize and thank these doctors and nurses on the front lines fighting this crisis in our communities. Please allow me to begin. To the expert staff at the centennial centre in Ponoka: Thank you. You matter, and your efforts are greatly appreciated. We can never thank you enough.

Provincial Pension Plan Proposal

Ms Phillips: Mr. Speaker, the UCP just can't seem to read the room. Before the election campaign the Premier promised she had no plans to gamble with Albertans' pensions and in the first week stated that it was not part of her campaign. Three months later, though, top priority. They released a report with laughable numbers that everyone immediately rejected as fanciful, unless you were employed by the Premier. They rolled out a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign, launched a panel, but Albertans were not buying it. Albertans signed up to the UCP panel to tell them to keep their hands off their retirements. They signed the NDP petition by the tens of thousands, they came out to NDP town halls by the thousands, and they told the government in surveys, e-mails, letters, phone calls to end this bad plan, but the government just isn't willing to listen.

The Finance minister and the Premier insist that they can still sell this bad idea. Since Albertans telling them no isn't working, there has to be some way that this government will get the message to drop their pension scheme. Skywriting? Morse code? Do they need to see it spelled out in the sky using fireworks? Do they need to see it on lawn signs across Alberta? Some of this might be far-fetched, but lawn signs are not. As long as this government is still fixated on gambling with Albertans' pensions, the NDP opposition will not stop defending Albertans' retirement security. Hands off our CPP: coming to a front lawn near you.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader has a notice of motion.

Mr. Schow: Indeed, I do, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide oral notice of Bill 20, the Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, sponsored by the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Electric Power System

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, after five years in office the UCP have taken our growing and diversifying energy grid and given Albertans brownouts, warnings about power usage, and higher electricity rates than in any other province. Our government's capacity market plan would have addressed both price volatility and supply shortages, but the UCP scrapped it. To the Premier: will she now admit that the UCP's fit of partisan pique and subsequent scrapping of the capacity market, without any plans ready to replace it, has driven Alberta into the mess we are now all experiencing?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What has driven us into the mess is an early phase-out of coal, which cost a minimum of \$4 billion, then the build of intermittent power of solar and wind, which requires backup, so you have to build the system twice, plus additional distribution and transmission charges, plus the fact that they never addressed the issue of local access fees charged by Calgary that were also inflating the cost of bills. Those are the reasons why we have the high power prices that we do right now and the uncertainty, and that's what we're going to fix.

Ms Notley: Well, a lot of those ideas were very fictional, Mr. Speaker.

The actions of that government led AESO to be accused of discriminatory and anticompetitive practices, blocking growth of the grid, and curtailing supply from intertie partners. All of this is allegedly costing Alberta electricity consumers billions of dollars per year. These claims are also supported by the Alberta Chambers of Commerce and the 22,000 businesses it represents. So to the Premier: why is she allowing this kind of chaos and discord to grow under her government's watch? It's been five years, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Smith: I find it amazing, Mr. Speaker, that the members opposite didn't fix any of the problems that they're now so passionately concerned about now. My Minister of Affordability and Utilities has made it very clear that we are going to be expanding all of our intertie capacity not only with British Columbia but also down south and in addition going east to our friends in Saskatchewan. So stay tuned. We look at this issue as all hands on deck. We need to build more baseload power, we need to create more certainty in the market, we need to bring more power on, and we need to do more interties.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not what they've been doing for five years, and all of the problems have actually been happening under their watch. The Market Surveillance Administrator is currently investigating Alberta's power grid. Other jurisdictions have found the right balance, but here major international investors question our competitive fairness. There are brownouts during the lowest demand time of the year, unexpected restrictions on power, and through it all electricity rates higher than any other province in the country. It wasn't that way when we were in charge. Again to the Premier: when will she stop pointing fingers and start fixing the problem?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, if we could turn back the clock, then perhaps the members opposite would have realized that they couldn't take baseload power off until they had baseload power available to replace it. That's the problem that we've been having,

that we have a lot of intermittent power. As we recall, when it gets to minus 35, there's zero solar and zero wind, and as a result we need to be able to bring on baseload natural gas. That's what we're building. We will have 2,700 new megawatts of natural gas power coming on this year, and that will help.

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

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, it was plus 20 when her natural gas power plants failed.

Health Care User Fees

Ms Notley: Anyway, this Premier is also on a mission to feed chaos in our public health care system so she can justify scrapping it. She'll deny it, but actions speak louder than words. A media report today revealed that the government has found 40 health clinics in Alberta charging membership fees for basic health care. This Premier claimed she'd shut down the very fees she once advocated for. Instead, we're looking at a 300 per cent increase. To the Premier: does her so-called crackdown on members-only medicine sound to her like it's been successful?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to correct the record: there was 900 megawatts of wind that didn't show up that day that we also had pressure on the grid.

What I will say about the investigation that we have done into the Marda Loop facility and others is that we wanted to get to the bottom of it. You'll recall that Marda Loop said that they were allowing people to pay a membership fee for access, faster access to insured services. You cannot do that. It is against the law. You cannot charge somebody for faster access to doctor services or to hospital services, and that is not happening in the province, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Notley: Her ministry says that there's a 300 per cent increase of that happening in the province.

As well, since coming to office, the UCP has ushered in motel medicine, hallway health care, and now 40 clinics spreading like weeds, making people pay. Members-only medicine means that those who can least afford it have to pay out of pocket for their health care. So to the Premier. Her Health minister promised she'd take action. Is the failure of her minister the result of incompetence, or was it always the UCP's plan to expand and grow members-only medicine?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has risen.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would invite the member opposite to read the Canada Health Act to know what is covered and what is not. What is covered are doctor services and hospital services. What is not covered are things like travel advice ... [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Smith: What is not covered and clinics are allowed to charge for are travel advice and immunizations, doctors' notes or letters, elective cosmetic surgery, physiotherapy, chiropractic services, nutrition services, some lab and diagnostic imaging services, and several other things. As long as these clinics are charging for the things that are allowed and not charging for the things that they can't charge for, we are fine with that.

Ms Notley: Well, that sounds like a heartfelt defence of a grey area that's going to make people pay for access.

In Alberta there's already a growing doctor shortage, medicentres closing all over the province, NICUs dangerously understaffed, and we're short hundreds and hundreds of hospital beds across the province. The Premier's response has been to cancel construction of a hospital, expand private surgical centres, and oversee and defend a 300 per cent increase in cash-for-access clinics. To the Premier: will she finally admit that two-tier, pay-as-you-go medicine has been her plan all along?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, no one is going to pay out of pocket for publicly funded health care, and that is access to doctor services and access to hospital services. On the issue of NICU we're watching it very, very closely. I'm pleased to report today – the members opposite keep trying to panic parents. We want parents to be assured that there are 69 spaces out of 327 open today, including 25 NICU beds available in Edmonton zone, 22 in Calgary zone, two in Red Deer, 13 in south zone, and seven in Grande Prairie.

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

Wage Growth and Cost of Living

Mr. Ip: Alberta is facing an affordability crisis, and instead of doing anything about it, this government has sat back while wages for Albertans have stagnated. Albertans know that their wages haven't kept up with how expensive everything is getting. The cost-of-living crisis in our province is real because the job-killing policies of the UCP are hurting, and Albertans can feel it. Albertans are hit with the highest inflation rate in the country. To the minister: why are Albertans not seeing wages keep up with the high cost of living?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, today the NDP criticized Alberta's wages. Alberta has the highest wages in the country. Today the NDP criticized Alberta's productivity. Alberta has the highest productivity in the country. And the NDP criticized ... [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Jones: The NDP criticized our policies, which they characterize as job-killing. Over the last six months 90 per cent of the private-sector jobs added in Canada were added where? In Alberta; 83,000 jobs over the last 12 months alone. Mr. Speaker, it's fortunate that the United Conservative government is representing Alberta because when it comes to Alberta, the NDP have nothing positive to say.

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, Albertans face skyrocketing rent prices and ever-increasing housing prices. People are paying huge utility bills and the most expensive electricity rates in Canada, high insurance rates, high cost of living. Statistics Canada has found we have completely stagnant wage growth. Government policy must focus on growing prosperity so that everyone can benefit from our economy, not just those with already deep pockets. Will the government acknowledge more must be done to help Albertans keep up?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, today the NDP also criticized the Alberta advantage. Alberta does have the highest wages in the country. We have the lowest taxes. Alberta has the best combination of opportunity, quality of life, and competitive cost of living in Canada. That's why we've seen over 200,000 people move to Alberta over the last 12 months. That's why 322 major projects representing over \$82 billion of investment are currently under construction. I ask again: can the NDP find something positive to say about Alberta?

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, it's about wages. Stagnant wages mean some families may not be able to buy healthy food because they can't afford it. Stagnant wage growth means students might have to take a semester off so they can afford textbooks. Stagnant wage growth means Albertans will have trouble keeping up with escalating mortgage payments or trouble finding an affordable place to rent thanks to skyrocketing prices. Why is this government not focused on getting down to governing, focusing on prosperity, and ensuring that everyday Albertans aren't struggling to get by?

Mr. Jones: Mr. Speaker, stagnant wages? That sounds like 2015 to 2019 under the NDP, when the members opposite cost us 183,000 jobs, tens of billions of investments. They literally told people to seek work in other provinces.

An Hon. Member: That's right.

Mr. Jones: Yes.

Their track record speaks for itself. We're going to keep managing the economy, and we recommend the NDP stick to other topics.

2:00

Primary Health Care

Dr. Metz: Over 800,000 Albertans have no access to a family doctor, so many are forced to rely on the emergency room or walk-in clinics. Medicentres in southwest Edmonton and northwest Edmonton are already closed, stating that, quote, the reimbursement from the Alberta government isn't enough to cover the cost of operating a clinic. Why is the minister letting even more Albertans lose access to their only source of primary care? Will she act to prevent these closures?

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

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, we want to make sure that every Albertan has an attachment to a primary care provider, whether that is a doctor, nurse practitioner, pharmacy-led clinic, et cetera. [interjections] The members opposite continue to interrupt, so it's hard to tell them that, in fact, all of the supports that we are providing to family physicians – again, the member opposite, being a physician, should know that these are private clinics, and these are private business owners making decisions that are best for them.

Dr. Metz: A family practice in south Edmonton reported that they are closing. This will impact 7,000 patients. They can't afford the rent because two of the doctors are retiring. This means there will be even more Albertans forced to rely on overcrowded emergency rooms for their health care needs. There are not enough family doctors to meet Albertans' needs, and costs are rising. We heard yesterday about how this government is failing smaller practices. Is the minister really about to allow the sky-high rent under the UCP to block people from necessary primary care?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, business owners make decisions that are in the best interest of their businesses. That being said, I do want to thank those doctors that are retiring for their long years of service to Alberta. I think we should thank all physicians. Hopefully, they'll enjoy their retirement years.

Mr. Speaker, we are in fact providing over \$2 billion worth of supports into primary care. When you look at the over \$200 million over two years to stabilize primary health care, \$57 million to support panel management, \$40 million over two years to support primary care networks, \$12 million to community information integration, and . . .

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

Dr. Metz: The UCP is failing health care in south Edmonton with their cancellation of the south Edmonton hospital and with the Premier telling people to hit the highway to Red Deer if they need help. The UCP is failing health care in rural Alberta by blocking smaller practices from the support they need to stay open, and now they're failing health care in north Edmonton by allowing clinics to close because of skyrocketing rent and inability to recruit physicians to this province. People need help today, not next week, not next month, not a year from now. What's the minister doing today to ensure that not a single other clinic is forced to close their doors under her watch?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, we are working very closely with the Alberta Medical Association and with the College of Physicians & Surgeons to make sure that we have the doctors, the family practitioners, the rural generalists that we need in Alberta. That is why we've been able to work collaboratively over extensive engagements with the Alberta Medical Association to come up with a new funding framework for family physicians. Even the AMA president is touting how well we have worked together to find real solutions to real problems rather than creating fear, like the members opposite.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning has a question to ask.

Drought Preparations

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas announced major water-share agreements with the Bow, Oldman, and Red Deer River basin. These historic agreements are designed to bring Albertans together to address the current multiyear drought. This is a necessary step to give Albertans confidence in the drought response, yet these agreements won't be activated until triggered when things get worse. Even then the five listed triggers are vague, and just a list of data is being collected. Our reservoirs are far below capacity right now, so why don't these agreements come into force today?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I announced on Friday, we did launch the largest water-sharing agreements in our province's history. This was very well received by all of our major water users. Why it is not activated right now is that at the end of April we expect our updated snowpack data. That will let us know, with a little bit more precise information, what things are going to look like over the coming months, and that will be when we're able to make a decision on whether or not we need to activate those plans.

Mr. Speaker, it was really, truly amazing to see so many people come together to really roll up their sleeves and ensure everybody has access to water this spring, summer, and fall.

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the drought emergency plan was supposed to be announced on Friday but it wasn't and given that this plan should define our emergency response to drought to protect communities and livestock and given that this plan should also connect to a wildfire emergency response plan to ensure water is available to fight wildfires and given that climate change models show that we can expect more frequency

and intense drought and given that postponing this work reduces confidence in the government's response this year and into future years, to the minister: when can Albertans expect to see the drought emergency plan, and when is it going to take effect?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We've been very clear with Albertans that these were going to be very separate announcements, so I'm not sure why the NDP continues to share that misinformation. I also want to confirm, of course, that when we brought all of those major water users together, we did so in the spirit, that Albertans always show, of helping out their neighbours, coming together to make sure that every user within a system has access to water. I can also say that, of course, we do know that drought conditions increase risk of wildfires. If conditions affect water availability, Alberta Wildfire has contracts for water delivery ready and in place as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that water-sharing agreements make several important recommendations that aren't implemented and don't include enforcement and given that one of the recommendations is for industry to use the minimum amount of water and to look for additional water conservation opportunities but includes zero supports to help them do it and given that small water licence holders don't always have the technology to measure their water use and there are also no supports to help them, what enforcement program does the minister have in place to ensure that when these agreements are activated, they'll actually work and the communities will have the supports they need to do it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think that this is an important discussion to have. These water-sharing agreement discussions are really setting us up for the bigger conversations that we need to have about water, not only now but into Alberta's future.

I do just want to point out, Mr. Speaker, that while the NDP likes to criticize the amazing Albertans, whether that be in our ag and irrigation industry or when it comes to industry or municipalities, this was exceptional work. I applaud their leadership. I'm grateful for it. I do want to quote Randy Taylor, the reeve of the county of Warner, who said, quote: I think these agreements will help in a big way, not just us acting alone; it's not just irrigators acting alone; it's all of us saying that we will work together. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

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

Federal Firearms Buyback Program

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Liberal-NDP coalition in Ottawa continues to fumble with the gun buyback program. The NDP's bosses in Ottawa are more interested in targeting law-abiding Canadians than the criminals who are endangering public safety. Can the Minister of Justice shed light on the ongoing failures of the NDP-Liberal coalition regarding the gun buyback program and reassure Albertans, law-abiding firearms owners and businesses, that their concerns are being addressed right now?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The list of failures of this Liberal-NDP coalition is very, very long, but I want to assure all law-abiding firearms community members that on this side of the House we will continue to stand up against Ottawa's intrusion on this issue. I'm immensely proud of the work that our chief firearms office has done in this province. Dr. Teri Bryant, our Alberta Chief Firearms Officer, is the envy of the entire country and perhaps North America, and she continues to advocate for a comprehensive review of confiscation programs and the negative impact on law-abiding hunters, collectors, and target shooters in this province. On this side of the House we will firmly stand behind lawful gun owners.

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

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that response. Given that the federal gun buyback program has been causing uncertainty for many businesses and given that Alberta has repeated warnings about the ineffectiveness of this program, to the same minister: how are you standing up for Albertans against federal overreach in the firearms regulations?

Hands off our guns, Trudeau.

2:10

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, Alberta has stated over and over again that the failed buyback program will not significantly improve public safety as it doesn't even target those involved in criminal activity and gun violence. Albertans can be assured that we are actively advocating for Alberta's interests in firearm regulation amid ongoing discussions and consultations with provincial stakeholders. You will be pleased to know that our government continues to fund the Alberta chief firearms office at the same level as previous years to ensure that the ACFO is sufficiently resourced to process these transactions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again thank you to the minister for the response. Given that the federal government's misguided approach is not just costing Alberta businesses but also diverting resources away from addressing public safety and given that Canada Post has refused to participate in the federal confiscation program, compounding the problem, to the same minister: what specific actions are you taking to ensure that the federal government doesn't shoot itself in the foot with this ill-conceived firearms policy?

Mr. Amery: Mr. Speaker, the federal government tends to do that more often than not, but indeed Canadian firearm owners are still waiting for concrete details about how this buyback program will actually work. I think the evidence is, obviously, clear. Canada Post refuses to participate in the buyback program, and it's just one more glaring example of how out of touch Ottawa is, how out of touch the Prime Minister is in the implementation of this failed and disastrous program.

Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

Member Kayande: It took 48 years for the Alberta heritage savings trust fund to reach \$22 billion; the Premier now wants the fund to hit \$400 billion in just another 26. In fact, the heritage fund, which on average has grown by \$2 billion annually, would now need to grow by \$16 billion annually. When we asked about this, we learned that the Premier has commissioned yet another report, I assume because her CPP one was so popular. Will the minister commit to a public release date for this heritage fund report?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We commissioned a study by a group to look at just that, the asset composition of the heritage fund, because the Premier has a vision to really apply a new vision of the heritage fund that we haven't seen since the times of Peter Lougheed. What we know right now is that when governments have used the fund to take the retained earnings and put into general revenue, you're kind of looking for a different purpose. The fund currently has about 20 per cent in fixed income. These are some of the things that will need to be changed. Norway's sovereign wealth fund saw 16 per cent . . .

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

Member Kayande: Given that reports say that for the heritage fund to reach even \$300 billion, annual government operations increases would need to be cut by nearly half and given that the heritage fund has only ever grown at a snail's pace, can the minister tell us if he plans to cut funds to health care or will it be education to fund this pipe dream?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the most rapid growth we've seen in the heritage fund has been over our five years in government, from \$16.7 billion to what we're predicting will be \$25 billion by the end of this fiscal year, so we'll take no advice from that side of the House. The plan that we're going to articulate to Albertans later this year will clearly show that the plan is based around growth, not around dedicated deposits. We need to be dedicated and committed as leaders of Alberta to leave the retained earnings in the fund; that is the main piece of the strategy.

Member Kayande: Given that the three-month heritage fund value-added was negative 70 basis points, the nine-month negative 100, the one-year negative 100, and the five-year negative 10 basis points and it underperforms the CPP over a 10-year horizon and given that the Premier wants to fork over all Albertans' pensions to be managed by AIMCo, which consistently destroys value, and given that I have watched oak trees grow faster than the heritage fund, can the minister explain why this government is so willing to put Albertans' hard-earned, secure, sustainably managed pensions under such great risk?

Mr. Horner: Well, it was started in '76, and, like I said in my previous answer, \$16.7 billion to \$25 billion: that's quite an oak tree, Mr. Speaker. I think Albertans should be proud of what we've seen and proud of where we're going. AIMCo's total fund return for this year was below their benchmark. When you compare it to other Canadian funds that have already reported for 2023 – four have reported – AIMCo has outperformed three of them. I would also point to some of the challenges in the commercial real estate portfolios of funds like this across Canada. Ontario pension plan: 1.9 per cent.

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

Reproductive Health Services

Ms Hayter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently we learned some absolutely heartbreaking news. Among women in Alberta aged 20 to 24 the rate of stillbirths has doubled, and for those young women aged 15 to 19 it has quadrupled. Treatment is possible with access to a family doctor, but thousands of Albertans do not have that access. What is the minister doing to ensure young Albertans have access to prenatal care necessary to carry their pregnancies to term?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. As a mother of seven children myself, grandmother of eight, I know how important it is to have prenatal care for young women and women in general who are having children. We are continuing to make sure that we add to the physician workforce, but we're also looking at nurse practitioners. I'm looking to have an announcement very soon on that. We've been working very diligently with the nurse practitioners in this province to make sure that we have a funding model that will allow them to have autonomous practices.

Ms Hayter: Given the alarming rise of stillbirths among adolescents due to factors like syphilis, the need for comprehensive sexual education couldn't be more urgent. Given the scarcity of resources in addressing critical health issues, the UCP's decision to make sexual health education opt-in only makes a bad situation worse. Given the gravity of the situation it's baffling that the government would choose to restrict access to vital information on safety and well-being. How can the UCP justify stripping away educational lifelines precisely when our youth need them the most?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Mr. Speaker, we're doing nothing of the sort. Alberta has a very robust curriculum in terms of providing proper education to students with respect to sexual health, with respect to consent, with respect to human reproduction and human sexuality. These courses will continue to be taught, and of course we want to make sure that parents, as always, are in the driver's seat as it relates to their children's education.

Ms Hayter: Given that the research that found a spike in stillbirth stated, quote, that with everything being cut, there's not a lot of money to fix this problem, given that Alberta Health said an investigation into the rates of stillbirth in Alberta is ongoing, will the minister fund this investigation and fund health supports needed to implement any recommendations today?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we have allocated \$10 million to the Women's Health Foundation in Edmonton. We've also matched that down in Calgary so that we have over \$20 million going into health research specifically around women, because there are unique challenges that women face through their reproductive years but also through their whole lives. It's really, really important.

The member opposite is correct in that Alberta has some of the highest syphilis rates in all of Canada. We need to address this. I've added additional dollars to make sure that we are addressing this serious problem in Alberta. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon has a question.

Highway 628 Capital Plan

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents have raised concerns over daunting conditions and unpaved portions of highway 628. I'm familiar with this concern myself. When I first drove that road back in 1996, I felt its conditions seemed inconsistent with the conditions of other provinces' roads. Can the minister of transportation please provide this Assembly and my constituents with an update on the plans of an upgrade of highway 628?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon and for the tour of this road. Budget '24 actually has engineering dollars in it, and land acquisition along this road is going to happen right after that. We are going to break up this project into two phases. The first will be five kilometres from 231st Street to highway 60. The second will be an 11-kilometre stretch from highway 60 to Campsite Road. There's also going to be paving on highway 779 and Golden Spike Road. This is a priority, and we're going to get it done.

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

2:20

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister. Given the thousands of vehicles travelling highway 628 every single day and further given that Parkland county, Stony Plain, and Spruce Grove represent some of the fastest growing municipalities in Alberta, to the same minister: is the province looking to upgrade this road sometime in the near future?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of transportation.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The answer is yes. In the longer term expansion of this area there will be a four-lane divided freeway, and obviously the growth of Edmonton, Spruce Grove, Stony Plain, and Parkland county is impressive. That's why this budget actually has \$2.2 billion over three years for the Edmonton region, and you don't have to be an Oilers fan to know that investing in Edmonton is good for the entire province.

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

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you to the Speaker and to the minister. Given that highway 16 regularly sees large volumes of vehicles and further given that any potential highway 628 upgrades will eventually result in some traffic during construction, to the same minister: will plans to upgrade highway 628 keep the relationship between the roads in mind with respect to the traffic volumes and delays during construction?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of transportation.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes. We're obviously planning for growth in this region. We're looking at a study from highway 16, from Anthony Henday Drive to highway 779. And, yes, obviously, construction times are always difficult when they're actually being built, but obviously with the future plan, when we actually get this project built, there are going to be huge benefits for the people in this region.

Transportation and Economic Corridors' budget is \$3.3 billion this year. Sadly, the NDP saddled all Albertans with \$80 billion of debt, and we're having to pay \$3.3 billion just to pay off that interest of debt, Mr. Speaker. It's something that we want to make sure, whether the Liberals take over the NDP Party, never happens again in . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Municipal Development Approval Process

Mr. Kasawski: This government trades in the politics of grievances with the federal government, grievances with fellow Albertans, grievances with municipalities, grievances with the weather, yet when Albertans bring our grievances to the government, they deflect,

throwing out words like "misinformation," "mistaken," and the laughable claim that no one has ever done a better job in the history of government. The town of Hinton recently highlighted one of the ways the UCP is failing to get the job done for Albertans, waiting a year for ministerial approval of road closure bylaws which before the UCP would take 30 days. To the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors: why is it taking a year to do something that used to take a month?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the NDP and their track record when they tried to build roads in this province, it's just been terrible. I mean, I just said that the \$3.3 billion of debt that we have to pay in this year's budget . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. You might not like the answer, but the minister is entitled to give it.

Mr. Dreeshen: We could have doubled this year's Transportation and Economic Corridors budget, Mr. Speaker, had we not had to pay for the \$80 billion of failed NDP legacy debt, that was also \$3.3 billion. We'll take no lessons when it comes to the NDP.

Mr. Kasawski: Given that we're talking about you doing your job, Minister, and given that this government is holding up development permits in municipalities like Hinton and given that Hinton waited nearly a year for the minister to approve two right-of-way closure bylaws it submitted in fall 2022 and the town is still waiting for approval of another one that was sent in a year ago in May 2023, given that the requirement to have a minister approve municipal bylaws is another example of unnecessary red tape, given that the minister's delay to get his work done is slowing down economic development and raising construction costs, how is the minister going to address this grievance of his own creation?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously, when it comes to development permits, we work with the communities so that when there is going to be a new area that will be developed, that is actually closely aligned with any road closures that it would have to accommodate, whether it's freeway traffic or otherwise. But when it comes to municipalities, again, this year's budget: of the \$3.3 billion, \$900 million in grants are directly going out to municipalities, a historic number going out to municipalities to make sure that they know that the provincial government has their back. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Kasawski: Given that I understand there is already a government process for development within 800 metres of a highway, given that this process is normally expedient and takes weeks, not months, given that ministerial approval by the UCP chief gatekeepers takes forever because of the minister's distractions like organizing municipal political parties, will the government commit to getting rid of the unnecessary requirement for a minister's signature to authorize municipal road closure bylaws and actually help municipalities for a change?

Mr. Dreeshen: I wish the member could have pivoted from his question and that he would've actually listened to the \$900 million in grants that we're directly giving to municipalities to help them build and grow. Mr. Speaker, in our budget, the \$3.3 billion budget, we actually have 151 engineering projects. We are providing money for our provincial road network of 64,000 lane kilometres and over 5,000 bridges, but we're also helping municipalities grow and expand through incredible amounts of investment and grants going out to municipalities all across this province.

Health System Reform

Mr. van Dijken: Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to strengthening and enhancing our primary health care system and has through the modernizing Alberta's primary health care system, MAPS, initiative embarked on a transformative journey in our health care system. The MAPS initiative will ensure all Albertans, regardless of location, have access to timely, appropriate health care services. Can the Minister of Health provide an update on the progress in implementing the MAPS recommendations and how these initiatives are improving access to primary health care right across this province?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Happy to. Alberta Health has released the two-year MAPS implementation plan. However, work has already begun on many of the initiatives such as announcing a framework for a new family physician compensation model in collaboration with the Alberta Medical Association; providing funding to upgrade and expand the Alberta Find a Doctor platform, that connects Albertans with physicians and nurse practitioners; developing initiatives to reduce the administrative burden and maintenance costs of increasing patient caseloads. We will continue to improve primary care access right across this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta is undergoing a transformative period in health care and given that as part of this effort Alberta Health is establishing 12 new regional advisory councils and one Indigenous advisory council and further given that these councils will play a crucial role in reflecting local voices and community perspectives in our health care system, can the minister explain how these advisory councils will address the diverse health care needs across our province and ensure that local voices are heard in health care decision-making?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, members of each council will reflect a diverse range of voices and experiences in their communities and will bring forward various local priorities. Health care workers, Indigenous and municipal leaders, who understand the unique needs of their communities, and general members of the public will help these important councils. We will work to ensure that the councils' valuable advice and recommendations are taken into consideration, and we will identify opportunities to better support local health care decision-making right across this province. It's so important to hear from the local voices. I've seen that throughout the engagement sessions that we've had, and I'm really proud of the work we're doing in this.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the unique challenges faced by different regions in Alberta and the need to have tailor-based solutions to effectively respond to the health care needs of Albertans across the province and given the importance of incorporating front-line health care workers, patients, families, caregivers, and other community members' perspectives into the health care planning, can the minister share how the new advisory councils will engage with these individuals and ensure their valuable insights are considered in health care policy and planning?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. The councils will directly advise government and the new primary care, acute-care, continuing care, and mental health and addiction organizations on clinical service planning and on capital and workforce planning. Councils will also engage with their communities and put forward tailor-based solutions to address unique challenges in their region. I am looking forward to the creation of the new advisory councils, and I'm also certain that they will be an excellent addition to Alberta's health care decision-making process. It's long overdue.

Thank you.

Funding for CKUA Radio

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, for nearly 100 years CKUA has been supporting and promoting artists and the arts in Alberta, an invaluable and essential public service. In 2023 alone they played music by over 1,000 Alberta artists alongside hundreds of interviews with artists, festival planners, other creatives across our province, a true voice of Alberta. The minister of arts and culture could hardly find a better partner to help fulfill her mandate of promoting and celebrating our unique cultural identity and heritage. To the minister. Over 7,000 Albertans have stepped up to support CKUA. Will you and your government join them?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of arts and culture.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I previously said in this House, I agree that CKUA is an important institution that has helped preserve and promote Alberta's unique culture and heritage. However, again, the funds that CKUA needs would go primarily towards debt servicing. We need to be responsible with the province's finances. As the member opposite knows and I will say again, significant portions of CKUA's challenges relate to their debt obligations. Capital grants are intended to build new assets or enhance the productivity of Albertans. Requests for debt repayments or endowments, which CKUA requested funds for, do not match that.

2:30

Mr. Shepherd: Given that the minister knows that CKUA also made a second ask not for debt financing but for 2 and a half million dollars in operational bridge funding and given that the minister knows that despite CKUA's enormous contributions her government only funds about 1 per cent of their annual budget and given that if this government truly wants more Alberta and less Ottawa, investing in our own local public broadcaster who promotes Alberta arts is a great way to get there and given that even a small provincial investment would help unlock federal dollars, more of our fair share, to the minister: will you at least commit to meeting with CKUA to discuss direct support?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of arts and culture.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I met with CKUA months and months before the members opposite did, and given that the member opposite should know that this Conservative government has supported CKUA through the years, from a \$5 million investment from a Conservative government in 2012 for the purchase and renovation of the Alberta Hotel to our government, who since 2019 has provided CKUA with ... [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Fir: The Member for Calgary-Buffalo should check his facts. In a previous statement he had indicated that this government has

provided no funding to CKUA. False. Since 2019 our government has provided over \$450,000 to CKUA.

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, given that this government has happily spent \$90 million on off-brand, ultimately unusable children's Tylenol, a quarter of a million on the Premier's personal friend and long-term adviser Preston Manning, nearly \$1 million on sole-source contracts for her supporters, friends, and former colleagues, including her former leadership campaign manager, the president of the Premier's previous party, and Alberta Counsel, a legal lobbying group run by the Premier's former colleague and Wildrose MLA, and given that it's clear they have no issues spending freely on the Premier's pet political projects and personal friends, why not an investment in something that actually helps all Albertans, CKUA?

Ms Fir: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the members opposite should ask their leaders in Ottawa why in a recent budget of \$100 million they gave zero money in media to CKUA, a public broadcaster, while they had no problem giving \$42 million to their public broadcaster friends at the CBC. They also committed \$58 million to help promote local journalism, which includes funds for radio stations; nothing to the CKUA. The Trudeau-Singh coalition has funded organizations similar to the CKUA in eastern Canada but once again left Alberta with nothing.

Provincial Pension Plan Proposal

Member Brar: Mr. Speaker, my constituents in Calgary-North East are struggling with the impact of the UCP's affordability crisis, failure to build much-needed schools, failure to ensure access to needed health care. The last thing they should have to be concerned about is the UCP putting their retirements at risk with their risky pension scheme. Tens of thousands of Albertans have told the UCP to stop their pension grab. Will the minister start listening?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, it's always a special day when we get to come into this House, but today is a rare day because although our bosses are always here, because we listen to Albertans, the opposition's boss was actually in town today talking about the CPP, the APP idea, saying that he doesn't respect the wills and wants of Albertans, that he would pursue unconstitutional things.

What we're committed to with this idea is getting some clarity for Albertans so we can hopefully provide them some great benefit.

Member Brar: Given that the UCP's own panel told them that there were no issues with the Canada pension plan and given that small businesses, chambers of commerce, municipalities, retirees, and the majority of Albertans, including a majority of UCP supporters, oppose this pension plan and given that despite getting this message loud and clear, the UCP is still moving forward, planning to waste more money and time on this nonstarter of an idea, how many more millions will this government waste in pursuit of an idea that Albertans do not want?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I don't know why the opposition would be scared of the wills and wants and desires of Albertans, why they need to get their party leader . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance is the one with the call.

Mr. Horner: Like I was saying, Jagmeet Singh, out on the steps outside this building, talking about an Alberta issue — it's very clear that when all of the provinces signed on to this, there was a withdrawal formula. They wouldn't have signed on if there wasn't a way that they could exit.

We're having a conversation right now about what that looks like. We've involved the Chief Actuary. We're waiting to hear back. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Member Brar: Given that the UCP have refused to consult with anyone other than the Premier, ignoring the tens of thousands of Albertans who signed the petition for the Alberta NDP, who came to in-person town halls, given that the UCP broke their promise for in-person town halls, given that the UCP are hiding the results of the pension surveys they did and given that it is clear that this is an idea being driven out of the Premier's office, will the minister start listening to Albertans rather than the Premier's office and commit to ending this scheme today?

Mr. Horner: I will listen to the Premier, and I'll listen to Albertans. Like we said in the Alberta Pension Protection Act last fall, this idea will never go anywhere without the explicit consent of Albertans through a referendum. Once again, what are you so afraid of? Why do you have to call the mother ship and get the big boss out on the steps here to show Albertans clearly who you answer to and who your boss is? We will not back down from getting clarity and working through this with Albertans. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Funding for Policing

Mr. Hunter: Mr. Speaker, the primary justification first proposed to fund governments was to protect people from violence. For years the federal government has been failing in this capacity for the town of Coaldale in my riding. For every other municipality in Canada the federal government has split the cost of policing with the municipalities. For Coaldale the federal government is forcing it to pay all its costs for policing on its own. To the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services: can you please tell the House how our Alberta government is stepping up for the town of Coaldale?

The Speaker: The hon. the Deputy Premier.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member not only for the question but for being such a great advocate for the community of Coaldale. He is correct. Coaldale is the only municipality in all of Canada that has to pay the full cost of their policing contract, so we have stepped up to the plate where the federal government has failed yet again. That NDP-Liberal coalition has failed yet again, especially for folks in rural Alberta. We've made them whole. We've provided \$550,000, and we're going to make people safe in Coaldale.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that welcome news. Given that we cannot wait for the federal government to act on the safety of Albertans and given that our government will not sit idly by as our communities like Coaldale reach out for help with policing, can the same minister please let the House know what other funding is being provided to help ensure the safety of all Albertans?

Mr. Ellis: Well, Mr. Speaker, we provided \$377.8 million for the provincial RCMP contract, and that's a \$20.9 million increase from the previous year. We are doing what we are supposed to do. What we're asking is that the federal government needs to be doing what they're supposed to be doing. We're 21.9 per cent short on the

officers we're supposed to have. That's a cost of \$16 million for services that we're not getting. On this side of the House we're going to support the people in rural Alberta, and we're going to make sure that rural Albertans are taken care of.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that response. Given that the RCMP has a vacancy rate of over 21 per cent on average in Alberta and given that while the hard-working and selfless men and women of the RCMP are doing their best to protect Albertans, additional help is still needed to improve safety in this province. To the same minister: can you please let this House know how Bill 11 will help improve public safety to ensure that Albertans have the protection and peace of mind that they deserve?

The Speaker: The Deputy Premier.

2:40

Mr. Ellis: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Despite what the members opposite think, all Albertans have rights. Rural Albertans have rights. That's right. You know what? There are areas within rural Alberta that don't even have 24-hour coverage. Now, I know the members opposite don't want to check their urban privilege cards, but we on this side of the House are going to respect the people in rural Alberta. We're going to make sure that with Bill 11 we have police officers to respond to calls to service because on this side of the House we respect rural Alberta and we respect law enforcement. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Hon. members, this concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. [interjections] Order. Order. Order. In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Tabling Returns and Reports

Member Hoyle: Mr. Speaker, I'm tabling articles from postsecondary researchers, profs, and media condemning Bill 18 as an unprecedented attack on Albertans and a call for government to scrap this bill.

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

Member Ceci: Thank you. James Jodoin also has a letter around Bill 18, wanting to repeal it and saying that it's interfering with critical funding for the city of Calgary and other municipalities around housing.

Mr. McIver: I have two tablings, Mr. Speaker. The first one is from Coaldale, thanking the Alberta government for Bill 18 and our support for their policing.

Also, yesterday's column from the Alberta Treasury Branches highlighting how many homes are being built in Alberta and what a high percentage are multifamily. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. It's a rare occasion in the Assembly when a member is being heckled during tablings. [interjection] It's not that funny, actually. Perhaps we can show a small amount of respect to the minister, who has just shown the same sort of respect for others in the Assembly who were tabling.

The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The second tabling is yesterday's Alberta Treasury Branches newsletter talking about how many homes, a record, are being built in Alberta and highlighting the high percentage of multifamily, affordable homes being built in Alberta.

The Speaker: Are there other tablings?

Member Irwin: I'm saying no today.

The Speaker: I'll circle the calendar.

Are there others?

Seeing none, hon. members, that brings us to points of order, of which there were none; a gold star for everyone.

The hon. the Official Opposition deputy House leader, I believe, is rising on a request for unanimous consent.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you. That's correct, Mr. Speaker. I rise to seek the unanimous consent of the House to move to one-minute bells for the duration of Committee of the Whole, including the first bell in the Committee of the Whole.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this is a request for unanimous consent. It is a departure as the hon. member has asked for the first bell after going into committee to also be included as a one-minute bell and one-minute bells for the remainder of the afternoon.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to call Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 12

Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024

The Chair: We are on amendment A1 as moved by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont. Are there any members wishing to join the debate on amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to rise in Committee of the Whole and speak to government amendment A1 on Bill 12, the Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024. As I understand it, I believe that the intention behind this government amendment is to try to preserve and create some order to the repayment of life lease entrance fees that are owed to those who terminate life leases.

Now, this is meant to address what's really, unfortunately, a situation that has been created by the fact that Bill 12 does provide some protections for any life lease moving forward that's been entered into, and it does provide some protection for the return of entrance fees where a life lease was entered into before the bill comes into effect but is terminated after. The challenge is that there are over 180 seniors and their families at least, that we are aware of, that are owed the repayment of their entrance fees from life leases that were terminated prior to this bill being introduced. The challenge is that those individuals have absolutely no protections under this legislation or under this proposed amendment.

This amendment seeks to say that nothing in the bill will affect the order in which entrance fees will be repaid. Now, just for a little bit of clarity, for most of these individuals who had terminated their life leases prior to this bill being introduced, they are supposed to be repaid in an order, in a queue that has been established based on when they made the termination. Now, I'm representing 55 families

in my constituency, that we know of, at one building called Devonshire Village, owned by Greg Christenson and Christenson development group. The first person in line in that queue, Madam Chair, has already been waiting over three years to be repaid over \$300,000. And that's just one person. In total, we know that there are currently over \$16 million that are owed to people under these life leases who are not currently covered by this bill.

Now, while the amendment seeks to say that there will be no change in the order in which people will be paid out as a result of this bill, that does not actually seem to be the effect of this amendment. What has happened, Madam Chair, is that this proposed amendment does not in any way change the fact that there will be legislated timelines for those individuals who have already entered into life leases which will be terminated after the bill is proclaimed as well as for anybody in the future. Under this current bill those entrance fees must be repaid within 180 days. Otherwise, interest starts to accrue, and the triggers that are set out in Bill 12 apply.

Unfortunately, Madam Chair, that does not apply to all those 180 Albertans who are still waiting to be repaid. Those legislated timelines do not apply to them. That means that although this bill is trying to preserve a particular order of repayment, those folks who terminate their life lease after this bill comes into effect will not get paid back until all these other people will be paid back, for which there is no timeline by which they must be repaid. That is the problem. There is no timeline for those people.

As we know, some of them have already been waiting three years. Many of them will be waiting perhaps a lot longer because there doesn't seem to be any movement by, in this case, the operator of the life leases, Christenson development group, in actually repaying those life leases. So if we are now saying, under this government amendment, that nobody, moving forward, will get any of their entrance fees returned until all those other folks are repaid, it is not going to happen in 180 days, Madam Chair. It simply means that nobody is getting paid in a timely fashion. It's going to mean that all of these folks will continue to be waiting. I understand and I believe that the intent of this government amendment is to try to create some order, but when one group of folks have a legislated timeline and one group of folks do not, it actually continues the inequity, going forward, for who knows how long.

I am going to therefore propose a subamendment to the government amendment.

2:50

The Chair: Perfect. Please wait till I have a copy, and I'll provide further instruction.

Hon. members, this will be known as subamendment SA1. Please note it is two pages.

Do your best to describe this amendment. I won't make you read it into the record in its entirety, but all members will be provided with a copy. Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that.

To describe what this subamendment is, as I mentioned, the challenge is that we have a whole group of individuals in Alberta who have life leases that were terminated prior to this bill being introduced, and those life leases do not have any timelines in them by which they will be paid out, or in some cases there may be a timeline, but they have not been met. What we know is that there are millions of dollars owed to these individuals.

What this subamendment does is that it creates essentially a class of people who are provided some measure of a process and legislated timelines for repayment of the entrance fees. What it does is that it describes the class of people, being those individuals who entered into and terminated life leases prior to Bill 12 coming into

effect, and indicates that those folks, if their entrance fees are not returned by August 1, 2024 – that date was chosen, Madam Chair, to try to allow for the proclamation of Bill 12 – must have their entrance fee returned by August 1, 2024. If it does not happen, then they will be subject to an interest rate that will apply, and then they will also be able to go to the Court of King's Bench to file an application to have the return of their entrance fee. Any director of any operator can be held jointly and severally liable with the lease operator for any damages awarded to the former leaseholder. It creates liability for any director of any operator as well as setting a timeline by which those individuals must have their entrance fees returned. If their entrance fees are not returned, they can go to the Court of King's Bench.

The goal behind this, Madam Chair, is not to be retroactively changing the terms and conditions of contracts and life leases that applied before this bill came into effect but to describe that group of people who entered into a life lease as a class of people who now have a right of action and a date by which their entrance fee must be returned. This works in conjunction with the government amendment by essentially stating that this class of people have to have their entrance fees returned by August 1, 2024, and then for all those folks who terminate their life lease after the bill comes into effect, they will get paid out in order, just like the government amendment suggests.

Madam Chair, if we do not have a legislated timeline by which those folks who have terminated their life lease get repaid, then they are simply going to hold up everybody else from getting paid. Nobody under this government amendment scenario is going to get paid in a timely fashion. It's simply going to delay everybody and mean that nobody gets paid back. We don't have a plan. There doesn't seem to be any movement by the operator, in the case of Christenson development group, to actually pay back any of these loans that are owed. Not a single one has had any movement in three years. We cannot continue to keep this in a holding pattern. We need to offer those Albertans some security and some measure by which we say: okay; this is the day that your entrance fee must be returned. Then they will initiate a process by which they can take that action to the Court of King's Bench and also hold individuals like Greg Christenson personally liable for their action.

Madam Chair, we cannot continue to allow bad actors, which is essentially what Mr. Christenson and Christenson development group are, to act without any consequence or action. We are tiptoeing around right now making sure that he is still, I guess, solvent. Ultimately, it is his bad business practices that are going to cause millions of dollars of loss to Alberta seniors and their families. Their life savings are going to be lost because of this bad actor. There should be some liability for him as a director and for any other director who enters into these agreements knowing that they were not in a position to pay them back. They made promises. They entered into contractual arrangements with Alberta seniors for their life savings, with a promise they would pay it back, and they are making no progress whatsoever in actually returning those funds which are owed to these individuals.

We think that the government can take action now and say, "Look, we are at least going to establish a date," because right now they're operating in limbo. There is no timeline for most of these seniors as to when they will get repaid. We think they deserve a little bit of certainty to say, "This is going to be the date," and then they can take an action if they need to but also hold the directors of any operator who is acting inappropriately, as I believe, Madam Chair, we're seeing from Christenson development group – and I believe the minister and the government will agree with that assessment. It is time for us to make some protections in this bill.

Again, I want to highlight that this subamendment does not go back and retroactively change any terms and conditions of the

contract. It simply creates a class of individuals, those people who entered into life leases before this bill came into effect and terminated them, and provides them a process at law so that they can make action and seek to get the return of their life savings. I think that this will actually strengthen the government amendment that was put forward, and I encourage the government members to support this.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there members wishing to speak to the subamendment? The hon. Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that this subamendment is well intentioned, and I share many of the member's concerns. I, too, want to see two things: one, that this never happens again; and two, I want to ensure that these people are made whole. I have some concerns with this subamendment. The hon. member says that it's not retroactive, but in fact it is retroactive. It's creating retroactive liability. Here's the challenge. Any time that we create any level of retroactivity at all, we run the risk of having our legislation challenged in court, and spending three years in court is not going to help anyone. The focus needs to be on putting forward meaningful, credible legislation that ensures this will never happen again and focusing on making sure that everyone is made whole.

Now, this subamendment – and, again, it is well intentioned, but it's based on the assumption that the money is there. That's the assumption it's built on, that there's a pot of money and that they just have to dole it out and that they're just waiting to be told to do so. Here's the challenge with putting in that date of August 1, 2024: if that pot of money is not there, Madam Chair, then what happens? Are we forcing the builder into receivership? You know, I think that having a direct path for this company to restructure, to go into bankruptcy is not going to get these individuals paid back any quicker. It's not going to get them made whole.

This amendment that we've put forward, which is why we don't need the subamendment, does not create two classes of people. We're putting that amendment forward so that there is only one class of people, and that is the life lease holder, and there's only one going to be one queue. There's going to be one queue, Madam Chair, and people will get paid out in the order of that queue. It's imperative that we recognize the sanctity of the contract, the sanctity of the queue. And, by the way, I should mention that this was put forward at the request of the life lease association. We heard them out, and this was something that I felt could be dealt with in regulation. But they wanted some assurances, so we're putting this amendment forward, after having met with the life lease association, to give them the assurances that there will be one queue and only one queue.

Now, I appreciate that the member is well intentioned on this, but here's what I want to bring us back to. This could have all been avoided. I have – and I'm happy to table these if the NDP wants me to – 21 letters, Madam Chair, that were sent from life lease holders to the NDP government in 2017. These letters: they clearly ask for life lease protection to be enacted. They asked for life lease protection to be enacted because, as they point out in their letters, there were no protections for life lease holders in 2017. There wasn't the disclosure. The frustrating part of all of this is that if the NDP had read the letters in 2017, if they had put forward the legislation that we're putting forward now, including the amendment, we would not be here today. So my comment to the members opposite is: shame on them for not acting when they had a chance, because they sentenced 180 Albertans to not have their deposits returned.

Madam Chair, here is my recommendation, that we move forward with passing this legislation, that we move forward with passing the amendment, but this subamendment: absolutely not, okay? This is going to create a level of retroactivity that we don't want, that is not going to help out these 180 life lease holders, Madam Chair. Again, I urge every member to vote down this subamendment.

The Chair: Any other members to join the debate on subamendment SA1?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on subamendment SA1 lost]

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

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

For the motion:

Boparai	Elmeligi	Metz
Ceci	Ip	Pancholi
Chapman	Irwin	Renaud
Dach	Kasawski	Sabir
Deol	Loyola	Shepherd
Eggen		

Against the motion:

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

Totals:	For – 16	Against – 43
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[Motion on subamendment SA1 lost]

The Chair: I seek speakers to amendment A1. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to rise again and to propose another alternative for this government to provide them an opportunity to do what they claim they want to do, which is to actually provide some protections to those individuals who are looking to lose millions of dollars because of the bad actions and bad practices of Greg Christenson, who we know is a very big donor and a very big supporter of the UCP and of the Premier and just recently attended a fundraiser, a very swanky fundraiser for the Premier. We know that he's a good friend of the members across the way, but we are reminding them to have an opportunity here to actually look out for the best interests of Albertans.

I'd like to propose another subamendment, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Hon. members, this will be known as subamendment SA2. It will be two pages for members as provided.

Hon. member, you may proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. This amendment seeks to change the application provision, which is the one that's currently being proposed as an amendment by the government, to essentially say that the provision that requires entrance fees to be returned within 180 days also applies to those individuals who terminated a life lease before this bill came into effect. Most importantly, what it does is it actually provides those individuals, like my constituents, like the 180 families and seniors who look to lose their entire life savings to Greg Christenson, with the powers and the processes of the Consumer Protection Act. It allows them to go through that process to seek to have some remedy.

Now, the minister spoke about connecting with the Life Lease Protection Society members last week and, you know, putting forward this government amendment to try to address some of their concerns. But, Madam Chair, having spoken with members of that protection society just this morning myself, they were not aware that the amendment that the government was going to bring forward would actually provide no protections to them, that it did not actually offer them a timeline by which they must be repaid. So when they talk about a payment queue being protected in the order, if these folks still have no timelines by which they must be paid out, it provides nothing for them, and it means that even those folks who terminate a life lease after this bill comes into effect also will not get their payment in time. They wanted to ensure that, for example, if Greg Christenson did not pay back their entrance fees in the order in which they were set out in the payment queue, they would be able to go to the provisions under the Consumer Protection Act and seek the processes there.

This is what they are looking for. This is what this subamendment will do. It will allow those folks – if Christenson does not follow the payment queue order as expected, it gives them an avenue of appeal. Again, no other provision in Bill 12 provides any protection to those individuals who already stand to lose their entire life savings. This is an off-ramp, Madam Chair, that we are providing to the government, to the minister to listen to all those folks who have been speaking very clearly and very loudly about needing to see some protections for themselves in Bill 12.

Now, listen, it is true that at this point in time no government legislation is going to be able to just give these people back their money, but the least that they could have is some legislated certainty. Why we are not giving the same timelines and certainty to those folks who stand to lose their entire investment, their life savings under a life lease that we're offering now to future people – I understand. The minister keeps talking about that he wants to make sure this never happens again, but it is happening right now to people. It is happening to my constituents. It's happening to constituents from many members of the government caucus as well.

3:10

This is an opportunity for the government to take an action that would allow some protection, simply a process saying that, yes, they must get paid back within 180 days as well or whatever the legislated timeline is in Bill 12. I will suggest, Madam Chair, that 180 days is too long, but I will say that whatever that timeline is, why would we not offer those same protections? It is what these individuals have been saying loud and clear.

Yes, they did want an amendment proposed by government, but they were not aware that the amendment that the government was going to propose would provide them no timelines, that it would not actually give them any possibility to take this action to the consumer protection process if they are not followed. They have good reason, Madam Chair, to have sincere doubts about whether or not Greg Christenson is going to follow anything put forward just because the government asked him to. Here's the thing. The minister continually talks about wanting to make these people

whole, but he's not taking any steps to do so. There's an opportunity right here to take a legislated step to make sure that there is at least a process available to these people.

It's true. I think that there is a very good chance that perhaps, given that Greg Christenson has made some very terrible financial decisions, on the backs of Alberta seniors, might I add – I don't know the state of his financial situation, but he clearly doesn't make good decisions. I don't know why this government is going out of its way to protect the bad actor that is Greg Christenson and saying: we don't want to push him into insolvency. Well, I'm sorry; Greg Christenson has pushed himself into insolvency if that's the case. But these people, if they don't have any action, any judgment under any other court process, under the Consumer Protection Act – they have no claim if this company is going to go into bankruptcy. Let's be clear. If Christenson is pushed into some kind of bankruptcy, this is not going to result in people being pushed out of their homes and into receivership. Some company will take over, and they'll still have a place to live. But what will happen is that these folks will not get their money back. Greg Christenson has already made terrible decisions. We should not be worried about protecting him. We should be focused on protecting Alberta seniors, giving them a process, giving them some certainty.

For some folks – I've spoken to some constituents who told me about their elderly parent who passed away. They're owed this entrance fee, and they're spending years and years of having – they can't even wind up their mother's estate because they're waiting for this to be resolved. The government has been provided an opportunity right now to provide some measure of protection for those folks so at least they can say: all right; they have 180 days from the time this bill passes, and that's when that money is due. And if it's not due and it's not paid or if Greg Christenson does not follow the payment queue, as this amendment by the government hopes that he will do, they can take some action under the Consumer Protection Act.

This is not too much to ask. The government seems to be very concerned about retroactivity, but I don't think the minister can even explain why he thinks that's a bad thing. I think the only thing is that he's been told that he should think it's a bad thing. What is a bad thing is 180 seniors who are getting no action by this government to protect their life savings. That is a bad thing.

I would encourage now the government to take this opportunity. We're trying to work collaboratively to achieve some results for Albertans. Let's worry less about Greg Christenson and more about Alberta seniors and pass the subamendment.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Nally: This is, quite frankly, repugnant, Madam Chair. I am not referring to the insults from the other side. I am referring to the fact that we have 180 seniors that cannot get their deposits returned. Absolutely repugnant. Let's not forget that those are the real victims here. This is why we're having this conversation.

There's a second reason why this is repugnant. It's repugnant because this could have been avoided. If we did not have an accidental government in 2015 and 2019, Madam Chair, then this could have been avoided. Twenty-seven life lease holders wrote in to the minister for service Alberta for the NDP, and they begged. They begged them to put forward life lease protections because they didn't exist. You know what kind of protections they wanted? They wanted transparency. They wanted disclosure. They wanted to make sure that what is happening now doesn't happen to them. But guess what the NDP did in 2017. Guess how they responded to those 27 life lease holders. They didn't. They did not respond. They did not do their job. They did nothing. Sadly, if they had done their job in 2017, we wouldn't be here today, but I will not make that

mistake that they did, not on my watch. We are going to put forward life lease protections that make sure this does not happen again.

Now, there were some other unnecessary comments, Madam Chair, comments about fundraising, which I think were extremely inappropriate. I have not received any campaign donations from Greg Christenson, but if we want to play that dirty little game, I will point out that in 2017 the Member for Edmonton-City Centre was in this House bragging about the great night that he had with Greg Christenson. It wasn't clear to me if it was a personal dinner or a fundraiser, but if that member would ask, I would be more than happy to table those documents from *Hansard* into the House. All they need to do is ask. I'd be happy to do it.

Now, I've said this before. Retroactivity is going to make things worse and not better, Madam Chair. That member knows that, or at least she ought to know that because for over half an hour I had that member in my office. I had a table full of my department officials, who walked her through why it's problematic. So if she didn't listen then, she's not going to listen now, but I will say for the benefit of this House that retroactivity is problematic.

We cannot go back in time and open up contracts that have been cancelled. Jurisdictions that do that – yeah; Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba – will open up cancelled contracts, Madam Chair, but if we do that, we will end up in court. We will end up fighting it for three years, and you know what? We will lose. So we are not going to put in something that is going to have an unintended consequence.

Now, Madam Chair, we did contact the life lease society. We let them know why we wouldn't be proceeding with those subamendments that the NDP are putting forward. We walked them through why there's a weakness in what they're putting forward, why it's damaging, why it has unintended consequences. But they did bring up a legitimate concern, that they wanted to have some assurances that the sanctity of the queue will be first and foremost. That's why we're putting this forward. We're putting this forward so that there will be one queue and that every developer will have to respect that queue. This is the path forward.

Madam Chair, I encourage every member of this House to vote against this subamendment because it's not helpful, it's not productive, and it's counterintuitive. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members on subamendment SA2? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will speak briefly to this amendment. I think the government continues to just do finger pointing instead of doing the right thing. We have a bill before us, we have heard from those who are impacted by this, and we can do the right thing. Instead of protecting Christenson, we can protect the life lease holders.

Also, there were some comments about retroactivity. I think all it does is that it's protecting those 180 people in particular who are affected by this. I think this House has passed legislation with provisions that were retroactive. Also, if the member was not paying attention, I can find him many pieces of legislation, regulations that were passed by this House with their caucus support which have provisions of retroactivity. In this case, it is the right thing to do.

People who are being wronged by their friend Greg Christenson deserve to get paid, and today is the opportunity for the minister to do the right thing and listen to those voices and correct his legislation. I urge all members of the House to support this common-sense and reasonable amendment.

The Chair: Any other speakers to subamendment SA2?

Seeing none, I will call the question on subamendment SA2 as moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on subamendment SA2 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:19 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

For the motion:

Boparai	Gray	Metz
Chapman	Ip	Pancholi
Dach	Irwin	Renaud
Deol	Kasawski	Sabir
Eggen	Loyola	Shepherd
Elmeligi		

Against the motion:

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

Totals:	For – 16	Against – 43
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[Motion on subamendment SA2 lost]

The Chair: We are on amendment A1 in Committee of the Whole. Are there any members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise to move another amendment to the government amendment. I have the requisite number of copies for the House, and I will wait until it is distributed. Then I will speak for the record.

The Chair: Hon. members, this will be known as subamendment SA3.

Hon. member, please proceed.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Madam Chair. I, the Member for Calgary-Falconridge, rise to move that amendment A1 to Bill 12, Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024, be amended in part A by striking out clause (ii) and substituting the following: (ii) in the proposed section 41.4 (a) in subsection (1) by striking out “180 days” and substituting “90 days” and (b) by adding the following immediately after subsection (4):

- (4) Nothing in this section affects any provisions in a
 - (a) life lease,
 - (b) a lease terminated before the coming into force of this Part that is substantially similar to a life lease, or

(c) a lease subsisting on the coming into force of this Part that is substantially similar to a life lease,

respecting the order in which entrance fees are to be returned.

Madam Chair, this amendment does two things. It will make sure that the entrance fee is returned within 90 days and not in six months as drafted by the UCP. It will preserve the rights of life lease holders, those terminated or subsisting today. It is something that lease holders would want to see – blaming or shaming or yelling, raising voices, is not going to sort it out – and requests the minister to please help those seniors and work for Albertan life lease holders.

I hope all members can support this. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any members to join the debate on subamendment SA3?

Mr. Nally: Madam Chair, I appreciate that this is a well-intentioned subamendment. I would concur that if we could get them reimbursed in 90 days, then we should do that, but the fact that this member is putting this subamendment forward tells me, confirms for me, that he didn't speak to any of the developers. There are 22 life lease providers.

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall on a point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Sabir: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). I think the minister just used the language, pointing directly at the member, that he didn't speak to that person or developers. It's just imputing false motives, throwing in allegations. That kind of behaviour certainly will cause disorder in this House, and it's offside the standing orders of this House.

Mr. Schow: Well, Madam Chair, I don't have the ability to comment deeply on the matter, but I suspect it was not a point of order as I know the conduct of the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction. I'd say that this is a matter of debate. We should move on.

The Chair: Hon. members, this is not a point of order. It is certainly a matter of debate but a good reminder for all to keep this thing on the rails for an enjoyable afternoon of legislative debate here in the Assembly.

Mr. Nally: Madam Chair, I certainly did not mean any offence to any of the members opposite.

Debate Continued

Mr. Nally: Here's where I'm going. We met with the life lease developers. There are 22 of them. Five are profits... [interjections] You know, those comments, Madam Chair, are not helpful, and if we want to keep this on topic, that would be appreciated because, quite frankly, this is not a laughing matter.

It wasn't a laughing matter in 2017, Madam Chair, when we could have dealt with this. If the NDP had simply listened to the 27 life lease holders who asked for help, we wouldn't be here, so all I ask in return is that they not make any jokes about this matter and that they participate in the debate rather than cheap heckles. That's what we've heard from them. We've heard cheap heckling. We've heard cheap political points trying to be scored. This is a serious matter. Had they done their job in 2017, we wouldn't be here, but we're not going to make that mistake.

We consulted with everyone widely. We met with 150 life lease holders and their families. And, yes, there are 22 developers of life leases in this province. We met with most of them, I should say. There are five profits and 17 not-for-profits. These not-for-profit charities are often religious organizations. They said to us that they will often pay their life leases back within 90 days. Sometimes they get it done in 30 days. They did say to us that there could be a time where they have, you know, more than just one or two that provide their cancellation at the same time, and it could cause them to go over 90 days, but they were adamant that they could go within the 180 days and pay it back.

3:30

To be clear, Madam Chair – and I hope the members opposite agree with us – the intention of this legislation is not to harm the good guys. The intention of this is not to take religious charities and put them out of business and punish them. That is not the perspective of what we're trying to do. We're trying to find that balance of protecting an industry – because this is an affordability issue. That's why 17 charities are involved in this space. We want to find that balance between not harming the good guys and also protecting Albertans that invest in life leases. And we think we have that balance.

Madam Chair, that member opposite, the entire caucus opposite would know this if they had met with any of those nonprofits. I get it that they don't like the profit guys. I get that. But they could have met with the nonprofits, they could have met with the charities, but they chose not to. They demonstrate that they haven't met with them when they stand up here and ask for the 90 days. If they had consulted with the nonprofit charities, they would know that the 90 days is a nonstarter.

I would ask everyone here to vote against this subamendment, and hopefully we can go back to the issue at hand, which is putting forward the original amendment, which will protect the sanctity of the queue, which is what this is about today. I urge you to vote no to the subamendment.

The Chair: Any other members to join the debate on subamendment SA3?

Seeing none, I will call the question on subamendment SA3 as moved by the hon. Member for Calgary-Falconridge.

[Motion on subamendment SA3 lost]

The Chair: We're back on amendment A1. Any members to join debate?

Seeing none, I will call the question on amendment A1 as moved by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Chair: We have no amendments before us on Bill 12 in Committee of the Whole. Are there members that are wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to rise and speak against Bill 12. I certainly appreciate the members opposite's very impassioned arguments, but it really is a black-and-white issue. While the minister in his rhetoric has committed to making the life lease holders whole, his actions and this legislation, frankly, don't actually reflect that commitment. Right now the crux of the issue is that the bill does not provide any recourse or any remedy to those who have already terminated their life leases – case in point, many of the life lease holders under Christenson – and this legislation doesn't cover them.

I've had the opportunity to meet some life lease holders, and let me tell you, Madam Chair, that there were some truly heartbreaking stories, life savings of \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000. A whole life's worth of savings and work is essentially tied up in these life leases, and they can't settle their estate. What I find particularly repugnant, to use a word from the members opposite, is that Mr. Christenson, in a video, has been captured to say: "Why do they need the money anyway? What are they going to do with the money?" It shows a blatant lack of empathy. It shows how truly, truly tragic the situation is.

The reality is that many of those impacted by this life lease debacle are everyday folks. They are not wealthy folks. They don't have disposable income of hundreds of thousands of dollars just sitting there. These are hard-working folks who have saved up so that they can take care of themselves and their families. But the reality is that with the money held up in the life leases, many cannot settle their estates. It's put many families in very precarious financial circumstances. Some are in fact looking at selling homes in order to maintain a roof over their head or have to move in with other family.

It's also curious, Madam Chair, that this government likes to play the blame game after five years in power. At this point, I guess, my question is: when are you going to take responsibility and, as we've said on this side of the House, do the right thing? The reality is that the minister actually has broad powers under the Consumer Protection Act to protect Alberta consumers against bad actors. There are, in fact, remedies within the Consumer Protection Act. There's broad language that already exists. It's curious that the minister has taken such a narrow interpretation, but perhaps that's water under the bridge. All I'm saying is that there are opportunities, notwithstanding this current legislation, to take action. The minister believes otherwise, but let's just set that aside for a moment. Let's look at this legislation.

The reality is that many of the life lease holders were pressured into signing an unfair contract, and I believe that there are some legal opinions that would in fact say that these contracts are unenforceable. Again, the minister has broad powers under the Consumer Protection Act to protect consumers and review these current contracts, so it's very curious that the minister has taken such a narrow interpretation. The truth is that the minister can do the right thing, but it's not the avenue that he has decided to take.

What I also want to say is that – and I'm going to hold this government accountable – there is no secret that Mr. Christenson is a long-time supporter of the UCP. It's no question that he has deep relationships with the UCP caucus. But in the midst of this debacle what I find curious and, frankly, disappointing is that the minister has met with Mr. Christenson at least nine times and far fewer times with life lease holders and that Mr. Christenson continued to attend a fundraiser when, in fact, any sort of casual political observer would probably agree that this creates certainly the optics of bias. So it's curious to me why folks on that side of the House haven't actually asked Mr. Christenson to stay away, haven't actually tried at least on the surface to keep some distance between Christenson, the Christenson company, and this current government.

You know, certainly, many of us, not just on this side of the House but also many of those watching this from the public, are wondering whether this government will do the right thing, whether they will do the right thing for life lease holders or – frankly, is there some bias towards the Christenson company? I think if we look at the actions, if we look at the fact that the minister has refused to make this legislation retroactive, has refused to seek any direct remedy for those who have already terminated their life leases, I think that goes to show that clearly there potentially could be some bias there. And I think that is a matter of debate for this House.

It disappoints me, though. It disappoints me that with such a black-and-white issue, the minister and this government, frankly, haven't just simply made this an open-and-shut case. In my opinion, it is fairly simple: make this piece of legislation retroactive; ensure that there are provisions and avenues to allow those with existing life leases to be paid back. This legislation does not do that. It puts them into a queue that simply does not guarantee that at any point they would get their money back.

3:40

Even with our, you know, very reasonable amendments, this government has not accepted it, so my question to the government, then, is: what are you going to do for current life lease holders? How are you going to ensure through this piece of legislation that those that are impacted are going to be made whole? That is unclear. Despite the rhetoric, Madam Chair, that is unclear, and this legislation doesn't have the teeth to enforce that once passed. I think Albertans deserve better. The life lease holders, seniors, deserve better. Families deserve better.

So I think that for all of those reasons and many others that have already been outlined by my colleagues, I encourage my colleagues in this House to vote against this bill. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 12, Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024. Well, it's incredibly disappointing, but first I want to put on the record – and I'm sure that there are some folks from the life lease organization watching, paying attention. I'm sure there are other seniors that are – you know, this isn't actually about politics; this is about them just being worried about the future, and is there actually a path forward for them? It's unfortunate that we're at this place.

What is kind of interesting, Madam Chair, is that I think we've heard repeatedly the minister say, "You know, I'm not going to work with the Member for St. Albert because she's made it political," which is super funny considering the rhetoric that we just heard for the last I don't know how many minutes. [interjection] If someone would like to stand, sure.

Anyway ... [interjection] Sorry?

The Chair: Hon. members, through the chair.

Ms Renaud: Yep. I am, Madam Chair.

Anyway, this should not be a political debate. Well, I guess it is a political debate because we're in the Assembly, but it should not be sort of one side and the other because this truly, truly is about seniors, and this is about elder abuse in this case, in my opinion. This is about some really bad actors. This is about a developer that needs to feel some consequences of what this developer has done. There needs to be some real protection for a class of people, and it's not just a few people, Madam Chair. At this point I'm sure it's higher because we were getting weekly updates, but I'm sure it's over 183 people. We know that the one developer, the one actor, Greg Christenson Group of Companies, because there seem to be a number of different companies, owes millions and millions of dollars to seniors.

What we've got is a piece of legislation that, in my opinion, does the bare minimum for consumer protection, and the reason I know that is because – I am not a lawyer. I do not have the ability to speak on the legalities of the legislation, so I rely on my caucus colleagues that are lawyers. I also rely on some research. I rely on other jurisdictions. I don't know if any of my colleagues in this Chamber

have had a look at what Saskatchewan does, some of the work that Ontario has done, and some of the reports that are out there that give some really good information and some good questions to ask. For example, weirdly enough, I spent some time today looking at the Law Reform Commission of Saskatchewan. They issued a pretty detailed report in 2019 specifically on life leases, and they did a jurisdictional scan. They talked a lot about, you know, what needed to be done in a consultation, questions to be asked, items to be considered. Weirdly enough, there's hardly anything, really, in the recommendations I saw in this report that the minister has talked about.

One of the very basic things is consultation, right? I think we can all agree that the UCP is not very good at consultation. They like to pass something and say, "Well, don't worry; we'll fix it in the regulations" or "Don't worry; we'll talk to people after the fact." That's not really consultation because you don't get the best legislation when you don't talk to people beforehand. The minister likes to tell us: well, we talked to all the developers, and we talked to, like, 150 people, 150 seniors. Well, that's not enough. It is not enough just to talk to the developers that are involved, and it's certainly not enough just to talk to 150 people. We know that the Alberta Life Lease Protection Society has over 400 members, and that's just one organization. That's just the Christenson Group of Companies. That's just one group that got ripped off. I don't know if there are other people with other concerns. So that is not encouraging.

One of the basic things that this minister could do, to let us know maybe some of the consultation work that he did, is to share with the Chamber a what-we-heard document. If indeed there was substantive consultation with not just developers and Greg Christenson but actually the seniors, what happened there? What did you talk about? What was the result? What was the end result? What did they ask for, and what did you give them? But we haven't seen that. What we're hearing from this minister is: "Oh, no; trust us," and "NDP bad because they were in government for four years." That's all we get when what we really want – and genuinely what we really want – is to fix this legislation, because that's all we have to work with right now, so that at least we can carve out a way for the group that has been harmed. And they have truly been harmed. Truly been harmed.

You know, every time I meet with this group, they tell me another story, and it's heavy. They are so close to giving up, and they're desperate. Like, these are people in their 80s and 90s. They do not deserve to live out the end of their life, the last years of their life, with this kind of stress and this kind of frustration and this kind of legislation that really does nothing for them.

All we hear, repeatedly, day after day after day from this government is: "My heart breaks for them. I'm going to keep meeting with them and make them whole." We see no progress. We see no protection. It's just rhetoric. It's just noise. It really is just noise, and it's unfortunate. You know what? I would have liked to hear: "Yeah, we feel really bad for this group, and – you know what? – we're going to investigate. We're going to have another panel." This government likes to create panels. Why not create a panel? Find out: why did this happen? How can we truly prevent this from happening again? We've heard crickets. All we've heard is: "The opposition is bad. They don't know what they're talking about. I was told this, and I'm right, and that's it." That's unreasonable. That's not how you fix a problem.

We know that this legislation, even the way that it has been amended, will not help the people that have been impacted. That's what we need to do, not just cut them loose and say: sorry; we can't help you because a lawyer told us that we can't help you. That is just not good enough. We are elected and sent to this place to represent Albertans and to fix problems, to find solutions for

problems. This legislation is not that. It is insufficient. It is truly insufficient.

You know, originally I was quite hopeful that perhaps the government would say: "You know what? We didn't quite get there. Maybe we need to stop, back up a little bit, and redo some of this consultation so we get the best legislation possible. Let's work with the opposition. Let's get a win here." No. We saw a doubling down of: "NDP bad. We're right. We talked to developers. You're bad." Well, it doesn't matter. That is irrelevant because, at the end of the day, this group of people is not protected. Sure, we might protect people going forward, but as you heard from my colleague, it doesn't look that way. All of these people – and there are over 180 of them that are already owed money – are there. They're in the lineup. They're going to impact new people in the lineup. Truly, this legislation and this amendment are disappointing at best, Madam Chair.

You know, there were all kinds of suggestions. If anybody has done research on life leases across Canada, other than listening to so-and-so, who said, "That's impossible; you can't do that," do your own research. Maybe look around and find out what's happening in other jurisdictions. They're doing all kinds of things to ensure that people are safe and protected going forward, and I don't see any of that in this legislation. Now, government will say, "Trust us; it's in the regs," or "It's in regulation." [interjection] Well, it's okay. The member is just crumpling stuff.

Some of the things that they pointed out: this report, the Law Reform Commission of Saskatchewan in 2019, specifically looking at life leases, did make some – it's not at all distracting. They did make some recommendations. Actually, for people if they genuinely wanted to consult, here are some – that's really irritating, Madam Chair. I don't know; maybe it's just my brain, but I'm having trouble focusing with the member continuing to crumple paper like that. They actually released a list of items that would actually be useful in a discussion, in a consultation to actually get to some of the issues around life lease. I encourage the members to do a little bit of research and look for themselves. Anyway, I'm going to stop pretty quick because Mr. Crumple over there just needs to be active.

3:50

I am just going to say that I along with my colleagues am incredibly disappointed in the partisan, really silly rhetoric that we heard earlier, Madam Chair. It wasn't helpful at all. I think that we genuinely spent a lot of hours over the last couple of weeks talking to people that we knew in other jurisdictions, talking to lawyers, and trying to get some ideas. Like, what else can we suggest? What else can we propose? How else can we possibly fix this to make these folks whole? How can we fix this legislation to truly capture what the problem is?

You know, we haven't even begun to talk about the fact that maybe for-profit shouldn't be using this kind of model. That seems to be a discussion that other provinces are having. It's not really a sustainable financial model. Those are the questions and discussions other people are having; we don't seem to be having that.

Anyway, this government seems uninterested in hearing from anyone else except their own little bubble about what they think is correct. Sadly, as a result, people will not be made whole, there will not be progress on this, and those over 180 people that are owed millions and millions of dollars, these vulnerable seniors who have been taken advantage of, in my opinion, will not be assisted by this. Unfortunate and disappointing.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members to join the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Pleased to rise on Bill 12 as amended. Even so, it fails, as other members have alluded to, to protect 180 seniors who are owed millions of dollars. It's a failure of an individual businessman to take responsibility for harming his clients with a contract that ended up allowing the money to be unpaid. The life lease entry fee that was promised under the contract ended up not being available, and as a result 180 people have lost their life savings to the tune of millions and millions of dollars.

Madam Chair, this province is a big province. The city of Edmonton is a big city, but really in many ways it's a small village, a small town because when you speak about the business elite, it's a small community of people who are well known to each other in many cases. Whether you're speaking about the real estate industry, whether it's oil and gas, whether it's construction or road building, the circle of people who are operating at the highest levels of the industry sector are known to each other.

By and large, Madam Chair, in this province, in this city there's a high level of integrity, a high level of compassion for clients. Reputation is what your company and your own individual business is built upon. You lose that reputation, you lose that respect from the business colleagues that you operate with and from your clients, most importantly, and you can lose your business.

I know that in this particular case Christenson Developments and Mr. Christenson have operated within the real estate industry in this province and in this city enjoying a fairly high level of respect and reputational integrity from their peers and from their clients. Yet now we are in a situation, Madam Chair, where the company and Mr. Christenson's reputation are in tatters. There is a way to resurrect it. There are examples of other businesspeople in this province who have actually made sure that given a situation where they were in some financial difficulty, they took steps to exemplify the integrity that we expect of our Alberta businesspeople and did something to make whole the situation that they found themselves in.

One example that I'm most familiar with, Madam Chair: in the real estate industry was an individual who first, of course, began in the music industry and then ultimately transferred over to real estate. I speak of Danny Hooper. Danny was somebody who, of course, in his early 20s started off Danny Hooper's Stockyard, and they brought in, starting in 1979, some major acts to the Stockyard. They had a six-year run from '79 to about '85. Ultimately, the business failed and bankruptcy was looming, yet Danny Hooper refused to take that route and go into bankruptcy. What he did instead showed the level of integrity that I expect that Mr. Christenson should be showing his business colleagues and this province and his community by doing what Danny did, and that is saying: "Look, I'm not going to go into bankruptcy. I'm going to make sure I make whole all my creditors."

What he did instead was that he joined the real estate industry, and that's where I got to know him rather well, first of all joining Royal LePage at an office in the west end, and then ultimately both of us moved over to a Re/Max franchise. Over the course of the next number of years he was able to earn enough by working his tail off to pay back the creditors that were owed the money and avoid the bankruptcy.

That's the type of integrity, Madam Chair, that one would expect of somebody who enjoyed the reputation that he did – namely, Mr. Christenson – before this fiasco where he now stands telling 180 of his clients, who he has harmed: too bad; so sad; the contract allows me to avoid paying you, so I'm going to do that. That is certainly very, very disappointing. I would hope that the Edmonton and the wider Alberta business community really takes notice of this and in the small circles that these people operate in make it well known to

Mr. Christenson that he has fouled their nest, and it is not something that one would hope would be repeated.

As I say now, Madam Chair, there's still an opportunity for Mr. Christenson to resurrect his reputation and do the right thing; that is, do what's expected of businesspeople with integrity in this province, and that is to do your utmost. You do everything to make these people whole. If it's necessary, you finance your assets and you obtain the funds that way, and you pay the millions of dollars that are owed from your assets. If you have to refinance, so be it. If it hurts, so be it. You do whatever is necessary, following the example of people like Danny Hooper, and you go out and you do the hard work and raise those funds from your assets, and you make these people whole.

The ball is in Mr. Christenson's court because Bill 12 does nothing to satisfy the needs of the 180 people whose funds have been lost. Bill 12 has basically let these people sail in the wind and has dropped the ball. They're saying: too bad; so sad. The government is allowing Mr. Christenson to avoid paying these folks and saying: look, in the future we'll protect them, but for those people now who are the 180 left holding the bag, too bad; so sad. What the government is saying is: up to Mr. Christenson. It's up to him to provide the integrity and show the dignity and compassion that we expect of our business community in this province and for him to do whatever is necessary to make these people whole.

I hope the business community, the small circle of the business elite in Alberta, in this city, hold Mr. Christenson to account because it's everybody's reputation that's at stake, not only the real estate industry but other industries as well, people who operate at a high level. The jury is out. We'll see if Mr. Christenson takes the route of dignity and decides to take the hard challenge up and make his people whole and face the Alberta business community again with his reputation intact and say: "I did the right thing. It was difficult, but this is the way we operate in Alberta." This is how free enterprise should work, not letting your clients, who in this case are 80- and 90-year-old seniors, lose their life savings because of something that you did in your contract that harmed them. Make them whole, resurrect your reputation, and provide an example to the business community that we can all be proud of, Mr. Christenson.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to Bill 12?

4:00

Seeing none, I will call the question on Bill 12, the Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 12 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. I move that the committee rise and report on Bill 12.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Cyr: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill with some amendments: Bill 12. I wish to table the copies of all the

amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official record of the Assembly.

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

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. So carried.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 16

Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

[Adjourned debate April 17: Ms Goehring]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I really appreciate being recognized to be able to speak to Bill 16, the Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. Before I get into a little bit of detail, I just wanted to offer a bit of insight into what we see happening in terms of red tape reduction. Now, for a lot of people – I understand that we are trying to make things easier, but making things easier should never be done at the risk of making things unsafe, and I do believe that the members on the other side of the House would agree with this. However, sometimes the perspective that you have keeps you from seeing how you are making a situation unsafe. With red tape it's important to always keep this in mind.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

Like, I mean, yes, if you're going to business owners and they're saying, "Look, make this easier for us," ultimately, this is what we want. We do want it to be an easier process for entrepreneurs inside of our province and those that we're attracting here to be able to do business as effectively as they can. But if, on the other side of that, you're doing it by reducing legislation on safety aspects in the workplace, for example, then this is something that if you're looking at it from a particular perspective, then, yes, you're trying to make things easier, but at the same time you're not making them safe for the people who are actually working in that particular business or industry. We always have to be cautious when dealing with these kinds of situations.

Now, particularly with the bill that we have before us, though, there's a whole other level of safety that I believe that this government has neglected. I would go so far as neglect. But, you know, Mr. Speaker, what we see repeatedly with this government is that they provide too little, too late. We've had examples of this with the life leases. We've had examples of this with their new electricity bill, Bill 19. It's too little, too late. Consistently throughout the past year, specifically with this government, what we've seen are tactics where they delay making a decision on something, then when they finally do make a decision, it's legislation that doesn't really help the people that were impacted by the problem that they're trying to solve. Either that, or they're underfunding a particular aspect of the help that Albertans are actually asking for.

With this particular piece of legislation what we see is the fact that they've had to repeal the ACTA regulation. Now the problem that we are trying to solve here, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that – especially going through the whole process of COVID, I can tell you that I heard from a number of constituents of my own that they had, in some cases, even severe mental health impacts.

As we all know – and we've seen the statistics of how, for example, even domestic violence actually went up during COVID – families were forced to stay at home, and couples perhaps that weren't addressing the issues that they should have been addressing found themselves now in a predicament, where they were at home having to be in each other's company, and particular issues, perhaps that could have been solved in other ways, weren't getting addressed, and then these issues were compounded by what was going on. There were also a number of people who just weren't used to being in those kinds of circumstances. There were a number of mental health issues that arose throughout COVID, never mind talking about children and having to do school online. But, of course, these were all things that had to be done.

But the particular aspect of this bill is the fact that when people were then reaching out to get help, they were going to people who identified as counsellors but may not have had the preparation, the education, or the experience to actually help these people. The government had the responsibility of then moving this piece of this regulation into force. There were talks to actually get it done with the Association of Counselling Therapy of Alberta, but here again the government, as I was explaining, Mr. Speaker, delayed and delayed and delayed, and it just kind of slipped past their attention that this was something that had to be done. Of course, maybe they didn't see it as being a priority. Okay. I understand.

But the reality is that they had to act on it, and they didn't. So now in order to cover up, they're going to the College of Alberta Psychologists and saying: hey, we need you guys to do this for us. You know, luckily, the College of Alberta Psychologists is saying: yeah; of course we want to do this because it has to do with the protection of Albertans. I'll put it this way: there wasn't a sufficient amount of consultation with the organization to actually figure out how this was going to happen.

4:10

So now we find ourselves in a situation where people are needing help more than ever, because, you know – thanks – over the last few years there's been a movement to take away the stigma of actually getting mental help. Thank goodness. Thank goodness for the people of Alberta. Thank goodness for all people here in Canada. This has been a movement to get away from: oh, you know, like, push your feelings down inside you and just kind of deal with it on your own. Now people are taking the stigma away from actually getting the help that they desperately need. Remember, like, getting therapy really is about being a better human being, changing your behaviour, becoming more of an individual that is confident in who you are so that not only can you be better for yourself and for your family but you can also be better for society and actually give back to society. I'm so glad that there has been this movement to get rid of the stigma of actually getting mental health support.

We have to realize, then, that by bringing this regulation back and asking the College of Alberta Psychologists to implement it, they're going to need the resources to do so. That's the part that – again, Mr. Speaker, we've had the delay, and now we're having the underfunding, you see, which is the general practice of this government: to delay, delay, delay on a situation, and then when you finally get to implementing the regulation that should have been implemented years ago, there is limited funding accompanying the process. Of course, the government needs to put its money where its mouth is. Actually, if they support Albertans getting the mental health supports that they desperately require, then they have to put the money into it so that the College of Alberta Psychologists can actually put this regulation into place so that they can make sure that people who actually are requiring those services can get that service from an individual that is reputable, that there is a standard within the service so that when an individual

knows that they're going to get the counselling services that they need, they can expect a specific standard of care when they go.

Mr. Speaker, I think that this is the bare minimum that Albertans can expect from their government instead of getting the rhetoric that we get often from this UCP government when it comes to actually implementing and doing things for Albertans. The examples are countless, as we've seen throughout this entire session. When it actually comes to helping Albertans with something, this government falls short. My opinion, right? Of course, the opinion that truly matters is the opinion of Albertans, and I think that Albertans have been very clear that, given the current context in which we are living, mental health is really, really important. We've even seen corporations like Bell, for example, get in on trying to break the stigma with people needing and getting the mental health services that they need. I think this is really important. Our government has to continue supporting that as we continue to go. Of course, it's that standard of care which is so important.

I'm glad that finally the government has gotten around to working with the College of Alberta Psychologists to actually be able to regulate counsellors, but what we need to see is a little bit more in depth from this government. We have to see a little bit more of, like: what are they actually going to do in order to support the College of Alberta Psychologists in actually making sure that this is something that's actually implemented and that over the years it's continued to be strengthened so that Albertans can have access to the best quality of mental health services here in the province of Alberta? I'm sure that many of the people in the House agree on this particular matter, Mr. Speaker. Of course, the health of Albertans is what we're focused on.

Now, unfortunately, as has been demonstrated by colleagues of mine on this side of the House, the government seems to be lacking not only when it comes to mental health but also when it comes to health services in general in the province of Alberta. Why is this happening? We can only assume why, Mr. Speaker. The government has its particular way of looking at health care – there's no question about it – but what I'm coming to see and what Albertans are starting to see very clearly is that this is a government that is purely ideologically driven. Rather than looking at a problem that an Albertan is experiencing and saying, "Okay, what is the best approach?" this government is saying: "Okay. Well, this is our ideology. This is how we see the world, and it has to fit inside of this framework. If it doesn't fit in this framework, if it doesn't fit within the way that we see the world, then the approach that's being provided..."

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Are there any others wishing to speak? The Member for Calgary-Beddington has risen.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak in opposition to Bill 16, Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. This is a pretty hefty, 60-page bill that's touted as another piece in this government's ongoing battle against red tape. I will say that, actually, there are some pieces in this bill that make some sense. Unfortunately, when a government decides to package together changes to 230 requirements and 12 pieces of legislation across 10 ministries, it becomes almost impossible to support the bill.

This bill makes changes to the Rural Electrification Loan Act and regulation, the Rural Electrification Long-term Financing Act, the Alberta Investment Attraction Act, the Public Lands Act, the Provincial Offences Procedure Act, the Mental Health Services Protection Act, the Libraries Act, the Income and Employment Supports Act, the Commercial Tenancies Protection Act, the Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act, the Red Tape Reduction Act,

the Traffic Safety Act, and the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act. So we're doing a lot in this bill.

I do want to speak to some of the issues that are raised when omnibus bills like this one are presented, but I'll just do a little side jog here first to talk about why it's difficult to support this particular bill; for example, the change to the Commercial Tenancies Protection Act. This was a series of measures that the government took during the pandemic to provide supports to businesses. This was a piece of legislation that protected commercial tenants from evictions, penalties, and rent increases. This was something that was only in place until August 2020, and then it was no longer applicable.

4:20

Yes, obviously, it makes sense to clean up the legislation. Taking retired legislation off the books makes sense. It makes sense to ensure that Alberta businesses are clear about the rules that govern them though I would suggest that to say that this is reducing red tape is really a bit of a stretch because it doesn't in fact change anything for the function of businesses. It doesn't smooth any paths. It doesn't reduce any regulatory burdens. I'm not suggesting it's not a good thing to do, just that it's not really doing what the government says the act is doing.

One other piece in that long list of affected areas that stood out to me: like, any time the word "libraries" comes up, my ears perk right up because, you know, what I'm hoping to see is some good things for libraries. I will talk ad nauseam about the vital role that libraries play in our communities. They are one of the only gathering spaces left, one of the only third spaces we have left in our communities that don't charge for entry. Everyone is welcome at the library. I spent a ton of my childhood at the library. I remember spending summers in Indian Head, Saskatchewan, and on the really hot days my grandma would ask me if I wanted to be dropped off at the pool. I would point out to her that, actually, it was easier to stay cool at the library because they had air conditioning. "Grandma, can you please just drop me off at the library instead?" And she did because she was a very lovely grandma. Usually I got ice cream after, too, so that worked out. So I've always been a huge advocate for libraries, and I want us to be thinking about: how do we strengthen our libraries? How do we help our libraries build capacity? What can we as a provincial government do to ensure that access to libraries is as free and open as possible?

Well, it turns out that what this government is doing in this bill, Bill 16, is increasing the total number of communities allowed to be included in an intermunicipal board from three to four and that all municipalities within a municipal district or county would also be allowed to form an intermunicipal library board. I understand that these are changes that were requested by Alberta's library boards and associations, and it's great that we've been able to fulfill that request. Again, you know, I'm not suggesting that this is the wrong thing to do here, but do I see action here that builds on the incredible work that our libraries do in communities? No. Do I see more resources for newcomers who use libraries to help them navigate life in Canada? No, I don't see that. What I see is another piece of a red tape reduction bill that has nothing to do with red tape reduction.

I'm going to jog back to my original point here now to just touch briefly on the issues that are presented with these kinds of wide-ranging bills. I'm going to read you a couple of quotes from a news article. This was a *Toronto Sun* article published June 18, 2012. The title of the article is Omnibus Bills in Hill History, and the opening line of the article is: "Are omnibus bills anti-democratic? No doubt about it." Those are pretty strong words. The author of that article is Lorne Gunter. I know that some of the members opposite can get a little hot and bothered when we talk about articles from the CBC. You know, I know they love to conflate balanced journalism with

woke ideologies, so I made sure to look for sources on this issue that would really speak to the members opposite.

The article goes on to talk about another popular guy in Conservative circles, Mr. Stephen Harper, who in 2005 called omnibus bills “a contradiction to the conventions and practices of the House.” Of course, that was before Harper himself used some, like, enormous budget omnibus bills in Parliament. Like so many Conservatives, of course, Mr. Harper was never one to let his values get in the way of doing whatever it was he wanted to do in the moment.

When talking about the content of this bill, Bill 16, what really stood out to me in this article was this quote:

The fact that the contents of an omnibus bill are admirable doesn't make their use any less offensive, though. They are almost always an attempt to slip controversial amendments past . . . the public without adequate scrutiny. They seek to minimize the political damage the governing party must take to advance its policies.

I don't want to overstate the matter here. I'm not suggesting that Bill 16 is anywhere near as controversial as terrible Conservative omnibus bills like C-38 were for Harper, but there is the principle of the thing.

The defence that is presented on omnibus bills is often: you can get away with it if you have a unifying theme. If an omnibus bill is considered acceptable, it will have a thread that ties all of its pieces together. You know, I mean, I guess I can give this government a little bit of credit for making an attempt at that unifying thread. Unfortunately, they just missed the mark because these changes to 230 requirements and 12 pieces of legislation across 10 ministries – I just do think it missed the mark because it touches on so many regulations that don't really have anything to do with red tape, and I've provided a couple of examples of that already.

I'll just speak for a moment on one of the other aspects of this bill, because the section that stood out to me was on the provincial offences procedure. This is a suite of “amendments to how regulatory offences are enforced” and “would increase access to justice, save time and costs for Albertans, improve enforcement and court services, and support a shift to a fully digital justice solutions.” Now, this all sounds really great, but that was a quote from the government news release. If you just read the government news releases, you know, everything they do sounds really great in their own news releases. Of course, we know that it's not. It's not really always all that great.

I had a lot of questions when I read this section because virtual court was being touted as a solution to save time and money. My biggest question was: is the government able to provide any data to back this up? Are more or fewer staff required to run virtual court than in-person court? Does virtual court speed up the justice process? Do virtual courtrooms process a caseload that's higher, lower, or mostly the same as an in-person courtroom? We don't have answers to any of those questions, of course.

The news release mentions how this will “increase access to justice.” You know, the first thing that occurred to me was: are people booking actual appointments for virtual court appearances? This area is a little bit outside of my expertise, of course, but I do have friends and family who have, for example, gone through the family court system. That's a system that I know makes use of the virtual format, but the experience the people I know had wasn't that it provided easier access. They were still in a situation where they had to take a half day or potentially a full day off from work. They had to wait for hours until their turn with the judge came up. I know there are some people who have the kinds of jobs where you could just leave, like, a virtual waiting room – or whatever that looks like – running and just pop in when needed, but I'll remind folks that not everyone is a white-collar working professional.

4:30

So, sure, you know, this change might make access to justice easier for, like, say, an accountant or an admin assistant, someone who has a really understanding boss, but will this change increase access to justice for a grocery store cashier, for someone who has to work in the gig economy? They're driving an Uber. They're delivering your food. Are they able to keep that virtual room running and just wait around for hours until it's their turn with the judge? The answer is no, of course. Those people, whether they're going to a virtual court or going to in-person court, are still going to have to take time off work to do it, right? They're still going to take that half day or full day off. I just don't see how this does enough to improve access to justice for folks like that.

It's warm in here today. It's warm, and it smells like doughnuts. I think it smells like doughnuts in here right now. Leave the Chamber, come back in, and tell me if you think it smells like doughnuts. Like, I feel like I'm in the Donut Mill.

Okay. I'm going to run out of time here soon. The other issue I just wanted to touch on was, like, the issue of red tape reduction itself, and that's because I've heard this government say that they're, you know, striving for regulatory excellence, that they're doing that by reducing regulatory burdens. But I would be remiss to not take this opportunity that I have to point out that regulation is not necessarily a bad thing. Regulations are simply requirements that a government imposes on private interests – that's companies or it's individuals – and they don't implement those requirements to burden people. They're almost always put in place with good intentions. Regulations are designed to address public health and safety, to protect the environment, to promote fair competition, and these are all laudable goals.

I see the hand coming down, so I'm going to wrap it up. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Any others wishing to speak? The Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Kasawski: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The red tape additions act, I believe, is what we're speaking to. This is the eighth red tape act brought in. As a new MLA I've learned that this is the eighth time that there's been a red tape act brought in by the UCP, which is pretty incredible. That's a lot of going back to the well for something, to create a new position, a new role in society. We have the C-suite in society. There's a new C-suite position; that's the chief gatekeepers, the CGK. You might see that on some people's business cards coming up in the future. Maybe on the government side they'll put that on their business cards. Maybe they'll put “Minister” and then also put if they are a CGK. There is a lot of red tape in Alberta that's not being taken care of with a bill that's here to reduce red tape.

There are some things I wish would have been brought up in the red tape reduction act and maybe some changes that could be looked at by the minister, who has the opportunity to review things brought in, for the opportunity for nonprofits in the charitable sector to work in casinos. Just to bring everybody in the House a little bit of the background, in Alberta we have a very unique system for fundraising for nonprofits, and with those nonprofits you have an opportunity to work in a casino, a gambling setting where we know there is, you know, activity going on that we don't want in society, but we found a way to – back to our unique charitable gaming system that we have here, Mr. Speaker. I'll just read it. It's the only model in Canada like this, and I didn't know that until, as a volunteer, I'd worked in some casinos, where we bring volunteer staff in from nonprofits. A lot of times they're community organizations, sports organizations, and their work is to be the bankers and work inside the casino. They get a

take on the casino, and it's a great system, actually. It's really special to Alberta.

One of the most interesting things about it, which I wish the government would look at and they could have looked at in Bill 16, is that if you are a municipality like Strathcona county, which is right up against the city of Edmonton, you don't have the opportunity to work at a casino, let's say the Yellowhead casino or the Argyll casino, which are on the border of my riding. For my community we can't go into the city to work at casinos. We have to work at a county casino, which means we're heading off to Camrose often, and our take on the casino money is small compared to what's drawn in for the city.

You know, from a county perspective what we would like to see is that we would like the opportunity to say: provincially, province-wide, can we find a way to make for more fairness in the system of fundraising for communities?

Mr. Nally: What does that have to do with Bill 16?

Mr. Kasawski: Could have been in Bill 16. It's your bill, and it could have been in Bill 16. That's the point. There was a lot of paper tearing at the beginning, so you might not have heard that I said that I wish there were things in Bill 16. This is something I wish was in Bill 16. You have the opportunity with your omnibus bill to bring in some useful legislation, and you have missed that opportunity. For Sherwood Park, the community, we would like to look at bringing this in. There's still that opportunity to bring amendments. We dealt with a lot of amendments today. Wish that we would have that in Bill 16.

We have had some good discussion here in this House about some of the things that have been taken away with Bill 16, which isn't bringing forward something for therapists. There's another type of therapist in this province, which in Strathcona county we wish was being looked at, and that is massage therapists. It's another profession in this province which does not have a college. And without that college, we are dealing with, in our criminal justice system, cases of assault by massage therapists. It's a very trusted position in this society. We have a role, and we have no college to professionally manage massage therapists. It's something else that we could have brought in with the red tape bill. Under this ministry there is an opportunity to look at ways we can bring massage therapists up into the modern times and just acknowledge that this is a valuable position in society. It does need professional oversight and needs a college of professional massage therapists, and none exists in Alberta right now. So there are lots of things lacking.

One of the things I find most interesting about the red tape bill is the government's ability to make claims. I know that in business if I would have come to my board and I would have said, "We just made you \$2.79 billion," they would have said: "That's great. Can we have the accounting to prove that?" What's so fascinating about a red tape bill is that the government gets to make announcements like that they have now saved Albertans \$2.7 billion through red tape reduction since 2019. Where are the benchmarks? How are we doing our key performance indicators? Where is our measurement coming from? If you can't measure it, you can't manage it, and that is just the truth. We get to say and make announcements like: things are 33 per cent better; there's 33 per cent less red tape. That's amazing. I would love to know where this is coming from. [interjections] Right? There is this amazing ability just to say that things are better, throw out numbers. I'm sure it went sort of something like this. They kind of said: what sounds reasonable, what sounds like a reasonable . . .

Mr. Nally: Intervention?

Mr. Kasawski: I would love to have an intervention from the minister. That's great.

Mr. Nally: Thank you to the hon. member. We had a bit of a side bet going whether it would get accepted or not.

I just wanted to provide some clarity because you asked a good question and I'm glad that you did. How did we land at the \$2.75 billion that we saved job creators and Albertans? Well, we didn't land there; that is an industry-reported number. I'll give you an example. One of the biggest savings that we did was allowing for the commingling of abandoned wells. That's saved industry over \$500 million, again, an industry-reported number.

4:40

But red tape reduction is not just about the dollars saved; it's also about providing convenience to Albertans. We have to look no further than my department, which provides personal registry services online so that you don't have to go to a registry on a Saturday and line up; you can actually do it from the comfort of your home, in your space at your own pace. So it's about the \$2.75 billion, absolutely, but it's about the convenience that we're offering Albertans as well.

Again, it's an industry-reported number. I hope that provides some clarity for you.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Minister.

Really, with Bill 16 the only thing I really like about it is its number. It's the number of wins that the Oilers need to win the Stanley Cup, 16 wins. That's really the thing I like most about Bill 16.

Member Irwin: Fifteen now, but 16 in total.

Mr. Kasawski: Right? We only need 15. Would we consider a change in the name of this bill?

All right. Let me just get reorganized. I appreciate that, Minister. I do still think it has that opportunity to be a bit nebulous when we're talking about what we are achieving.

With the red tape additions – I'll come back to municipalities – one of the things municipalities are most concerned about, not with Bill 16 but with this suite of bills that have been brought through in this Legislature, is the oversight over government. Government is going to have more oversight over government. I dare say that the government dream of small government, the conservative dream of small government: it is dead in this province. We have more layers upon more layers being added into our provincial system, and it's being added into by a government that brands themselves as Conservative. That dream of small government is dead.

We brought it up today in question period, and it's just one of those small examples. If you go into Hinton and you go down the highway – you will be familiar with going towards Jasper from Edmonton, or you'll be familiar with Hinton – off the highway we have a side road off a frontage road. It's really a standard road you might see in many towns and cities across Alberta. You would come across an empty lot. It's been empty for years, so long that we have poplar trees that are growing on this property that have been there for probably 16 years.

Everybody who would walk along this site would say, "That's just an empty lot." A developer comes to the town of Hinton and says, "We want to build here." "That sounds great," says city council. They look at the property. Sometime in the past an engineer drew on the property line a place where there could have been an alleyway or a laneway. It doesn't go into anything. It's a laneway that goes into the edge of a property line, but it was drawn in there.

So the city looks at it, talks to the developer. The developer says: "Hey, we would like to build on this property, but we just need to say that it's not a road anymore. This is actually just going to be a

property we can develop into commercial real estate.” Municipal council reviews this. City administration brings a report. They say: “You know what? This is a great idea.” The developer gets excited. Then they pass a bylaw and say: “You know what? We’re going to change this from a roadway. We’re going to change this into a property that can be developed for commercial purposes.” “Hooray. This is great.” “Oh, just one catch. We have to go to the provincial government to see if it’s okay that we change this thing that’s been zoned as a roadway into a commercial property for development. No promises, Developer. I know this provincial government. They get things done quickly. They’re so fast at everything.” We just had great reference to that from the minister.

And then they wait. Council waits. The developer waits. Costs go up. Construction costs that could be bought at today’s price: we’re going to have to buy at a future price. Time goes by, a year goes by, and the minister finally says: “Oh, why am I signing this? Why am I even looking at this?” They have to sign off on it. It gets back to the municipality, and then the developer can start that development process of going through the point where they want to look at: “What are the designs? What are the construction parameters we’re going to have to meet in order to build this site?” But they were delayed for a year by the addition of government oversight over government, and it’s unnecessary.

It’s another thing that could have been added to this Bill 16, ways that we can try and improve lives for Albertans, more ways that we can find for that. So I keep on seeking for those looks within the province. I know especially when it comes back to that – if the minister would like to get up and talk about the ways we can bring counties into city casinos for fundraising, I think that would be a really popular decision in counties that surround cities that have the casinos.

How are we doing for time there, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker: Three minutes left, Member.

Mr. Kasawski: Oh, my goodness. I’ve really covered it up. I’ve really talked to Bill 16 a lot.

Member Irwin: You can rap on that high note.

Mr. Kasawski: Well, then I’ll bring rap to this because, Mr. Speaker, I think there are some additions I want: the addition of removing that ministerial oversight, something that could be handled by administration, where administration would look at a development decision by a municipality, they would provide comment or straight approval, and then the municipality could move quickly on those development opportunities which matter so much to towns in this province and cities in this province, where it’s challenging to get development in the first place.

Then I want to look at the ways to bring counties into the city to work at casinos so that the nonprofits in counties have access to that greater pool of funding to fund their activities.

Then, last thing, we do need to look at oversight for massage therapy because massage therapy is working in this province without any oversight, and there are assaults that are happening to Albertans that could be prevented with a proper massage therapy college.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and at this time I’ll turn it over to anybody else.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any others wishing to speak? The Member for Edmonton-North West has risen to speak.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m happy to provide a few comments on Bill 16, Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024. I guess, yeah, I mean, this is something that is becoming more clear to me as we’ve now seen a number of red tape reduction acts are framed as such, and that’s that it’s good that the government’s going through existing statutes, regulations, or laws to look for updates and so forth. That’s normal procedure for any government, but generally there’s a mechanism by which you can use a miscellaneous statutes act to enact these things. It’s very efficient, right? Efficiency is a manifestation of red tape reduction, I would venture to say, and you can actually put those miscellaneous statutes acts to the opposition or any parties in the House and come to a virtual agreement before the legislation even hits the floor of the Legislature.

By somehow not doing that, we’re slowing down the process. As another one of my colleagues, Calgary-Bedington, pointed out, you know, if you’re building something between a miscellaneous statutes act and an omnibus bill, then you’re creating lots of ways by which a bill is just necessarily taken down, which could have some good ideas in it, by something that is less than good or inadequate or dysfunctional in some way. So just the structure of a red tape reduction statutes amendment act, as this one, Bill 16, is, has inherent flaws in it in the way that it’s constructed. If you use miscellaneous statutes, you can talk to the opposition, you could cut a deal with that, and Bob’s your uncle, right? You move on to something else. But instead we are – in fact, there’s no one named Bob here. I didn’t name anybody, did I? Oops.

With that in mind, I mean, you know, that’s the lens that I’m looking at this first and foremost and some of the individual pieces then that kind of bring down what is otherwise some reasonable housekeeping, I think, in regard to existing laws and regulation. The first one that comes to my mind is the College of Alberta Psychologists to regulate counsellors. I mean, this is something that’s been left on the shelf for a long time, right? It’s way overdue, and they’re just kind of rushing it into this bill without any proper consultation or planning or the money that is needed to actually carry this out.

4:50

We know that Alberta psychologists have been looking for some oversight, provincial oversight. We know that mental health is a priority at all levels of government and all levels of institutions from postsecondaries to K to 12 education, you know, to Alberta Health Services, you name it. I mean, mental health is front and centre as part of our responsibility as legislators. For us to look at this one little aspect of Bill 16 and see that this is tucked in there as an afterthought without consultation nor structure nor money to make it work does a disservice to this whole mental health issue that we are responsible for here in the Legislature, right? You can’t just sort of throw in something like that as an afterthought. It needs to be structurally sound. It needs to have the professionals that can help build proper legislation involved every step of the way, and it needs to be funded.

I mean, that alone undermines the sort of grab bag of miscellaneous statutes that Bill 16 does have built here within it. You know, my understanding of kids walking through casinos to get to the restaurant or whatever doesn’t seem like a big problem, right? But with the psychologists’ college not adequately supported in the same legislation, then suddenly the casino element that’s in here gets dragged down with that other thing. That’s my first comment on this bill.

I mean, we know that Albertans have a pressing interest in making life more affordable for themselves and their families to buttress our public health care system, which is in crisis mode at this moment, including mental health, of which this bill does touch on very briefly. We know that, you know, again, our education system is in imminent

crisis. I've never seen such big class sizes and lack of building for capacity because of all the young families that are here and having children, and then to top it all off, as if irony doesn't reign supreme in this place very often, we have a Red Tape Reduction Act within two bill numbers, bill 16, 17, 18, which is like the mother of all red tape increases. It's literally written on a big wad of red tape, intruding on municipalities and postsecondaries and funding and trying to build this giant desk of everything.

I can envision this, you know, Stalinist sort of idea of: we must oversee everything that goes across our borders, right? Bill 18, the mother of all red tape increase bills, just at the very same time that this one slides through across our desks as well.

I mean, I think Albertans want the government to do better. There are pressing issues that need to be discussed, and we need to make sure we're focusing our energies on those things. I would venture to say that Bill 16 by and large is not any of those things, and really Albertans expect better.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to this bill, Bill 16, which is again named as a red tape reduction bill. Over the period of the last five years I have seen quite a few red tape reduction bills. Generally speaking, I think red tape would mean that there are some bureaucratic hurdles in the processes and you're cleaning up those processes so that the processes are streamlined and that would help Albertans navigate those processes better.

But what this government has been doing and claiming with these bills is that somehow they've helped Albertans save \$2.75 billion through these bills and that this bill alone will save \$1.5 million dollars. I don't know how.

As my colleague mentioned, this will also include changes that will allow kids to pass through the casino with their parents and guardians. I don't know how that saves us \$1.5 million. I think I would be very interested if the minister could show the receipts and table those reports which tell the minister those kinds of things.

[The Speaker in the chair]

We do know that they saved businesses \$4.7 billion when they came in and gave them a big, fat handout by cutting their taxes, after which we lost a lot of jobs in Calgary; 30 per cent of the Calgary downtown, I guess, still sits empty, and we have yet to see the prosperity that the UCP promised with their cuts.

One more thing that I want to talk about in this bill specifically. There are so many pieces of legislation I can talk about, but one that caught my attention was the Provincial Offences Procedure Act. One of the changes that they are making in it is that they are adding some digital service and additional terms but also increasing the timeline for proceedings to be instituted within this act to 12 months from the existing six months. We do know that our justice system is under a lot of strain. There are a lot of delays, but what this government is doing is that they found this as a fix to increase the timeline for proceedings from six months to 12 months.

Yet what they did – they could have accepted the federal government offer for 17 judges, superior court judges, and established a unified family court. That would have freed up a lot of time, and they wouldn't need to change the timeline from six months to 12 months. That's not red tape reduction. That's simply: you're addressing the delays facing the, quote, injustice system in an artificial way by changing the targets instead. Before people could expect that proceedings will be initiated in six months; now they're delaying it to 12 months.

Essentially, many of the changes contained in this act are changes to the substantive laws in this province. That should be the responsibility of the minister in charge of the file.

We do remember from previous bills that the NDP, when we were in government, we indexed AISH payments, income support, and seniors' payments to CPI, consumer price index. They deindexed that, and that change, which impacted thousands upon thousands of Albertans, was also contained in a red tape reduction bill.

The government is not even up front about the name of their legislation, much less what's contained in it. If there are housekeeping changes, generally both House leaders usually agree on those, and that's passed fairly quickly in the form of a miscellaneous statutes act, but this one has substantive changes to laws, programs, and services. The minister responsible should be looking after these changes instead of creating more red tape by adding a minister, who often doesn't know what's contained in his bill. The government somehow claims that that's their red tape reduction effort. These are changes that will impact Albertans in substantive ways. That's not red tape; that's just government cutting programs and services under the guise of red tape.

One of the changes that also got my attention was that they were making some change to "public interest," which initially included "health, safety, the environment and fiscal accountability." Now they're replacing it with "health and safety of Albertans." Like, those are the kinds of things that either could go in a miscellaneous statutes act, or if they think these changes are needed, then the minister responsible could bring these changes.

With that, I move that we adjourn debate on this so-called red tape reduction amendment act.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

5:00

Bill 18 Provincial Priorities Act

[Adjourned debate April 23: Mr. Hunter]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Taber-Warner has six minutes remaining should he choose to use it.

Are there others wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity has risen.

Dr. Metz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise to speak on Bill 18, which is the Provincial Priorities Act, and tell you about why I cannot support this bill. I represent Calgary-Varsity, which includes the University of Calgary, and I have heard from many, many academics and retired academics and people that work at the university with many concerns that they have about this bill. Prior to my role here with you I was a physician but also a researcher at the University of Calgary. I received many tricouncil grants, I had students funded by tricouncil grants, and I was a reviewer of tricouncil grants.

I'm really concerned that instead of creating barriers to research, which this bill will do by creating uncertainty and, I'm sure, creating delays, this government should really be looking at increasing the research budget, which is something that's super important. Canada is falling behind the rest of the world very significantly in terms of the amount of funding going into training and research, and that is, of course, our future. Any added funds from Alberta and this government would certainly help stabilization of research.

In Canada research is mostly funded by federal grants. These are the so-called tricouncil grants, which is CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC. University salaries and pay gaps are under the jurisdiction of the provincial governments. There are lists of federally funded

grants available online, so you do need to look at the sources. Even looking at trying to track what money goes to what university is very challenging because if you get a grant and it involves collaborators that are part of that grant, the money will come to the principal investigator and that institution, but then the funds will be distributed to your colleagues across the country. So it's not surprising to me that it's challenging. And just looking at grants even that our universities would look at that come in, it's not always clear where all that money goes. Our universities also receive overhead from federal government grants, so every time we get a federal grant, we also are helping to keep the university running. And as the funding from this government has been decreasing, we are critically dependent on every bit of funding that can come in.

I did mention that one of the things that provincial governments are responsible for is the gender pay gap, which is worse at the University of Calgary than anywhere else in the country. In a 2010 CBC article this was highlighted. In July of 2019 the University of Calgary implemented a slight correction of \$1,398 to the base salary, but another report in 2020 published by the CBC showed in that second article that there was still a gender pay gap of \$23,000 per year at the University of Calgary. So there are some important things that this government could do to build our research environment aside from creating uncertainty that Bill 18 will do.

One of the major problems with research in Canada, as I mentioned, is that there really are not enough grants being funded. I mentioned that female researchers are paid less for the same work, but also our research buildings are old and need to be replaced and repaired. So I'm hoping that this government will rethink what they're planning to do with Bill 18 and focus on these issues instead of defunding our universities and threatening to destabilize grant funding.

I'm now going to review a really insightful commentary by University of Calgary political science professor Dr. Lisa Young in her blog *What Now?!?* An Alberta Politics Newsletter. I'll then add some more detail about the grant process if I still have some time remaining. Dr. Young first provides an overview of federalism and postsecondary education and clearly notes that provinces do have jurisdiction over postsecondary education. That really is not the issue here. Provinces

legislate in this area... [They] approve the creation of institutions, [they] set out how the institutions [are] governed... [They] pay some of the bills via [and offer some] operating grants to [our] post-secondaries. The operating grants, together with revenue from tuition and things like parking, [kind of] keep the lights on and pay faculty and staff salaries.

But it is really the federal government that funds most of the research. This research is seen as their responsibility. They offer this through these tricouncil grants, and I will note that they are arm's length from the government. The government funds the agencies, which then determine how they will administer the grants.

Here's a little bit of an overview of what they do and who decides. A researcher who wants to get funded by one of these agencies submits an application that includes all the details about the research, about their own background, and makes the case why they are competent and capable of doing this research, and they outline exactly what funds are required. Certainly, in making that case why they should do this research, the researcher is also going to explain, "I can do it because I'm at the University of Calgary, and it is a stable institution where the lights are always going to be turned on" and that they will have the resources to administer this grant. There also are a number of other core research facilities that would be important to this grant.

These grants are then adjudicated by panels of researchers from within the discipline, and governments are completely kept out of

this. Bill 18 gets to digging into wanting to look at who gets money, and this is totally inappropriate. We don't want government deciding where exactly these grants should go. These granting agencies do have identified strategic priorities, and these change over time, depending on the needs of society. These are determined by each of the different granting councils, and they set aside some funds for these areas of priority whereas other funds are for, depending, the best grants that come through to them, and that it is really based on that priority.

And I can say that these grants are highly competitive. To get a CIHR grant is a feather in your bonnet. They are hard to get, and it is a very small proportion of grants that get funded. And these are all from highly respected researchers who all have academic appointments.

5:10

For example, CIHR has set aside some "money for 'Enhanced patient experiences and outcomes through health innovation,' and 'Health and wellness for Aboriginal people.'" These are two of the priorities that are currently set aside as priorities. Social sciences health research funding "has set aside money for... 'Imagining Canada's Future.'" This is an "initiative, which prioritizes areas [such as] 'shifting dynamics of privilege and mobilization.'" Dr. Young in her blog also notes that perhaps some of these ideas might be "a little [bit] 'woke' for [our Premier's] taste, but [they're] hardly an extension of the Trudeau government's policy agenda" because they play no role in determining this. These are based on what is happening in society and what the needs are.

So how could our province get involved rather than putting up barriers and creating red tape? Maybe we could call this the creating-red-tape bill.

If the provincial government wanted to push research in [any] particular area in Alberta, [they] could spend [their] own money.

The government can do that. There already is

Alberta Innovates [which] provides funding focused on digital health, clean resources and smart agriculture.

There are no funding opportunities now in the humanities and the social sciences,

but there's nothing stopping the [government] from funding the kind of research [if] the government would prefer.

But what about this new legislation?

Can this government stop funding research if it would like? Well, here's a little take, Janet French from the CBC's account of what our Premier has said about our postsecondary institutions:

[Premier] Smith said those agreements also require provincial...

[interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The use of a private name, even if you're quoting from a document, would not be parliamentary. I'm sure it was a small error, and I appreciate that the member will withdraw and proceed.

Dr. Metz: I withdraw and apologize. I apologize.

I would say:

[Our Premier] said [that] those agreements... require provincial oversight in Alberta because the federal government is making political decisions about which research projects to fund.

Now, we know that is not the case. Our Premier has also said that they are

"[funded] in a certain way, based on a certain ideology, and that's what we're going to be able to determine once that becomes a lot more transparent."

Well, I would argue that everything is available there, the process. Everything is available, exactly what grants are funded, so we don't need legislation to look at transparency. We just need someone to look at what's being funded.

For the provincial government to pick and choose what gets funded by the federal government would require the granting [agencies] to amend their agreements with [our] Alberta post-secondary institutions. Right now, those agreements basically say that the institution can be trusted to hold research money on behalf of the granting agencies, and that they promise to follow accounting rules and make sure that researchers comply with research ethics rules.

That's kind of it. The universities determine who they hire in terms of faculty, which then can determine what kind of grants will come to a university, but they don't determine the exact grants that are funded. If this province is insisting on ripping up these agreements and bringing in a clause that tries to tell granting agencies what they can fund, I expect that there is going to be a no from the government granting agencies, and there's going to be so much uncertainty that we're going to see fleeing of our investigators, we'll lose a lot of jobs, we'll lose a lot of training opportunities. So I would really urge rethought on this part of the bill because it is going to create chaos. It is absolutely not going to have any effect on what gets funded in this province. There are other avenues to do that.

I will end my review of this and turn the floor over to my colleagues.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to rise in this Chamber today to speak in favour of government Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act. This bill, if passed by the Legislative Assembly, will ensure that federal tax dollars are spent in partnership with the provincial government.

You know what, Mr. Speaker? I'm going to tell you that in my first term, from 2015 to 2019, we saw an unprecedented action from the NDP, the government. They literally went to battle with our neighbours in Saskatchewan, picking a fight with one of our longest allies, if you will, from western Canada. Now, if you're looking at this, they were literally shutting down almost everything we could do. The joke was that they were actually building the Wall wall – the Brad Wall wall – between Alberta and Saskatchewan. That is how bad it got underneath the NDP government. Now they're here in front of us saying: "Holy cow. You know what? We would never do that." Yet that's exactly what they did, and they did it with a neighbour who was an ally.

Now, when it comes to the federal government, we're seeing – an intervention?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes.

Mr. Cyr: I will hear your intervention.

Mr. Shepherd: Certainly. The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul noted that there was significant, I guess you might say, warfare between the Alberta government from 2015 to 2019 and the province of Saskatchewan but failed to give any examples. I was wondering if he might outline a bit of detail about what specifically he was referring to during those years.

Mr. Cyr: Well, you know what? It was in the media. They saw it almost on a daily basis. A minister at the time, former minister Bilous, was actually known for his stances, for the jobs and his economy and how bad we were doing in Alberta, for the fact that you were chasing jobs out of the province, and Saskatchewan was seeing jobs flowing in from us. You know what? In my constituency alone, in Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, I had people that were getting jobs in Saskatchewan because they couldn't be employed underneath the NDP government. That is how bad it was. So if you're looking for an example, chasing jobs out of Alberta did a lot of damage. And, again, when it comes to our NDP friends . . . [interjection] No. I don't want to take another one,

but we can maybe go a little further. What I will say is that they are using this bill. They're saying that they've always been friends with everybody, but in that case I've got a clear example that is not the case.

Now, I don't believe that it would come to a surprise for many of the members, at least on this side of the Chamber, that for many years now Justin Trudeau has found it exceptionally difficult to get Albertans to vote for him in any meaningful way. It's my understanding that the provincial Liberals and the provincial NDP are actually changing their names, looking to pursue that, because it's so bad. That's how awful our relationship is, that their own provincial parties are abandoning the federal parties. You can't make that up.

What is Trudeau's response to this, Mr. Speaker? Well, was it to think that he would rethink his policy proposals to promote national unity? Of course not. Rather than trying to mend the divide in this country, he is simply making it worse by imposing his destructive – and I'll repeat that, destructive – agenda on Albertans and our taxpayers through direct funding agreements with cities and provincially regulated, funded organizations. What we're seeing is that they're outright acknowledging that they're trying to work around the Alberta government outside of their jurisdiction. You know, if they can't join us, they'll beat us in another, different way, and that is just not a good way to govern Canada. We're seeing over and over again where the friction that Jagmeet Singh and Justin Trudeau are bringing into this province and this country is going to come to the conclusion where they're booted out in the next federal election. And I welcome that.

5:20

This is why I support Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act. Rather than having our fair share given to other provinces, we're going to be working with the federal government through a collaborative approach. In this case it's going to be: you need to tell us what you're doing. We want to work with you. We don't want to be against you – nobody wants that – but I will tell you that we're forced to. This is not a good deal for us, and we're seeing it repeatedly where they're picking winners and losers. I'm going to tell you I am not in favour of that, and I can tell you my constituents aren't either.

Now, when it comes to Albertans, we need these dollars going towards actual provincial priorities like housing, infrastructure, roads, something that the federal environment minister feels that Canada no longer needs, Mr. Speaker. They admit that they're out to really change Canada. You know, fair enough. The federal government can do it underneath their jurisdiction. That's what they were elected to do, and I respect that, but they're doing it inside of our jurisdiction, which I don't agree with at all.

Currently our Government Organization Act requires intergovernmental agreements to be approved by the Minister of Intergovernmental Relations for Alberta government departments and some provincial agencies such as the Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis, Alberta Securities Commission, and Travel Alberta, amongst others. However, this requirement does not extend to all the public agencies or broader public-sector organizations, including municipalities, public postsecondary institutions, school boards, health entities, which has created a gap that could result in federal agreements contradicting provincial priorities and investments. Mr. Speaker, Bill 18 seeks to close this loophole.

Trudeau and Singh have been working in bad faith with Alberta, but this is not unprecedented. We have seen this again when it comes to the fact that every time we ask for what Quebec gets, we get ignored. We're only asking for what another province is getting. How can this be a wrong thing?

Quebec's legislation covers municipalities, municipal bodies, public agencies such as postsecondary institutions, school boards, health agencies, and other legal entities that receive more than 50

per cent of funding from the province. That sounds fair to me, Mr. Speaker. What about the members opposite? No? Don't know? Have to check with Jagmeet Singh maybe?

He was here today. Yeah. Did you ask him about Bill 18? I'm sure he said: love Bill 18. No, he didn't. No. He was here to undermine our government again, undermine Alberta's priorities. That's what the NDP government does, which is why, again, we can't allow them to get back in again.

Now, Alberta's government is demanding Justin Trudeau's Liberal government allocate Alberta's per capita share of the federal tax dollars for housing, roads, infrastructure, and this continues to be denied to us. Alberta will be launching a constitutional challenge on this matter, that the federal government is unconstitutionally abusing its federal spending power purely for ideological and political reasons.

It's not just about Alberta and Quebec that this has been seen, Mr. Speaker. In November Premiers across the country were united in demanding that the federal government work with and through the provinces when making agreements with municipalities. Albertans are absolutely entitled to be treated fairly when it comes to how the federal government deals with us. You know what? It comes down to hard-earned tax dollars that are being sent from Alberta to Ottawa, and it's only responsible to say that we should be included when the money comes back.

The United Conservative government will make sure this is exactly what happens, Mr. Speaker. Bill 18 is not about stopping provincial entities such as Alberta municipalities from receiving federal government funding. What this will do is require them to obtain prior approval from Alberta's government before entering into or amending or extending or renewing an agreement with the federal government. I can't believe that Justin Trudeau and Alberta's NDP opposition think that this is a polarizing issue for Albertans, who just want to be treated fairly. It is not unreasonable for Alberta to demand fairness from Ottawa.

Mr. Speaker, for many years, despite having almost no representation in Alberta, Liberal governments in Ottawa have been imposing their destructive agenda on Alberta taxpayers and Albertans in general. Ottawa continues to push their ideological agenda on everything despite the fact that Canadians are speaking up more loudly and more often to oppose the destructive agenda by the federal government. This needs to end.

Bill 18, if passed, aims to ensure Albertans' priorities are advanced to and inside of our province, not the priorities of the federal government, that the NDP are clearly – clearly – advocating for or we would be hearing the echo. Bill 18 is the answer for us. We need to make sure that our policy moves forward. We need to be working in collaboration with the other provinces. I'll tell you that right now, as it sits, all they're doing is pretty much getting in the way of everything we're doing here.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say that it's my pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 18, but I don't actually find it very pleasurable that we have to talk about this bill. Anyway, I'll launch in here. You know, many words come to mind when I read Bill 18: inappropriate, spiteful, government overreach, dangerous, more red tape, the idea that the province has to approve every single federal agreement with a provincial entity and just, like, the enormous amount of bureaucracy and red tape that will be needed to support that. Clearly, I'm opposed to this bill, and I will not be supporting it.

At the heart of my objections is a question of if it's even appropriate for the provincial government to intervene in the space

that is laid out here in Bill 18. If our role is to serve Albertans and to work together, maybe, to make their lives easier, safer, and more assured, why are we trying to interfere in the disbursement of funds to them? What does government interference in this space do? Well, nothing good. This bill is literally just continuing that fight with Ottawa, and it's doing it in a way that just reduces federal funding and other opportunities on which Albertans rely. It's shooting ourselves in the foot, Mr. Speaker.

There are three main issues that I have with this bill that I'll talk about in turn – I don't think I'm going to have enough time in 15 minutes, but I'm going to try – municipal autonomy, research and academia, and housing. This bill asserts that any new amended or renewed agreement between Ottawa and a provincial entity that isn't approved by the province is invalid. What a load of red tape for a government that always wants to reduce red tape. Even the government's own Fair Deal Panel recommended that no changes be made to administration of agreements between federal agencies and municipalities. But our Premier appears more concerned with picking a fight with Ottawa and feeding random conspiracy theories than serving Albertans.

Under the municipal autonomy section, in my notes here, anyway, the UCP seems to have forgotten that there are three levels of government – municipal, provincial, and federal – and Canadian residents over 18 vote for their representatives at each level, and each level of government has its roles and responsibilities clearly outlined. As such, every municipal councillor and mayor or reeve is an elected official, there to represent the needs of their constituents. If municipal councils find a positive relationship with federal agencies that serve their people, they should be able to pursue that without needing a permission slip from mommy and daddy provincial government.

As usual in bill debate, I'd like to take some time to reflect on how this might affect my communities in Banff-Kananaskis. Lake Louise and Banff and Jasper, which is not in my riding but definitely fits in this realm of what I'm about to say: these three towns are in a national park on federal land. There are intricacies in the federal-municipal relationship that are essential to town functioning. There are also some big grants from the federal government to these communities; for example, \$5 million from Parks Canada to Lake Louise for a new fire hall, \$4.6 million from the federal government to Banff to build and address affordable housing issues. We've got \$8.7 million for public transit and active transportation improvements in Banff, \$5 million to Jasper for zero-emissions equipment. I'm not sure how these large sums of money will be affected, but I do know that these three municipalities rely on that money.

5:30

But there are other parts of the relationship between these municipalities and the federal government that aren't about big grants and big projects. They're about daily operations in the town. If a water main breaks in the town of Banff, they need to work with Parks Canada to repair it; water treatment plants need to work with Parks Canada to do that. Any kind of infrastructure repair, daily operations: all of that is a relationship between the municipal government and Parks Canada. It is unclear to these municipalities and to me how that relationship might be impacted, but I can tell you that if a water main breaks in the town of Banff, they probably don't want to have time to involve the provincial government in exactly how they're going to address that issue when really it's an issue for the town council and Parks Canada to address.

Parks Canada also funds things like Roam Transit, which is essential public transit in the towns of Banff and Lake Louise. Parks Canada contributes to that. Will that money still be able to flow so that 5 million tourists a year can get around town with public transit instead of relying on their cars? These municipalities have a right

to work with the federal government on this. They are located on federal land, and maintaining that relationship without provincial interference is critical to just the daily operations of those towns. All municipalities, actually, have a right to work with whichever branch of government will best help them serve their people.

Moving on to the impacts to research and academia, I'll build a little bit on what my colleague from Calgary-Varsity was sharing. We've talked about the impacts to academia and research facilities quite a bit in question period over the last couple of weeks. I do believe that there are serious threats to academic freedom with this bill. It appears to be based on the Premier's feeling that there is some kind of grand conspiracy to only fund left-leaning research. Then yesterday the Premier in question period defined the scientific method for us. Well, luckily, we have a scientist in the House, and I'm happy to share my own experience with the scientific method and research protocols at a university, of which I have direct experience.

The scientific method: I'm not going to get into how it works and what the steps are, but it's basically designed to be objective and to create research objectives, methods, and analyses and recommendations that are removed from personal bias. That is the whole essence of the scientific method, that somebody could take your research and they could repeat it in exactly the same steps and get exactly the same results. The scientific method is free of personal bias. That is the whole point of this. The whole point of that is that data is data. It's just data. It doesn't come with an ideology or emotion or feelings. It is not partisan. Data is data. So the knowledge resulting from robust, nonbiased data is also nonpartisan. It is just the knowledge created from robust research.

For the government to suggest that there is a role of politics in this research process gravely compromises the objectivity of the research process and comes dangerously close to using ideology to generate new knowledge. This comes dangerously close to controlling the information available to the people, and that is dangerously close to threatening our freedoms of knowledge and learning. I cannot understate that.

This bill targets federal research grants, and I heard a little bit that this is because we need to know which grants are going where and funding what. My colleague from Calgary-Varsity did share some of the complexities of that. However, a simple Google search that takes about 20 minutes will tell you how much federal money is being awarded to what Alberta provincial institutions. The details of how that is trickling through the system may require a bit more investigation, but you know what it doesn't require? Legislation. It doesn't require a law to figure it out. It just takes somebody some time. We don't need a law to make this public. It's already public. Every single researcher will happily tell you who their funders are and where they got money to do the research because that is a part of doing research: acknowledging who your partners are, who your collaborators are, and where the money comes from. There's no conspiracy here. It is not a big secret.

Bill 18 requires reporting and approval of tricouncil research funding, as my colleague from Calgary-Varsity shared. In 2024-25 we expect \$533 million in transfers across institutions. That is an enormous sum of money. The research that is being funded by this is one of the reasons why Alberta researchers are known world-wide. Our researchers are internationally renowned. They are my colleagues and my peers, and I am honoured to work with them. I know our research facilities are the best because I'm a product of them, and I actually like to think I'm pretty great, but also I've worked with some of the people who I think are the smartest, wisest, most intelligent, competent researchers in the world, and they are right here at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. I talk to them all the time, and I

can tell you that every single one of them is very, very concerned about this bill and what it will do to their research programs.

As a researcher I'm also intimately familiar with these granting processes. I have also applied for an NSERC grant, and I was rejected. But I didn't try to change the law or petition the Premier to change the law for me so that my research could be funded. What I did was that I accepted that my research was maybe not robust enough or what NSERC was looking for, and I applied for other grants and have been successful in those. I've also reviewed grants and disbursed money. I've mentored young researchers and helped them with their grants, and I've been mentored by some of Alberta's best researchers.

Throughout this process and being involved from the application phase to the approval and the disbursement phase, I can attest that my colleague from Calgary-Varsity is correct that these research granting processes are incredibly competitive and that only the top echelon of grants are approved. They are approved because of the robustness and the objectivity of the science. They are approved because they address the priorities of the granting agency, which is formed to be independent from the politics of the day. The politicians of the day, whether that be on this side of the House or that side of the House, have no business in identifying or prioritizing research priorities from tricouncil grants. They're supposed to be independent from politics. As soon as they're not independent from politics, we lose some of that robustness and that objectivity that is so critical for the science.

These tricouncil research funding organizations are designed around rigorous peer review processes, which are also really important. Peer review is a critical component of science and assessing the validity, the rigour, and the applicability of a scientific project. Projects that are rejected just don't meet the high standards of methods or analysis to answer the research questions being posed. There is no grand conspiracy in how these decisions are made. There is no underlying underbelly of SSHRC or NSERC trying to advance some kind of weird political agenda. That's the whole point of them: they're independent, and they are not tied to a political agenda.

There are people out there who are doing incredible research in Alberta, and they are addressing incredibly complex problems, climate change, health care. Why on earth would we want to wrap these researchers up in more red tape? You know what will happen? They will just take their research somewhere else. If I applied for a grant and I got an NSERC grant and I had to go through all this red tape in Alberta, I'd probably just take my grant to B.C. We will lose some of our best and brightest minds in Alberta through this bill, and they will take their research elsewhere.

5:40

As Dr. Dan O'Donnell from the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations said, "High quality medicine, science, and policy depends on ethical research practices... And that means judging research on its own merits and not on the basis of whether the Premier likes what she sees." The question I ask myself when I am prescribed a drug or rely on science-based policy is whether it is safe and ethical, not whether the leader of the UCP thinks it will help her win an election. This bill dangerously interferes with our academic freedom, and I really urge all members in this House to strongly consider those implications before they vote.

In terms of housing I think this bill also gets in the way of addressing what is a top priority for Albertans right now, which is affordable housing. This bill could block badly needed funding for housing because the Alberta UCP has an issue with the net-zero requirements, and they're ideologically opposed to that. But green buildings will lower the cost because of lower utilities for people. We're leaving money on the table again. Again. We've done it

before; we're doing it again. The federal government wants to give us hundreds of millions of dollars, and we are walking away because we're ideologically opposed.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others?

I'd just like to take the opportunity to remind members that if you're hoping to have private conversations, there are many places to do that around the building. Just be respectful to members of the Assembly when they're on their feet.

The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, followed by the Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm grateful for the opportunity to rise and speak in the House today. The fact of the matter is very simple. Alberta's government has asked Justin Trudeau and his Liberal-NDP government in Ottawa to work collaboratively with us, to respect the wishes of our people, and to let us have a seat at the table in negotiations, but they didn't, thus proving the Milch cow cartoon of 1915 correct yet again. Instead of working with us, the federal government has blatantly shown time and time again that they do not care about Albertans. To the Liberal-NDP coalition the only votes that matter are those that are under their thumb.

Mr. Speaker, a year ago Alberta held its 31st general election, and Albertans re-elected our UCP government to advocate for the interests of Albertans now and in the future. Why is this relevant to this topic? Well, permit me to share a bit about my history. I grew up in Ontario. I moved here in 1998. I've lived all over Alberta in various different small communities and rural communities and the big two. I played junior football and lived in B.C., and I can tell you that what I learned from all of these locations is that the province that advocates for their people was better to live in than the ones who would sell their province out to buy social licencing.

I think that everyone, even the members on the other side of the Assembly, would agree that a provincial government should be able to pursue and advance the province's priorities for the betterment of its own people. But, as has become far too familiar, the federal government thinks they know best on everything in every corner of this country always. Mr. Speaker, that's just not true.

Ottawa continues to push their ideological agenda on everything, and they continue to overreach into every jurisdiction, to try to manage the province's responsibilities while failing embarrassingly on their own responsibilities. No matter that they've lost consecutive court battles relating to constitutional jurisdictions, no matter that more and more Canadians are speaking out louder and louder in opposition of their destructive agenda, the federal government just doesn't take an approach different than: no matter. No matter that even when provinces try to work in good faith, there is no willing partner in Ottawa, just a hostile, arrogant, corrupt, financially tone-deaf Prime Minister hell bent on destroying jurisdictional boundaries. This is why Bill 18 is so important.

In Alberta's over 100 years as being a provincial jurisdiction, Liberal governments have come and gone, and they've all looked to strip autonomy and representation out of Alberta. They continue to impose their destructive agenda on Alberta taxpayers through failed policy, now directly funding agreements with cities and provincially regulated and funded organizations.

Take the most recent carbon tax increase, for example. Our Premier has stood up with seven different Premiers across this country of different political stripes calling on the federal government to meet with the Premiers who represent the majority of Canadians who are also opposed. Mr. Speaker, 7 in 10 Canadians, to be specific, are opposed to that increase, yet the Prime Minister chose not to collaborate. Instead of collaborating, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

is hiding and acting like a scared child – throwing temper tantrums and refusing to meet with the Premiers of Canada to listen to over 70 per cent of Canadians, who oppose the Karen of Confederation, our Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau – instead of facing the hard truth that his carbon tax is hurting Canadians and worsening the affordability crisis. And the biggest joke of all is that Trudeau's carbon tax doesn't actually help the environment. It is nothing but a wealth distribution scheme.

If the federal government could stay in their own lane, I know that we'd remain happy to work with them, but with their constant overstepping into provincial matters, we know that safeguards are needed to be put in place to defend the interests of Albertans. That's why the Provincial Priorities Act is so important, Mr. Speaker. My constituents in Cypress-Medicine Hat feel that we do not want federal funding on virtue signalling political programs and projects. What we want is our fair share of tax dollars going to roads, infrastructure, and housing as well as other key priorities, dollars that are spent the way we want them spent and not the way that our Prime Minister's Lord Farquaad like ego wants it spent. We need federal dollars spent in partnership with provincial tax dollars on actual provincial priorities and not failed federal ideas like no more roads.

Even though you can count Alberta's Liberal and NDP MPs on only four fingers, that hasn't stopped the federal government from imposing a destructive agenda that Albertans do not want and do not need in our province. The message for our dictator-like Karen on Parliament Hill – well, their message was simple: elect more Liberals. What a narcissistic view, that is completely unacceptable in Canadian politics.

The Provincial Priorities Act sets up clear dividing lines. In matters of provincial jurisdiction the province is the boss, not the Liberal and socialist fat cats of Ottawa. Cities and other provincially funded and regulated entities will be required to have provincial approval before amending or extending or renewing any agreement with the federal government.

We know that the federal government doesn't believe that Albertans deserve their fair share, but, Mr. Speaker, our United Conservative government believes that Albertans deserve their fair share of federal tax dollars and to have them spent in a way that we prioritize, first and foremost. We will ensure this happens.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 18, the Provincial Priorities Act. We've certainly had some interesting comments about this today from the members across the way. You know, I've been listening to their MLAs talk about respecting the wishes of our people, about having respectful provincial-federal partnership on the spending of tax dollars, about wanting to ensure that spending is aligned with looking at the priorities of what's needed for the people of Alberta.

Now, certainly, I have many questions about how these members define what they consider to be the priorities of the people of Alberta given their penchant for pursuing things like an Alberta pension plan, which Albertans have been very clear they don't want and which this government promised they would not do but that they are pursuing. Similarly, forcing an Alberta provincial police force, which they continue to pursue, which, again, a majority of Albertans do not want – and they have made that very clear – and which, again, they promised they would not do but are now trying to do through the back door.

So when this government talks about wanting to align federal spending with provincial priorities, we have to ask about what those

priorities are. When they talk about doing what's best for the people of Alberta, we have real questions about how they determine what that is because they continue to pursue so many things that the people of Alberta have expressly told them that they do not want them to do.

Well, let's take a look at the bill itself. There are basically two areas I want to talk about today, Mr. Speaker: federal funding for municipalities, and federal dollars for funding for research. Let's start by talking about federal funding for municipalities. Let's specifically talk about housing dollars. Now, the executive director of the Premier's office, Mr. Rob Anderson, shortly after this bill was released was online. He said: Alberta wants its per capita share of federal tax dollars; we will ensure those dollars are spent on actual Alberta-first priorities, not virtue signalling waste.

Now, over the last few years the city of Edmonton has built 210 units of supportive housing. That is housing with wraparound supports – social workers, health care workers – for individuals who have complex needs who have been living on the streets. I can tell you that here in downtown Edmonton, in our central communities, we have seen many of those individuals. Indeed, that has been the case since I was first elected in 2015. We have seen the numbers of those folks double over the last four to five years under a UCP government.

5:50

Now, one of the best solutions for that is to provide supportive housing. Indeed, this government's own documentation – their own recent budget, business plans, strategy documents – talks about what a success supportive housing is. The city of Edmonton stepped up to lead on this because the provincial government was dragging its feet. The city of Edmonton donated land, and the city of Edmonton put in the funding to get this started. They applied for funding from the federal government, and they approached the province for a commitment on funding. The province refused to collaborate. The province would not put in a single dollar.

Now, thankfully, Mr. Speaker, the federal government did. Because we were able to access that federal funding, we have those 210 units of supportive housing here in the city of Edmonton, 210 fewer individuals with complex needs on the streets having to access the emergency room, tying up police services, tying up EMS.

When we talk about provincial priorities, we talk about collaboration on funding. One of the reasons the province did not step up was because they made it very clear they did not believe in the supportive housing model, this despite the fact, again, that their own strategy documents praise this model and note the studies that noted success. But in talking with folks who work on the front lines in a number of different organizations at different points in the system, they told us it was very clear in their conversations with this government that as soon as they introduced the words "supportive housing," that was the end of the conversation. They were not interested.

So when we talk about this government saying that they want full reign over federal dollars to spend it according to their priorities, it seems pretty clear that if Bill 18 had been in place four or five years ago, those 210 units of supportive housing never would have been built. To be clear, Mr. Speaker, we are still far short on what we actually need, because, again, the number of people that are living without housing doubled over the last four to five years, and we repeatedly saw this government drag its feet, striking task force after task force after committee report after report, refusing to take actual action. Meanwhile the city of Edmonton and the federal government worked together and got something done.

That is my concern, Mr. Speaker, when we have this government standing up and saying now that they want to be the gatekeeper for every federal dollar that flows to the municipalities in this province. This government has repeatedly made it clear that they are going to

put their political interests and priorities and, frankly, ideology ahead of what is actually effective for our local municipalities and for Albertans and that they are willing to insert themselves in that and that, in fact, then, they are willing to let communities suffer because of their own ideology and their political interests.

We have heard clearly from municipal leaders across this province who have expressed deep concern that not only now are we going to have this government inserting themselves in an ideological way, but they're going to create excessive red tape and delay projects, much as we saw this government, the current Minister of Municipal Affairs, drag out and delay the green line in Calgary, again for their political interests. On behalf of a few of their political friends in the city of Calgary they delayed that project by over a year, Mr. Speaker, with needless review and delay.

The second piece I want to speak about, Mr. Speaker, knowing we have limited time, is to talk about academic research and funding. Now, again, just after this bill was released, you know, it became clear that this government was now also going to interfere in the process by which federal dollars are awarded for research funding. They want to scrutinize every dollar that comes through. The Premier – and this is quoting from a news article – went on to accuse the federal government of imposing an ideological agenda while insisting her government is not doing the same. To quote the Premier: when we do spending, it doesn't have an ideological tinge to it.

Mr. Speaker, just yesterday we learned that in November 2022 the Premier quietly launched a \$2 million secret review of COVID response in the province. It's headed by a UCP nomination candidate who accused Alberta Health Services of intentionally manipulating data to justify health restrictions during the pandemic. Again, the Premier said: when we do spending, it doesn't have any ideological tinge to it. She said that with a straight face. We have a very clear example right here, not to mention the other \$2 million panel, that was headed by her mentor and close friend Preston Manning, who was awarded \$2 million, of which he took home a nice quarter of a million himself for that work. No ideological tinge there.

Now, the person that she put in charge of this panel was filmed making those comments about Alberta Health Services at a rally. This is a gentleman who has worked at the Red Deer regional hospital, Dr. Gary Davidson. One of his colleagues at that hospital spoke out at that time. He said that he was disappointed by Dr. Davidson's comments. He said that while the hospital had historic capacity issues, COVID-19 had in fact left the facility overtaken with cases, only performing life-and-limb surgeries. His colleague said: I think this kind of messaging causes potential harm to the public, and I don't think it should be tolerated. Now, did the Premier invite that colleague to be part of that panel? No, she did not. She gravitated to the 1 dentist out of 10 that says that flossing is bad for your teeth.

We have seen this as a repeated pattern with this Premier. She has an obsession with going for the fringe. That is all well and good, Mr. Speaker. If that is her personal interest, that is fine.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted. The hon. the Government House Leader.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under 23(h), (i), and (j). The member opposite said during his speech: the Premier has a tendency or likes to gravitate towards the fringe. It was part of an

extensive ramble from that member that I felt was – I think it's even worthy of saying – not on topic for the bill. I'm not sure what the obsession is with the Premier. But I will say that the member opposite certainly is using language that would create disorder in this Chamber, especially when talking about gravitating towards the fringe. That member would love to define what the fringe is. I can tell you that on this side of the House we are in government. It means we won the majority of the seats in the province. It means we have the majority of votes in the province. So I would hate for the member opposite to be suggesting that the people who voted for us are the fringe.

Now, it is not uncommon for that member or others to call into question the nature of the people who elected us, but the reality is that they did in fact elect us to be government. They elected us to form government, elected the hon. Premier to be the Premier and to lead the government. I'm not sure why the member continues to

obsess about that. Rather, maybe he should focus on the content of the bill instead of going on long, meaningless diatribes.

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, it's always interesting to hear the Government House Leader talk about relevance. I think the member was talking about Bill 18. He was clearly on point. He gave an example of how the Premier hand-picked some researcher who holds fringe views and, from there, concluded the Premier's tendency to associate with those kinds of views. We have seen that kind of tendency when the Premier attended David Parker's wedding.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the time for debate has concluded, and the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

Table of Contents

Prayers	1229
Introduction of Guests	1229
Members' Statements	
Home Construction.....	1229
Women in the Canadian Armed Forces	1230
Medicine Hat Mental Health Summits	1230
Government Policies and Children	1230
Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury.....	1230
Provincial Pension Plan Proposal	1231
Notices of Motions	1231
Oral Question Period	
Electric Power System.....	1231
Health Care User Fees	1232
Wage Growth and Cost of Living.....	1232
Primary Health Care	1233
Drought Preparations.....	1233
Federal Firearms Buyback Program	1234
Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund	1234
Reproductive Health Services.....	1235
Highway 628 Capital Plan.....	1235
Municipal Development Approval Process	1236
Health System Reform.....	1237
Funding for CKUA Radio	1237
Provincial Pension Plan Proposal	1238
Funding for Policing.....	1238
Tabling Returns and Reports	1239
Orders of the Day	1239
Government Bills and Orders	
Committee of the Whole	
Bill 12 Consumer Protection (Life Leases) Amendment Act, 2024	1239
Division	1241
Division	1243
Second Reading	
Bill 16 Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.....	1248
Bill 18 Provincial Priorities Act	1253

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