



Province of Alberta

The 28th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, April 22, 2014

Issue 21

The Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 28th Legislature

Second Session

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Progressive Conservative: 58 Wildrose: 17 Alberta Liberal: 5 New Democrat: 4 Independent: 3

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, April 22, 2014

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Let us pray. Let us pray that our strength will be renewed as we begin this new week of duty and service in this Assembly. May wisdom, patience, and civility guide our speech and actions on behalf of those whom we serve. Amen.

Hon. members, please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem. Further to the memo I sent out to each of you on April 4, in which I indicated that there might be circumstances where others would lead us in the singing of the national anthem, today is one of those days. I'm very pleased to have with us the Bonnyville Tune-Agers senior choir, who will now lead us in the singing of *O Canada*.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Thank you. Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Let us begin with school groups, hon. members. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Quadri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly 28 grade 6 and grade 12 students from Satoo school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Gordon Garritty, and parent helpers Eunice Tan, Janice McGillivray, and Charles Tompkins. I request that you please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West, followed by Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Jeneroux: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly an enthusiastic, outgoing group of students from George P. Nicholson elementary school that are here for the School at the Legislature this week. I've had the pleasure of meeting with this friendly group of grade 6 students several times this year. I believe that they have a strong sense of community, which is fostered by the unique design of their school, which houses a health clinic and a daycare. Minister of Infrastructure, please take note. There is also great support from their teacher, the beautiful Mrs. Sprague, and parent volunteers such as Marcel Balino, Dilushi Perera, and Vivienne Garbutt. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, followed by Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you some of the best and the brightest of the Leslieville school. I want to point out, as some members of this Assembly may remember, that Leslieville registered this last winter, on one particular day, as the coldest place on earth. Wow. What a record for an Alberta community. But they are the warmest hearts in all of Alberta. With their teacher, Ms Colleen Rudd, and the principal, Mr. Stanton Swain I would like to welcome them and to have all of these students rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there other school groups? I'm sorry. Edmonton-Decore – my apologies – followed by Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A piece of Alberta's history is going to be made today. It is my privilege and honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Alberta Legislature two school groups from St. Philip Catholic school. The students who are here today certainly are leaders of tomorrow, and we'll have to wait to see what their contribution to Alberta's history is going to be. Also, the gentlemen in one of the school groups are wearing bow ties today, so bow ties rock. They're joined today by Mrs. Garet Dafoe, teacher, and Mr. Matthew Charrois, teacher. I would ask that the students from St. Philip Catholic elementary school please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the Minister of Human Services.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the wonderful Tune-Agers, a seniors-only choir from my beautiful constituency of Bonnyville-Cold Lake; their founder, Lil Bodnar; and their director, Sharon Sharun. They are seated in your gallery, and I would ask them and their bus driver, Gil Proulx, to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services, followed by the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the spirit of improving the child intervention system, it's my privilege to introduce a number of people here today for first reading of a bill that I'll have later this afternoon. First of all, it's my pleasure to introduce Chief Wilton Littlechild today as a newly appointed member of the Child Intervention Implementation Oversight Committee. As you may know, Chief Littlechild is a member and former chief of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, a former Member of Parliament, a current member of the United Nations human rights Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and a commissioner for the Indian residential schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's my privilege and honour at this point to ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, my second introduction. Joining Chief Littlechild are a number of individuals that are here today in support of our bill. First of all, is Monique Marinier, a panel participant at the Child Intervention Roundtable in January, who is representing youth in care; and Samantha Wipf, who is also representing children in care and was at our round-table as well. On behalf of the Member for Lesser Slave Lake I'm pleased to welcome members of the Metis Child and Family Services Society, starting with their leader, Donald Langford, then Donna Kratky, Amanda

Collins, Kari Thomason, Mary Dion, Lorna Audette, Kaila Eisel, Claude Gallant, Bernice Gladue, Kayla Simms, Kym Pelletier, Kelly Klause, Kyle Lafond, Shirley West, Lezlee Martin, Rebecca Countaway, Angela Walsh, Harry Fuccaro, and J. Langford. It's my pleasure to have them here to join us today for what will be an exciting introduction of our bill.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you a resident of Killarney, Manitoba. He has travelled a long way to learn first-hand about Alberta politics while visiting his family here in Alberta. Dale Banman is an economic development officer for the Turtle Mountain region, a great place to visit in southwest Manitoba. He is also the father of one of the hard-working and talented communications staff for the Wildrose caucus, Tim Banman. I'd ask Dale to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by Lacombe-Ponoka.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly my guests today, Gemalil Bischoch and Marco Luciano from Migrante Alberta. Migrante Alberta is a community-based organization committed to the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of Filipino immigrants and migrant workers in Alberta. Migrante Alberta takes the position that the migration of Filipinos abroad is a product of the extreme poverty and joblessness in the Philippines and that the commodification of Filipino labour is encouraged by the Philippine government's labour export policy. Migrante is a member of Migrante Canada, a Canada-wide alliance of Filipino migrant organizations in B.C., Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. I would now ask Marco and Gemalil to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by Airdrie.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Teresa Schmidt, Teresa Budzick, and Theresia Brokamp, all visiting Alberta and Lacombe county from Germany. They're here today with Edie Biel of Billyco Junction Gardens in Lacombe county. Billyco Junction Gardens is a WWOOF farm host, and these girls are here from Germany because of the WWOOF Canada program. What does the WWOOF stand for, you ask? It's World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. These girls will be living and working on the farm for a few weeks and will get a chance to get to know the Canadian way of life. I'd ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I have two introductions today. First, it's truly a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Michelle and Jeff Bates, two very close friends of mine and community leaders for the city of Airdrie. I'll be touching a little bit on their story later today in Members' Statements. Michelle and Jeff were instrumental in establishing the Airdrie Health Foundation; in fact, Michelle is its co-chair. The foundation works to see overall health and the delivery of health care in Airdrie improved, and they are also a strong voice and advocate for 24-hour emergency services in the community and area. They have been working tirelessly for a modern, state-of-the-art 24-hour medical facility suitable for

Airdrie. Michelle and Jeff have two wonderful girls, aged five and seven, and they are seated today in the gallery to watch our presentation of the Airdrie 24 petition. I'd ask the members to give them a warm welcome.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, staying with that theme of great folks from Airdrie, is of one of the councillors for Airdrie city council, Mr. Allan Hunter. Alderman Hunter has been on council since 2010 and is currently serving his second term. He has lived in Airdrie for the past nine years. He and his wife have a daughter and son. Allan has also been a strong voice for improving health care in Airdrie and is an active board member for the Airdrie Health Foundation. He's also a great guy and is very famous for his belt buckles, cowboy boots, and common-sense approach to getting things done. I'd like to thank him for his service and hope we could all give him a warm welcome.

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

Mr. Jeneroux: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two very strong advocates for youth engagement in Alberta. My first guest is Timurlane Cakmak. Timurlane has attended both of the youth think tanks we've held and has given his input on how government, in particular the Youth Secretariat, can continue to engage youth. He's an active student at the University of Alberta, competing with the track and field team, and is a team lead for Caring for Campus. He is also a yoga and indoor cycling instructor in his hometown of Leduc.

My second guest is Kyle St. Thomas, who is also a fantastic advocate for the engagement of youth. He is currently premier, which is an elected position, of the TUXIS Parliament of Alberta and is involved in Caring for Campus. Next year he will be the recreation co-ordinator for Campus Saint-Jean. He currently lives in residence and comes from Lacombe, Alberta.

I would ask both to please rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, you have two minutes each for these statements. Let's start with Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by Airdrie.

Lil Bodnar and the Bonnyville Tune-Agers

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a privilege to stand here at the Legislature to talk about my good friend Lil Bodnar and her Tune-Agers. I have known Lil for close to 40 years. Her husband, Ted Bodnar, was my principal when I started teaching in Glendon, and I finished my career teaching in a school named after her father, H.E. Bourgoin. Lil is 87 years young. A couple of years ago she created a bucket list that she wanted to complete. One of the items on her bucket list was to visit our Legislature, which she'd never done before, and to sing *O Canada*. Thanks to you, Mr. Speaker, her dream has come true, and she can cross this off her bucket list.

Music is in Lil's blood. She was instrumental in starting the Bonnyville Society Singers over 25 years ago, and 16 years ago she founded the Bonnyville Tune-Agers, a group of the best singing seniors in Bonnyville and surrounding area. The Tune-Agers are very active in my constituency. Every year they put on two concerts for three seniors' centres in our constituency. They also perform at weddings, anniversary parties, and many events in the area too numerous to list. In 2003 and 2008 the Tune-Agers

sponsored a Seniors' Choir Festival and plan to have another festival this May back at home in Bonnyville.

Thank you to Lil and their director, Sharon Sharun, an honorary senior and a former colleague of mine, for coming to Edmonton. Enjoy your tour of the Legislature. May God bless you all. Keep singing, and provide music everywhere you go.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Welcome, all.

Airdrie Health Foundation

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, Michelle and Jeff Bates lost their precious little boy Lane four and a half years ago. We still don't fully understand how it happened. He was an active, healthy, and kind little boy, but one night he felt sick, and his parents did what every parent in Airdrie would have done. They decided that rather than waiting hours in an emergency room in Calgary, they would let him rest and take him to a doctor the next morning if he wasn't feeling better. Tragically, Lane passed during the night.

Obviously, this experience was devastating for Jeff and Michelle, but instead of permitting despair to overwhelm them and retreating from life, Michelle and Jeff showed a level of courage and strength that is difficult to comprehend. They were determined that Lane's premature passing would leave a legacy of love and care for others. So, Mr. Speaker, the Airdrie Health Foundation was founded, with Michelle as chair.

AHF has quickly become the primary driving force in the campaign to bring 24-hour health care to Airdrie. Along with Michelle it includes Airdrie's political leaders, health professionals, and business and nonprofit communities. All have come together towards the common goal of providing better access to health care for the people of Airdrie, including around-the-clock urgent health care services. It has been so effective in its efforts that Alberta Health Services has taken notice and, to their credit, has established a formal working group, including senior AHS executives, to work with the AHF in designing a health care model for Airdrie that focuses on improving primary care and bringing 24-hour health care to Airdrie. I applaud AHS and the minister for their involvement and for recognizing Airdrie's exploding growth.

Today I will present the first 2,400 signatures of Airdrie residents who are requesting that this government and AHS work with AHF to establish 24-hour health services for Airdrie, and many more thousands of signatures will be following.

Mr. Speaker, Jeff and Michelle may have to wait a little while to be with their sweet son again, but Lane's legacy on this Earth is already larger than anyone could have dreamed. It's a legacy of love that Lane and his parents, though separated for now, are building and growing together one day at a time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Invasive Mussel Species

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak on a very important issue; that is, aquatic invasive species, particularly zebra or quagga mussels. Anyone familiar with these tiny freshwater mollusks will know that their infestation results in objects being completely encompassed by these miniature creatures, creating a surface almost like concrete. High populations of these mussels in other jurisdictions along the eastern seaboard, including the Great Lakes, have led to an ecosystem shift that affects commercial and recreational fish populations. They've

been linked to blue-green algae blooms and have significantly impacted infrastructure, irrigation, property values, and recreational activities. This could result in \$75 million per year being expended to clean, repair, and replace infrastructure here in Alberta.

1:50

This government is the owner and operator of more than \$8 billion in water management infrastructure; for example, dams, irrigation canals, and pumping equipment. An infestation of zebra mussels could result in major financial losses not only for the government but for the farmers who irrigate southern Alberta and rely on irrigation to grow our agricultural products. The amount of damage these small creatures can cause is exponential to their size.

It's important for the government and the public to work in tandem to ensure that this invasive species stays out of Alberta. ESRD is aware, but unfortunately at this point there are no budget dollars. Watercraft owners, particularly those who use their boats in the southern U.S., should always remember to completely clean their motors and boats and drain water from buckets, live wells, and coolers before they return to Canada.

Albertans play an important role in protecting our waterways from aquatic invasive species and should educate themselves to be proactive about keeping our aquatic ecosystems safe so that we will all enjoy Alberta's lakes and rivers.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: Hon. members, you have 35 seconds maximum for a question and 35 seconds maximum for an answer. I appreciate the notes that you've sent regarding my enforcement of that rule.

Let us begin with the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Spring Flood Preparedness

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I have some important questions about the freedom of information process, but first I want to ask about flood preparedness. First thing this morning Environment Canada put out a special weather statement. They're predicting that heavy rain will begin early tomorrow over central Alberta and that almost three inches of rain can be expected in the foothills northwest of Red Deer. They warn that "some areas may be particularly sensitive to flooding due to already high water levels from the spring melt." Can the government reassure Albertans that our flood monitoring process is ready for this?

Mr. Campbell: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I can say that our flood response program is in place and ready to go. Again, we don't control the weather, but I can say to you that we're ready to move if we have to.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I asked the government questions on this topic on April 10. The environment minister replied that the government would increase the monitoring of rivers in June, and he talked a lot about the eastern slopes. Well, it's still April, and the area under threat this time is further north. Can the government assure Albertans that they have learned from last year's mistakes and that they have upped the monitoring of potential high water everywhere there's a risk?

Mr. Campbell: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me say that, first of all, we didn't make any mistakes last year. We had rainfall of unprecedented proportions. We had 214 millimetres in a 24-hour period. The

rainfall was so hard and the flood so devastating that it wiped out our monitors.

Mr. Speaker, we've put more monitoring in place. Our people on the ground are ready to give 24-hour response, and we'll be ready to go.

Ms Smith: For us to learn from mistakes, we have to admit them, Mr. Speaker. It doesn't appear that the government is ready to do that.

This government has been slow to adjust the needs of our foothills communities. Rain on snow events can be extremely dangerous. Last year's rains in Kananaskis Country resulted in the devastating southern Alberta floods. Many places in central Alberta are equally at risk should there be a major rain on snow event. Can the government assure Albertans that they have worked with all communities in the central and northern foothills to be sure that they are flood ready?

Mr. Campbell: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier to the other question, we have people on the ground, we have monitoring in place, and we will be able to get a hold of the communities as soon as we have to. Again, we have no control over the weather, so we will be monitoring on a 24-hour basis to make sure that we're prepared to move forward.

The Speaker: Second main set of questions. The hon. leader.

FOIP Request Process

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A government whistleblower leaked us an e-mail that states the following:

On November 29, 2013, the former Deputy Premier circulated a Memorandum to the Premier and Cabinet requesting that Ministers gather information about materials being released by their departments and that their press secretaries gather information about active FOIP requests which have the potential to generate media, session, political or other reputational issues for government. It was requested this information be sent to his office by noon Fridays in the template provided.

What does the Premier say about this?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would say that it would be quite normal, when information is made public, that the people who are making it public be aware of that information as it goes out. There's no interference with the process, but it's very important for us to know what that information is. I'll give you an example. In December a FOIP request was made about deaths of children in care who had been touched by care. I was briefed on that the day it went out, as I appropriately should have been.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, on Thursday we asked the Premier to confirm that neither his office nor any other minister's office was undermining the integrity or independence of the freedom of information process, and he glibly said yes. This memo was written by the Deputy Premier and circulated to all of cabinet. It instructed that ministers gather information about materials being released by their departments and that information be sent to the Deputy Premier by noon every Friday. Does the Premier think this is the right thing to do?

Mr. Hancock: Again, Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, what the hon. member is talking about is that as information goes out the door, it would be prudent to be aware of what's going out the door so you know how to respond to it when the people who get it, including the media or others, ask questions about it. At the time it

goes out the door, it's public information and quite appropriate to share.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the freedom of information process exists to prevent the government from suppressing and hiding damaging information about their mistakes, and the process is supposed to work free of political interference, yet the memo asked that the very political press secretaries to the various ministers should assemble the information in the template provided and send it to the Deputy Premier's office. If this isn't political interference in the FOIP process, what is it?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is trying to again create something out of nothing. What happens in the FOIP process is that the FOIP co-ordinators in our departments respond to FOIP requests. When the information goes out the door, it's quite appropriate for ministers to be made aware of that information because if it comes from their department, they ought to know that it's going out, and they ought to know how to respond to it. Press secretaries are doing exactly that job on behalf of their ministers, being aware of what is public information and advising on what the appropriate responses are.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Third and final set of questions.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's not the answer he gave us last week. Last Thursday the Premier said that he wasn't aware of any cabinet ministers who reviewed FOIP weekly summary reports. At the time he said that it was "an administrative function." Now we know that the Deputy Premier requested a different kind of weekly summary report, and that one definitely wasn't administrative in nature. It was handled by ministerial press secretaries, who are paid to be political. Why are embarrassing FOIPs being assembled and vetted by ministerial press secretaries?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is talking about two different things. The Deputy Minister of Executive Council has a role to play with respect to FOIP co-ordinators across government. There was a memo that went out from him. It clearly talked about the FOIP requests and a specific FOIP request, as a matter of fact, which dealt with things that were potentially cabinet information and therefore had to be screened from that perspective. That's an entirely different issue than the former Deputy Premier asking that when information is being released, all press secretaries be made aware of it so that the ministers can be briefed as to what . . .

The Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the leaked e-mail we have from the whistle-blower makes it clear that there is crossgovernment co-ordination for dealing with FOIPs and that there is another highly political process for assembling politically sensitive FOIPs. It is clear from the e-mail that we have that routine FOIP requests are being revised and massaged. In fact, in this e-mail there's a specific reference to revisions on three requests. If routine FOIPs are being revised, how can Albertans have any confidence that this government isn't fixing FOIPs that harm the government's reputation?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The Leader of the Opposition has a habit of asking questions about things of people who may not know the facts on this particular matter. She should know that this particular memo was actually proofread by the Privacy Commissioner – the

wording was approved, and then it was subsequently sent out – for the very reason that the Premier right now is indicating.

Ms Smith: I'm not sure why they were so afraid to admit to that last week, then, Mr. Speaker.

Our freedom of information process is under threat from this government, that likes to brag that it's transparent and accountable. The truth is that, for all the bragging, this government resists transparency and never wants to be accountable for its mistakes. All over this government thoughtful and committed provincial employees see that, and they are coming to us to try to do something about it. Will the Premier start afresh with an all-party review of Alberta's freedom of information laws so that Albertans can be reassured that our process isn't going to continue to be politicized?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the associate minister responsible has spent almost the better part of a year going around Alberta and talking with Albertans about the freedom of information and protection of privacy process and will be bringing that back to this Legislature at an appropriate time. We have talked about freedom of information many times as an automatic review of the act on a regular basis, and the only thing which threatens the FOIP process is the indiscriminate use of it by the opposition, who want to FOIP everything in the world, including – and I presume it's them because I don't get to know who asks the questions – a request for all of the ARs in government, which could be a million.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the Liberal opposition.

2:00 Public Service Pensions

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2008 the cowboys on Wall Street crashed the economy, causing the unfunded liability of public-sector pensions to spike to \$7.5 billion. Employees stepped up in Alberta by increasing their contributions and forgoing wage increases in favour of matching government contributions. As a result, the liability is down to \$6.4 billion, and the Minister of IIR says that pensions are healthy and will be fully funded in 12 years, at which time contributions will drop. Premier, the crisis has passed, so why are you launching a Republican-style attack on the pensions of public-sector workers?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I would hardly classify this as a Republican-style attack. We are not changing the pension promise. In fact, what we are doing is defending the pension promise. The age of retirement before the changes we introduced in the Legislature was 65. The age of retirement after the legislation, hopefully, is passed in this House will be 65. We are making changes to two things. The early retirement subsidy: we're not getting rid of it; we're actually keeping it and making it sustainable. The second thing we're doing is that we're ensuring that there are funds available to pay cost-of-living adjustments into the future. Hardly radical.

Dr. Sherman: Defending pensions by cutting them: please, we don't want your defence, thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, too many seniors in Alberta already struggle to survive on insufficient pensions, and the PC plan to reduce cost-of-living adjustments will only worsen the problem by depriving future retirees of enough money to pay their bills, thus retiring them into poverty. The Premier used to be Health minister. He knows how expensive poverty is, and he knows how much it will cost in terms of extra health care and subsidized housing. Premier,

why are you bringing in a cold-hearted policy which is so obviously penny-wise and pound-foolish?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member really, clearly does not understand what is happening and ought to go back and review the material again. The major change with respect to cost of living is going from a defined cost-of-living adjustment process to a targeted one, and that's based on return on investment. That's prudent, so we can keep the pension promise to Alberta's public service workers, because if you do not sustain the viability of the program, then it won't be there for anyone. As you have fewer people paying and more people drawing, it's more and more difficult to sustain that promise unless you assure sustainability. That's what this government is doing.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, targeted is right. They have targeted front-line workers with Bill 45, Bill 46, and these pension reforms.

This PC government's right-wing, antiworker ideology blinds it to certain basic facts. We've already covered a couple, and here's one more. Gutting public-sector pensions will make it more difficult to attract and retain workers, which means the government will be forced eventually to pay more in wages and salaries. Premier, precisely how much more will it cost to attract and retain public-sector workers who no longer find it appealing to work for your right-wing Conservative government? Have you done the math on this?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the premise, again, is wrong, so there's no answer to his question because you can't answer a hypothetical that's based on a wrong assumption. But this is the reality, that it's always been there for public-sector workers to be paid fairly, to get good benefits, and to have a pension. The benefits and the pension are not there for all the people in the private sector, but it is there for all the people in the public sector, and that's why many people who have a passion for public service also want to join the public service, because there is security, there are pensions, and there are good benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the ND opposition, followed by Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, the PC government continues its doublespeak on what their real plans are for Alberta's public-sector pensions. While publicly the Premier and the Finance minister proclaim that the government is protecting the defined benefit, behind closed doors pension bureaucrats admit that these changes essentially abolish defined benefit pensions for public-sector workers. My question is to the Premier. Don't you think that the 300,000 Albertans who depend on public-sector pensions deserve a little more honesty from your government about what you're actually trying to accomplish?

Mr. Hancock: What they deserve, Mr. Speaker, is a little bit more honesty and a little bit more comfort from that hon. member because it's very clear that the defined benefit pensions are here to stay. But the sustainability of those pensions is going to be enhanced by the modest changes that are being proposed by this government so that they will not only have the opportunity for those who are retired now to continue to draw the benefits they're drawing but for those who have retirement plans in the near term to understand that their pensions will not be reduced significantly

or at all. Those who have a longer term to plan will have that longer term to plan so that they can make up for the fact that the early retirement is not going to be as beneficial for them.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Mason: Well, thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that they'll have to work longer for pensions that pay less. This PC government is misleading Albertans. They claim they're maintaining a defined benefit plan, but if pension boards can't raise contribution rates to meet their obligations to their members, they can't possibly maintain a defined benefit. That's the bottom line, Premier. Why won't you stop this unnecessary attack on the modest pensions of Alberta's public employees and stop misleading Albertans about what you're up to?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely absurd that that hon. member would try and tell public-sector workers that their pensions are going to be less. Their pensions will be a factor of their best earning years, as they are now. That does not change. That will not change. That's the pension promise that we've made.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: are you cutting the cost-of-living increases built into the plans or not? Yes or no?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker. What we're saying is that instead of being guaranteed at the cost of living, they will be targeted to the cost of living and paid at what the return on the investment is. That's what makes them sustainable. Those can be accumulated over time. That's a sustainable cost-of-living increase that goes into the pension benefit, but the base pension is based on your best five years or your best three years of service. That has not changed whatsoever, and people can be guaranteed that.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Please curtail your preambles now to supplementals.

Let's start with Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 15 I was honoured to attend the missing and murdered aboriginal women round-table in Fort McMurray at the Nistawoyou friendship centre. In listening to their heart-wrenching stories, many expressed the sentiment that while stories about these women appear in the media initially, the files are then just thrown onto a pile of cases that go cold. They're not prepared to give up hope, and they're imploring that the federal and provincial governments do more. To the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General: can you please give some specifics as to changes your department can make to ensure that cases are investigated thoroughly and not just forgotten?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Please forgive my voice today as I'm not feeling that well.

I'm happy to chat with the member offline, but it would be a hazard to indicate any specific actions dealing with investigations here as both investigations and prosecutions are fully independent of political authority. I do think, of course, Mr. Speaker, that on a

higher level this is a matter worth looking into, and I thank the member for bringing this up.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Allen: Thank you. To the same minister: why is there no way to gather and measure information regarding these hateful crimes when it's easily determined that these missing women are aboriginal in descent?

Mr. Denis: I'm not aware, actually, that there is any type of system, other than the actual FOIP system or our statistics, that this member could use. Again, I would be happy to undertake to go and investigate in my department because, again, I do think that this is a very serious issue, with the number of missing aboriginal women that this member mentions.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Allen: Thank you. To the minister of aboriginal affairs: given that the government is committed to teaching students about the residential schools' impact, what else can you do to ensure that education extends beyond the terrible tragedies of yesterday and to the circumstances that are happening right now?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for his advocacy on this very, very important issue. He will know that we've struck in the last year two aboriginal women's security councils, a Métis council and a First Nations council. Both of those councils have identified the safety of aboriginal women as being of the utmost concern. We're working with them on that. The member is probably quite right; maybe there's an educational component here as well. We will continue to advocate on the national stage for missing and murdered aboriginal women. As I told the member the other day, we have advocated for an inquiry.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. Unfortunately, the time has elapsed.

Let's move on to Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, followed by Lethbridge-East.

FOIP Request Process

(continued)

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last November the former Deputy Premier issued a directive to this arrogant and out-of-touch PC cabinet. He told them to use their partisan political staff to vet all incoming FOIP requests that had the potential to generate "reputational issues for [this] government." To the Minister of Human Services: you were the Minister of Service Alberta at the time; you were in charge of maintaining the dignity and credibility of the FOIP process in Alberta. Why didn't you speak up the moment that you found out about this wrongdoing?

2:10

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, there's no end to how far they will go. Cabinet ministers in any cabinet, I imagine, are expected to know what their departments are releasing so that they can answer to their constituents, to the opposition, and to the media when asked that day about a certain piece of information. This memo was written and first sent to the Privacy Commissioner for her approval. She read it, she approved it, and then subsequent to that,

it was sent to cabinet. Keep digging, but you're digging in the wrong place.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act guarantees that all Albertans, from private citizens to professional journalists, have the right to access public records, does the current Minister of Service Alberta believe that this ongoing practice of using partisan political staff to vet FOIP requests is or isn't illegal political interference?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The word "vet" is where the entire problem here is. There is nothing being vetted. All of the FOIP requests are following the process. They're all being released publicly. The simple request was that we could coordinate what they are so that all of cabinet could know and all of caucus could know what FOIP requests are coming out, just like we do with any other public announcement. But nothing about the data or the information was being vetted at all. It doesn't even say "vetted" in the memo. They can keep pushing that issue, but they're incorrect about it.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that we now know that this PC cabinet is improperly vetting FOIP requests if there are reputational issues with the government, will the Premier accept this blatant breach of legislation, or did he not know that this rotten practice was wrong at the time?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I have a copy of what he's referring to right here, and there's nothing that says "vetting." All it discusses is gathering the FOIP requests so that they could be reviewed so that we'd know what was going out. Otherwise, they get publicly released, and we don't know what's going out, and then we get phone calls about it. There's nothing in here that mentions vetting. It's about gathering information so that everyone is aware of what's going out publicly. Nothing is being singled out or eliminated or affected by that process.

The Speaker: Thank you.

A point of order by the Minister of Justice was raised at 2:12:30.

We'll move on to Lethbridge-East, followed by Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Invasive Mussel Species

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Water is a force of nature that winds its way through bodies of water full of organisms that bring both nutrients and in some cases detriment. This brings me to the rising issue of infestation by quagga or zebra mussels. These freshwater mussels encompass objects and have been seen to be moving inward from the east coast of North America. Southern Alberta relies heavily on irrigation systems that could be directly affected by these mussels. My question is to the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development. What is the government doing to protect Alberta from this possible infestation, and is there a budget in the future?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and SRD.

Mr. Campbell: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a very important question and, actually, a real challenge to our waterways in Alberta. I can tell you that we developed an aquatic invasive species program, that looks at outreach and education, regular monitoring for invasive species, rapid response planning, watercraft inspections, and policy and legislation. We've put in place a boat inspection program, that's been initiated on our major highways coming into Alberta in an effort to stop any unintentional transport of the species, and it's also important that we work with our neighbouring jurisdictions – B.C., Saskatchewan, and Montana – to make sure that we intercept any boats that may be carrying the aquatic invasive species.

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Most of my questions were answered already in that very succinct answer, for which I'm grateful. I'd also like to know if perhaps the minister would speak more about how this infestation – I've been talking about southern Alberta – could affect other parts of the province.

Mr. Campbell: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I think it's important to realize that we are estimating that this infestation could cost the province about \$75 million annually, so no small cost.

Mr. Speaker, also, high populations of mussels in other jurisdictions have led to ecosystem shifts that affect both commercial and recreational populations. They're linked to blue-green algae blooms and have significantly impacted infrastructure, irrigation, property values, and recreational activities.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Could the minister explain if there are any initiatives under way to better educate the public about this threat, I guess, particularly at the border, when people are coming home from the south?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Campbell: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are launching an education campaign this summer promoting the clean, drain, and dry message. The campaign will help in recognition of the program while giving instructions about what actions boaters can take to prevent the spread of quagga or zebra mussels. We also have a hotline in place, which has been established for the public to call with questions. If someone calls about a mussel-infested vehicle or boat that they've seen, we have trained officials that can be there to clean those boats up.

The Speaker: Thank you.

PDD Supports Intensity Scale

Mrs. Towle: Mr. Speaker, last week the associate minister of PDD dodged questions on the supports intensity scale. Families and providers that work with SIS cannot understand why people with developmental disabilities must be asked questions that ask them to compare the assistance they require to that of regular people in order to assess the supports they receive. The associate minister has had all weekend to think about this and the effect of these demeaning questions. Will he respect Albertans and put an end to this line of questioning immediately?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This government is committed to delivering the highest quality of services to all Albertans. SIS is just a tool which is used to measure and to do a baseline assessment of individuals so that we can deliver consistent services right across the province. In PDD we serve 10,700 people. Of that, 97 per cent of SIS assessments have been completed so that we can deliver consistent services right across the province.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Mrs. Towle: Clearly, the minister is not going to stand up for people with developmental disabilities.

The associate minister keeps saying that the supports intensity scale is only one tool used to determine funding. In practice this simply is not true. It is the only tool. Can the associate minister explain to Albertans, who are challenging your statements day after day, what other tools your ministry is using to determine funding in the PDD system? And geographic area is not a tool; it is a factor, Minister.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Mr. Speaker, SIS measures individuals in nine different themes and 85 different categories. The reason for doing that assessment is to measure their needs, their goals, their aspirations right across the province so that we can meet their needs. When it comes to funding, SIS is just one of the tools which is used to have a baseline assessment for consistent services. Their existing natural supports play a role. Geographical location plays a role. Most importantly, once again, their needs . . .

The Speaker: Thank you.

Mrs. Towle: Mr. Speaker, clearly, the associate minister does not understand that SIS is demeaning and humiliating and that 97 per cent of these people have had to go through a demeaning and humiliating process, and this associate minister has defended that process all the way along. What other tools does this government, this ministry, have to assess funding for people with developmental disabilities over and above SIS?

Mr. Bhardwaj: Mr. Speaker, before selecting SIS, we went through a rigorous process. There were a number of different options which were available. At the time we had community boards, and we had the CEOs of community boards. A number of different options were provided to them. This is an international tool used by 14 different countries. In terms of funding, as I stated in my previous answer, their natural supports play a role, their geographical location plays a role, and their needs, their goals, their aspirations are the centre of all of that.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Let's go to Calgary-Buffalo, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona.

Electricity Prices

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The first-quarter report of the Market Surveillance Administrator validates what Alberta Liberals have been saying all session, that economic withholding leads to higher energy prices, and it is tacitly endorsed, if not encouraged, by the Alberta electricity watchdog, our system operator, and the government itself. To the Minister of Energy: whatever happened to the government's lofty pledge that deregulation and competition would bring lower energy prices?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

2:20

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are seeing lower prices. In the last several months we've seen lower prices. January was higher, but February and March – in April, quite frankly, we've seen lower prices than we've seen in several months. The system is working.

The other part of that, Mr. Speaker, is that Alberta's system, compared to other provinces, has no public debt.

Mr. Hehr: Up is down, east is west, and north is south.

Given that economic withholding is causing real hardship for Alberta families, the same families whose pension benefits this government is now threatening to claw back, when is this minister finally going to stand up to power producers and offer a solution to what is happening in our electricity market?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for the question. We're doing many things. One thing, first and foremost, is that if customers are uncomfortable with the month-to-month fluctuations in prices, they can sign a contract, or if they want, they can go to a fixed monthly plan.

In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, we have an MLA team that is reviewing different scenarios to look at these very same things. We always think of the consumers first and foremost.

Mr. Hehr: Well, the solution she offers is part of the problem. When are we going to cut all the nonsense of having Albertans trying to figure out which contract is best for their electricity needs? Why are we asking Albertans to become energy contract experts? Why wouldn't we just go to one energy price for all residential consumers by having them pay something like the spot energy price averaged out over a 12-month period?

Mrs. McQueen: Well, Mr. Speaker, consumers in Alberta can go to a month-to-month, or they can go to a fixed monthly plan. Over the last 10 years electricity prices in Alberta have been competitive with all provinces that do not have access to cheap hydro. We have a great system here in Alberta and, again, no public debt on our system here in Alberta.

Mr. Anglin: Point of order.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Public Service Pensions

(continued)

Ms. Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is also going after private-sector pensions and the workers who earn them. Employers said, "Jump," and this government begged, "How high?" They want to let private-sector employers gut defined benefits for their workers and replace them with a cross their fingers, cross their toes approach to scraping through their hard-earned retirement. To the Minister of Finance. Long-serving, hard-working Albertans want the defined benefits that they earned. Why are you stripping them of their retirement security?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the steps that we're taking are steps to actually protect the defined benefit pension plans that are in this province, both private and public. I would also suggest to the hon. member

that she might want to look at what's going on outside of the borders of Alberta. She might want to take a look at some of the things that are happening to defined benefit plans where people did cross their fingers and hoped that things would be better in the future, where they hoped that the returns would be there. Those defined benefit plans are in crisis mode and are changing the planned benefits for those individuals. That's not what is happening in Alberta.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that this government thinks it's okay for the cabinet behind closed doors to set the rules for consulting workers before stripping those benefits from their retirement and given that this government's idea of consultation means that if they don't like what they're hearing, they flip over the table and write their own rules, to the Minister of Finance: why is it so hard for you to understand that Alberta's seniors need retirement security, not empty promises to consult from a broken-promises government?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, seniors who are retired on defined benefit plans today are protected under the program that we're putting forward. They will not lose any benefits. For these hon. members to even suggest that is only to raise fear in their minds, and that is deplorable. What we are doing is protecting future benefits, benefits of today, and those seniors who are on retirement benefits today. Unbelievable.

Ms Notley: What's unbelievable is that this minister will not admit that he is making changes that are going to cut the benefits that people get when they retire five years from now, 10 years from now. Just admit it.

Given that the minister says that he's bringing in changes because he's been asked to by employers and given that the changes will be made on the backs of individual retirees now or in the future living on fixed incomes, will the minister admit that yet again he and his entitled PC government are placing the interests of their entitled corporate friends over that of regular working Albertans once again?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, again, you know, it's funny. When I started this process almost two years ago, I was actually in the camp with the Wildrose. I thought defined contribution was the way to go. I've actually changed my tune on that one. Over the last two years I've looked at a way that we can actually defend and protect and preserve defined benefit programs for our employees in the four pension plans that we're the trustee of, and that is exactly what we're doing. We are defending defined benefit programs. I met with all of the union leaders last week. We're starting the contribution cap discussion this week. We'll be talking about joint sponsorship as we move forward.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, your point of order was noted at 2:22. Now let's recognize you for your question.

Planned Transmission Line Shutdown

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Electric System Operator announced last week that May was the best time to shut down the transmission line for 12 days so that ultimately it could do its work to connect a new HVDC transmission line. This decision jeopardizes the reliability of the system, and it's going to raise electricity prices by 30 to 40 per cent, costing consumers

millions of dollars. Why should consumers pay for this mismanagement and not AltaLink?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The prices for May have not yet been released, so at this point that is just mere speculation. If people want to make sure that they have prices that are the same from month to month, we have a plan, and we have a system in place for consumers to do that. As I said, the prices for the month of April are the lowest that we've seen in months.

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, listen up. Listen up. Given that the new HVDC transmission line is not built and that it won't be built until 2015 and given that there are no wires to be connected to in May and that some of the towers have not been constructed, can the minister explain to hard-working Albertans why they will pay more in May to connect to a transmission line that does not exist and will not exist for another year?

Mrs. McQueen: Mr. Speaker, we make sure that as we're building out transmission for the entire province – and I believe it was that hon. member, who wasn't in the House at the time, who was going on and on about how we didn't need transmission. We have been making sure that we have a system that is effective, reliable, and affordable for Albertans. That is what we have been doing as a government, and that is what we will continue to do.

Mr. Wilson: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Calgary Shepard generating plant will be online and completed by 2015 and given that it will provide an increased stability to the system once it's energized, eliminating AltaLink's need to destabilize the system while they work, why can't AltaLink wait until the Shepard plant is energized to do their work and save Albertans millions of dollars in utility charges? What's the rush?

Mrs. McQueen: Well, Mr. Speaker, we want to make sure that when Albertans need to turn on the lights, we have the lights there for them to turn on, that the system is built. We believe in a competitive marketplace, unlike this member or members from the other two parties. It is our responsibility to make sure that we have affordable, accessible electricity for Albertans when they need it, and that is exactly what this government is doing.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Calgary-Shaw, your point of order at 2:27:45 has been noted.

Let's move on to Calgary-Glenmore, followed by Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Flood-related Temporary Housing

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following last year's flood the government moved forward in building two temporary communities for Albertans that needed accommodation. Many of the people that signed up for temporary housing lost everything overnight. Since then the temporary community named Great Plains, in Calgary, has closed, and the community called Saddlebrook, just outside of High River, is still open. Great Plains was built to house about 700 residents, and its population only hit about a hundred people. Saddlebrook was built for a thousand

residents and was fully occupied last fall. Can the Minister of Municipal Affairs tell us what the costs to taxpayers were for these temporary communities?

The Speaker: The associate minister responsible for Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year, in the worst disaster we've seen in this country, a hundred thousand people were impacted, 15,000 homes were damaged, and 3,000 people asked us for temporary housing. This government moved very quickly and within 10 days had a plan to put temporary housing in place for these folks. The cost of this housing for these two communities was approximately \$87 million, and I believe it was money well spent for the families that had a place to live.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister and your department, for the hard work that was undertaken at the time. Will any of the costs from building and operating the Saddlebrook and Great Plains temporary communities be recovered from the federal government?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister.

2:30

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I'd like to take a minute to thank the federal government and the disaster relief program for working with us and, in fact, all of the private and public and not-for-profits that worked with us through this very difficult time. We believe that under the disaster relief program, we're going to see nearly all of this money returned to the taxpayers of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you. Again to the same minister: what is the status of the Highwood Junction, the third temporary community that is planned for High River?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you know, High River was extremely impacted by this event, and there are still many people out of their homes, some still living in temporary housing. Highwood Junction is a community that we're developing right in High River to help people with longer term housing. This is for people that have disabilities, for seniors that need to be close to their homes, for people that want to be in their own community while they're rebuilding their lives, or for larger families that need that kind of space. We're going to work with them. We'll build this community in High River and help those families get back into their community.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, followed by Leduc-Beaumont.

Firearm Collection during High River Flooding

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This very liberal Justice minister has done a good job ducking responsibility for his government's part in the High River gun grab. However, documents obtained through an access to information request show a yet to be identified minister had advance information

about plans to kick in doors and seize guns from private homes in the flood-ravaged town well before it happened. Minister, the truth has a way of coming out. If any minister in this PC government had advance information about the High River gun grab, shouldn't it be you?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I thank this member for his question about the continuation of our common-sense conservative justice policies. As I've indicated before at our main estimates, I can only speak for myself, and I found out about this issue when I was visiting the RCMP detachment and saw many guns coming in. I immediately wrote a letter to the RCMP former commissioner, Dale McGowan, which I've already tabled here. That actually has triggered a full investigation. I'll let the RCMP complete that.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that we now know a minister from this incompetent PC government had advance information about the gun grab in High River, will the minister commit to an independent investigation to see which minister took actions against law-abiding gun owners in High River, or is that a stone he just doesn't want turned over?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, there already is an independent investigation going on, and that's with the RCMP Public Complaints Commission. That's not police investigating police; that actually is a fully independent body. I expect that probably sometime in June, but that's in their hands. I will make it public to this Assembly when I get it.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this Justice minister said that there was no direction from his government to do this, does he understand that if the minister named in this document turns out to be him, Albertans will know with certainty that he was the one that ordered the gun seizures and that his Trudeau-inspired and PC-endorsed liberal agenda will be uncovered?

Mr. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I would like to rise on a point of order. I'd like to indicate that perhaps this member should be doing better research as an MLA and stop practising law as a criminal defence attorney.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont, followed by Drumheller-Stettler.

Grain Rail Transportation Backlog

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjections] Last year . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, Leduc-Beaumont has the floor, and he's trying hard to be heard with it. Thank you.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year's crop yields were 30 per cent higher than normal. However, that entire crop won't be shipped till at best later this year due to issues with the rail lines. Considering that larger crops are becoming the norm, this problem is expected to continue. Our farmers will suffer and our customers will look to other sources for their products until the government of Canada and the rail companies understand the importance of our agricultural sector being able to deliver their products on time. To the minister of agriculture: what is your ministry doing in conjunction with the government of Canada to

push the rail companies to ensure that this backlog does not become a . . .

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member for the question. This is a matter of great concern to us, and it's an issue, really, of national concern. We have been very aggressive on this issue, but as well industry partners and other provinces have also been very aggressive. We're very pleased that the federal government has now taken some steps. They've passed an order in council, which creates some quick action, but also they've now tabled some legislation which is taking some of the suggestions that we've made in terms of interswitching distances and keeping better track of data and whatnot.

The Speaker: Thank you.

First supplemental.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Mr. Minister. I do appreciate those efforts so far, but are you exploring any other options for grain farmers to get their goods to market on time?

Mr. Olson: Mr. Speaker, we've been having a lot of discussions, and these are discussions, interestingly, that have been going on for, really, decades. We are pleased that we're seeing some action from the federal government now. There are conversations in the New West Partnership. We're going to be involved in a symposium next fall in Saskatchewan. Interestingly, this is not just about grain, though. This is about all commodities because the movement of all commodities is a matter of great concern to us right now.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Rogers: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: Mr. Minister, are you planning on providing any form of assistance to the farmers whose livelihoods are being impacted through no fault of their own?

Mr. Olson: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of options already. The federal government has an advanced payment program where producers can get \$400,000 advances, and \$100,000 of that is interest free. As of April 1 we're into a new year, so that's another possibility. There are also other options. I would note that AgriInvest, which is a federally-provincially funded program, has some half-billion dollars that producers have in Alberta.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler, followed by Edmonton-Manning.

Acute Health Care in Consort

Mr. Strankman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've asked six questions, given two member's statements, and presented a 1,000-person petition on the lack of acute-care beds in the community of Consort, and still nothing. Once again to the Minister of Health. It has been over three long years now that Consort has not had their acute-care beds and that this government has had the time to find a solution. Consort does not want to hear the PC pig Latin about mitigating circumstances. They want to know that these hospital beds will be returned to their community. Will they?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I've also had the pleasure of answering these same questions multiple times for the hon. member, and the answer actually hasn't changed from the last time that he asked. We continue to have challenges in the community of Consort with respect to ensuring sufficient volume to allow us to provide services that are safe and also to allow us to attract the required health professionals to offer those services. The question is about meeting the needs of not just the citizens of Consort but the surrounding area, and we are doing that.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Strankman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As some members have said, this is question period, not answer period.

Given that the Minister of Health continues to speak in bureaucratese about factors and circumstances and he meets and consults without getting anything in done in over three years, will he please tell AHS that enough is enough and that he expects acute-care beds in Consort to be in operation as soon as possible?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that of all people, the hon. member would not want a situation where in the political sphere we were directing the delivery of programs and services at the local level. The question is a question for Alberta Health Services and their professionals to determine. The hon. member knows full well that there is a significant issue with respect to having sufficient volume in that hospital to allow it to deliver services safely and effectively and to attract the required health professionals. If and when we're in a situation where we have those conditions, I'm sure that AHS will restore the acute-care services.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Strankman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'm rolling towards nine questions and no answers.

Given that this is a secretive government that does not share information with the public and does not keep its promises, will the Minister of Health once and for all break out of the PC government mold and show some leadership, follow through with your promises, and open the beds in Consort?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, leadership would be recognizing the fact that with 99 hospitals across the province, we have to ensure that all of the hospitals are attracting a sufficient volume of patients and health professionals to deliver services safely and effectively. A number of our smaller hospitals, including Consort, are facing these challenges. That is not to say that they do not deliver other community-based services that are very, very important to the community like public health and mental health. I appreciate that this hon. member would like the same hospital in his community that they had in 1970. The fact is that health care delivery has changed in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

2:40

Organ Donor Registry

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know that April 20 to 27 is National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week. This week draws awareness to the need for organ and tissue donation across the country. That's why I was very pleased to learn about and attend this morning's launch of the Alberta organ and tissue donation registry, following on Bill 201, which I sponsored in

2011. My first question is to the Minister of Health. Can you, Minister, tell us how this online registry helps increase the number of organ donations in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for his question. He was, in fact, a leader within our caucus in bringing forward a private member's bill a few years ago that raised awareness of this issue significantly. Today we have over 500 Albertans waiting for an organ transplant in our province. Many more are waiting for tissue transplants such as corneas or heart valves. This online registry, in short, will make it easier for Albertans to register their intention to donate, and it will support that decision-makers respect their wishes if and when they are in a position to be a donor.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you. To the same minister: what safeguards have been put in place to ensure people's personal information is well protected by this system?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we've taken extensive measures to ensure that information provided in the registry is kept secure. The registry complies with all the requirements of the Health Information Act. The registry is maintained by my ministry, the Ministry of Health, in a secure environment. There are a number of checks and balances within the registry itself that require people to identify multiple pieces of personally identifying information in order to verify their own identity.

Mr. Sandhu: To the same minister again: this registry system is a good step, but what else is the government doing to help improve organ and tissue donor rates in Alberta?

Thank you.

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is right. There is more to be done. The registry is an important step in making it easy for Albertans to register their intent to donate electronically. Later on this spring, when Albertans renew their drivers' licences and personal identification cards, they will be asked if they wish to register their intent at that time. Drivers' licences will contain a symbol designating that that individual has registered their intent to donate. Of course, later this year we will be establishing a separate organ and tissue donation agency for the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, today marks a significant birthday – well, aren't they all? – for the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood. Please join me in congratulating him on his birthday.

Equally important, I had received several notes asking for a 30-second time out, so to speak, at the end of question period when we have members' statements with which we want to continue. Now I've received several notes saying: please discontinue the 30 seconds. So let's try that for a while. I'm at your service.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: Let's go on with Calgary-Glenmore for her private member's statement, followed by Sherwood Park.

Genetics Research

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. April 29 is the anniversary of one of the most important discoveries in the field of genetics, and an Alberta organization has been taking the lead in making it a day worth noting. In April 1953 it was determined that the double helix structure of DNA is the basic building block of what makes us who we are. Because of genetics ranchers can now do a simple test to gain insight into the genetic makeup of their livestock to help raise quality Alberta beef and to ensure the best dairy cows. In plants it is genetics that allows crops to thrive in Alberta's climate. With careful genetic selection and testing Alberta researchers have helped the canola and flax industry be more competitive.

Here in Alberta we are proud to have an outstanding industry leader. Genome Alberta was created in 2006 as a joint initiative by the government of Alberta and Genome Canada. It has led many successful research efforts and is a leader in Alberta's contributions to the field of genetics. On April 29 Genome Alberta along with the Let's Talk Science organization will mark DNA Day with its fourth annual day of online activities. Experts in the field of genetics have recorded videos answering questions, all to be released on that day. Also, there will be digital chat rooms with experts and a Google Hangout with Jay Ingram, a well-known science broadcaster based in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, since the double helix was discovered 61 years ago, the world has made significant progress in understanding genetics. The work that Genome Alberta is doing ensures that our province is at the forefront of international human research and innovation. Major research in the energy sector is also under way to help industry deal with corrosion issues and clean up tailings ponds.

An important day in the world of science is occurring on April 29, Mr. Speaker. I encourage all members along with all Albertans to recognize this day by going to letstalkdna.ca.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Sherwood Park, followed by Calgary-Fish Creek.

GreenTRIP Funding

Ms Olesen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Tuesday I was so pleased to welcome the Minister of Transportation and the Associate Minister of Seniors along with the Strathcona county mayor, Roxanne Carr, to Sherwood Park for the unveiling of the new Bethel transit terminal. The new transit centre will have parking for 1,200 vehicles and a passenger pickup and drop-off area in addition to the new bus station and loading area. It is all estimated to cost \$23 million. Our government is contributing \$13.6 million through the green transit incentives program.

Mayor Carr reported that the new transit centre is one of the largest in the capital region and that it will facilitate 5,000 passenger movements a day. She said, "This terminal allows our community to restructure its bus routes, improve inter-municipal and local transit services, and take cars off highways."

I understand GreenTRIP is funding transit programs in 15 municipalities so far, to a total of over \$1 billion. I also understand that the call for a second round of applications, for close to another billion dollars, just opened up. You may wish to ensure that your municipalities are aware of the availability of the GreenTRIP funding that covers transit vehicles, light rail transit

services as well as transit terminals. Applicants are required to contribute at least one-third of the cost of projects.

I am proud our government is helping Albertans access a wider range of sustainable and accessible transit alternatives for local and regional travel while cutting down on our carbon footprint.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Health Care Professionals

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's not often that politicians want to talk about personal health issues. I recently underwent surgery, and I spent about a week in the hospital recovering. I feel it's important to mention the hard-working health care professionals, who truly deserve to be thanked.

Once you're in the system, Alberta health care is top notch. The quality of care I received in the operating room and during recovery was absolutely excellent. I saw doctors and nurses and health care aides doing everything they could do to make sure that not only I was safe and comfortable but also everyone else around me.

Mr. Speaker, the people taking care of me didn't know who I was or the job that I do. They had no idea I was the opposition Health critic. Quite frankly, they were too busy dealing with patients to give it much thought. Everywhere you looked, there were patients in bed. During my recovery one nurse suggested I take a walk, so I thought, "I'll go to the patient lounge," but, no, I couldn't do that because even the lounge was full of beds. Someone suggested they wouldn't be surprised if AHS started deploying bunk beds in the hospital to deal with the constant overcapacity.

Mr. Speaker, when we bring up issues of waste in the system, whether it's executive coaches, sole-sourced contracts, or image and reputation consultants, it's because the Wildrose believe these dollars should be going to where they actually need it, down to the front lines. When I came out of surgery, I was sick as a dog, and who was there for me holding the bucket? It certainly wasn't an AHS executive. When I needed to go to the washroom, who was there to help me up? It wasn't a bureaucrat. When I rang the call bell, who came rushing to my bedside to help? It wasn't a consultant. It was a hard-working front-line health professional: doctors, nurses, health care aides amongst them. They are the ones who are constantly holding the system together, and they are the ones who need to be thanked over and over again.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

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

Mr. Xiao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 99 the Standing Committee on Private Bills has reviewed the petitions that were presented on Wednesday, April 16, 2014. As chair of the committee I can advise the House that the petitions comply with standing orders 90 to 94.

Thanks.

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to present a petition of just over 2,400 signatures from residents of Airdrie. It states:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to recognize the need for 24-hour urgent health care services in Airdrie and work with community leaders and health professionals to provide the resources necessary for its prompt establishment.

2:50

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Services.

Bill 11

Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Amendment Act, 2014

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce and move first reading of Bill 11, the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Amendment Act, 2014.

This legislation is another step in support of our plan to build a stronger child intervention system built on continuous improvements. It puts a renewed focus on quality assurance that will improve supports for vulnerable children. The legislation and consequential amendments enhance our continued emphasis on providing quality services in supporting and protecting Alberta's children, youth, and families.

Lifting the publication ban with this bill will allow families to speak publicly about a child receiving intervention services who has died. Our government believes that it is the basic right of each and every person to express grief publicly if they so choose. It's also their right to protect privacy in a period of tremendous sadness, Mr. Speaker. This decision is not one for government to be making. It's one for families to decide and for those closest to the children to decide what's in the best interests of children.

This bill also expands the Child and Youth Advocate's investigative powers to include young people whose intervention files have been closed for up to two years, which will put additional scrutiny on how we assess outcomes. The works and reports of the Child and Family Services Council for Quality Assurance will also help increase public understanding and confidence in our system by having them be reported publicly.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table 50 of over 4,000 postcards our office has received asking this PC government to restore consistent and reliable funding to postsecondary education in Alberta. These postcards were collected by the Non-Academic Staff Association at the University of Alberta, clear evidence that this government is not listening to the demands of Albertans for well-funded postsecondary education.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Is there anyone else with a tabling?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, a couple of pieces that the Wildrose opposition doesn't want Albertans to know the truth about, stemming from this question period. My memo, addressed to the hon. Premier, which was also copied to Jill Clayton, information and privacy officer, and dated November 29, reads:

Of course, the intention is not to interfere in the timing or content of materials being released through the FOIP process, or to gather information about individuals filing requests. Rather, it is to ensure that ministers can provide informed comments to media and Opposition about materials in the public domain.

Also, the honourable office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner's response, signed by Ms Jill Clayton, the commissioner, dated December 6, 2013, thanking me for engaging her in the process of putting this new system in place, advising me of a whole bunch of potential risks that could stem, and advising me on how to mitigate risks to make sure that our FOIP process is intact.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition I would wish to table the requisite number of copies of a memo that was referenced in her questions earlier. In the document it is quoted:

On November 29, 2013, the former Deputy Premier circulated a Memorandum to the Premier and Cabinet requesting that Ministers gather information about materials being released by their departments and that their press secretaries gather information about active FOIP requests which have the potential to generate media, session, political or other reputational issues for government. It was requested this information be sent to his office by noon Fridays in the template provided.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

We are going to deal with points of order. The first point of order was raised by the Minister of Justice at approximately 2:12. Would you proceed with your citation for your point of order?

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 23(h), (i), (j), and (l), particularly but not limited to "imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member." In this particular case, this was in an exchange between the Minister of Service Alberta and the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills. I don't have the benefit of the Blues, but what made me rise on this particular matter is that I believe the member had indicated that the government was, quote, blatantly vetting FOIP requests. That was in the third exchange.

If you just look at what the definition of vet is, it is to appraise, verify, or to check accuracy. The Minister of Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour – I hope I got that right – has tabled the document in question. If you look to the final paragraph, Mr. Speaker, it says that "the intention is not to interfere in the timing or content of materials being released through the FOIP process." He's already gone through it; I won't beat the dead horse. It doesn't say "vet." It doesn't say "check." It doesn't say "verify." It doesn't allude to any of that at all. The intention, obviously, is not to interfere as to the timing or content. To say that the government was actually trying to vet FOIP requests: the very document that that member references proves his allegation to be incorrect. All I would ask is

that the member please withdraw that particular comment and refrain from making that assertion in the future.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. There's certainly no point of order here. If you have the opportunity to review the Blues, as I'm sure you will, you'll see that in the answer to the very question that the Minister of Justice has risen on in his point of order, the Minister of Service Alberta suggests something along the lines that they're not vetting these FOIP requests, that they're simply reviewing them. You know, you can get into the semantics of the definition of those two words, but at the end of the day the majority of Albertans would understand that reviewing FOIP requests is very similar to vetting them. Therefore, I would suggest to you . . . [interjections] The predictable calls from the peanut gallery across the way, particularly those that I always hear from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

It should be noted, Mr. Speaker, that it's simply not a point of order, and I would ask you to rule accordingly. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I know they want to deal with semantics because any opportunity to slander anyone on camera is an opportunity that will be taken. You should know that in the memo to which the opposition is referring, they're purposely not reading the last paragraph of this particular memo, which advises the commissioner that the fact is that ministries are inundated with FOIPs from the media, from the general public, and from the opposition, and ministers, who are in charge of the ministry, ought to know what information is going out so that they can knowledgeably answer questions about it. When a camera is in their face or the opposition asks a question in question period, the minister, to be competent and deemed to be competent, needs to know what information comes out of that minister's department and be able to answer that information knowledgeably. As the head of a department, as the minister of a department one must know what is in the public domain.

What the opposition, Mr. Speaker, is purposely doing is that they're tabling a memo, but they will not read you the last paragraph. They (a) won't tell you that this is a memo asking for advice from the Privacy Commissioner – in order for the system to be intact, I think any minister is well served to ask for advice from the commissioner – and (b) they will purposely not read you the last paragraph of this memo, that explains exactly why we're doing what we're doing.

What they also will purposely not do, Mr. Speaker, is present the response from the Privacy Commissioner. If they have this memo, they obviously would have received the response from the Privacy Commissioner, which says, first of all: thank you for giving me the opportunity of participating in this; thank you for soliciting my advice; here is a list of potential risks that may stem from introducing this new process; this is how to mitigate them; again, thank you for staying in touch, and thank you for making me part of this process.

That, Mr. Speaker, they will not tell you because they're not in the business of letting Albertans know what truly happened. They're in the business of slinging mud and hoping that something sticks.

3:00

The Speaker: Thank you.

I want, first of all, the record to show that there was a request made to revert to introductions by Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, and unfortunately it got caught up here, and I failed to recognize her. I apologize for that.

Are there others on the point of order? None.

Well, let's deal with this. I don't have the complete Blues on this matter either, but I have some, and I want to just review them with you very quickly. The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills rose at approximately 2:11:49 and among other things said, "This PC cabinet is improperly vetting FOIP requests if there are reputational issues with the government," and then went on to say, "Will the Premier accept this blatant breach of legislation or did he not know that this rotten practice was wrong at the time?"

The Minister of Service Alberta then stood and said amongst other things the following.

I have a copy of what he's referring to right here, and there's nothing that says "vetting." All it discusses is gathering the FOIP requests so that they could be reviewed so that we'd know what was going out . . . and then we get phone calls about it. There's nothing in here that mentions vetting. It's about gathering information so that everyone is aware of what's going out publicly. Nothing is being singled out or eliminated or affected by that process.

Hon. members, a couple of points, very quickly, then we'll move on. First of all, I would remind you to please, if you wouldn't mind, take a look at *Beauchesne* 408(1)(c), 409 (3), and 410(13) as well as *House of Commons*, page 502, the last line. All of them talk about issues pertaining to question period, where you shouldn't ask questions that require an opinion or questions that require a legal answer or words to that effect. I don't have all of that just in front of me. But just review those, if you would, please.

I would look at this and say that the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills did use some very stern if not harsh language in his questions, but that's what question period sometimes is all about. In response I think the Minister of Service Alberta did his best to clarify it. I think what we really have here is just a classic case of a dispute as to what the facts are surrounding this. No doubt there might be more that follows on it. But today I see no point of order here, so we're going to move on with a reminder that we shouldn't use points of order to prolong or initiate debate.

Let's move on, then – that closes that matter – to point of order 2. Point of order 2 was raised at approximately 2:22 p.m. by the hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre. It was raised I think with respect to something to do with the Minister of Energy. Let's hear the citation for the point of order.

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm citing 23(h), (i), (j), (k), and (l). The member twice – and it should be in the Blues; I don't have a copy – referenced that the public carries no debt with regard to the Alberta electric system. Now, we went over this in the estimates. The government can play with the words and with the definition of "debt" when it applies to generators, but when it applies to the system – I brought this up, and the minister clarified it in estimates – transmission lines carry debt, and that debt is passed directly on to consumers in the form of a charge called transmission charges. That has never changed. Transmission lines are heavily regulated. So to make a broad statement twice in this House that the system doesn't carry any debt, that Albertans don't

carry debt for the system would be inaccurate. We went down this road before.

I won't say that that is misleading, but the member should know or should have known the exact correctness of what was being said with regard to the entire system. To solve this, what I suggest is that the minister correct and rephrase her words, that there may be no debt, in her opinion, as it relates to generation but that the system carries debt.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much. First off, thank you to whoever gave me these Halls to help me with my speech today.

The Minister of Energy talked about – I don't have the benefit of the Blues, Mr. Speaker – no public debt. She said that there is no public debt, and her reference was that we don't have any public utility debt. Within the context of that question-and-answer exchange I think that was a reasonable submission. We were talking about utilities, so it was easily assumed that she should have said: no public utility debt.

This member brought up 23(k), which refers to: "speaks disrespectfully of Her Majesty or of any other member of the Royal Family." I don't believe that the Minister of Energy undertook that at all.

The Speaker: Are there others? Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, you wish to supplement briefly? Very quickly.

Mr. Anglin: Just to clarify, Mr. Speaker, the member brings up the issue of utilities. The fact is that a transmission line company is a utility. It carries a tremendous amount of debt, and that debt is passed along to Albertans, just as I stated earlier, in a direct charge. The consumers carry that debt.

I made the citation broad like the other member did, but it really pertains to (l), which I cited also. We can play games with that.

The Speaker: Hon. members, again two different versions, two different, perhaps, definitions, if you will, of what debt is or isn't and what the energy policy might or might not be. Some might see it this way, some might see it that way, but truly I don't see this as really a point of order, and we're going to stop it right there. Thank you for raising it just the same.

Let us conclude that matter there and move on to point of order 3, which was raised at 2:28. I believe it was Calgary-Shaw, again with reference to a discussion with the Minister of Energy.

Please proceed with a citation.

Point of Order Clarification

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll make this very quick. No need to extend this one. It's pretty straightforward. In response to the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre the hon. Minister of Energy in one of her responses suggested that the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre may not understand her answer because he may not have been here in the House at the time it was given. It is a long-standing tradition that the absence or presence of members not be referred to in debate. Look no further than 289(3). [interjections] I don't know what it is that they're talking about on the other side, but if we were to overlook this, I can assure you we would have quite a bit of talking to do about this issue.

So with 23(j), use of insulting language, or (l), offending the practice and precedents of the House, I would ask her to withdraw.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I again don't have the benefit of the Blues, but I believe the Minister of Energy indicated that the member was not in the House at that time, and her reference was that he was not elected prior to April 23, 2012, actually two years ago tomorrow. Her reference was to the fact that he was not elected at the time and, therefore, was not in the Legislature. I think this can be dealt with by the way of a point of clarification.

The Speaker: Thank you. Hon. members, that was my recollection of it as well. We can review the Blues to get more clarity and intent, but I thought that the hon. Minister of Energy also was referring to a time referred to as election time versus actual presence in the House. We all know that we do not and should not and must not refer to the presence or absence of members in the House, so we'll leave it at that. I hope the hon. members on the opposition side will accept the explanation. That is my interpretation of it. So that closes that matter. I don't have any Blues in front of me, by the way, on that point either. It's just too early.

That concludes that matter, and we'll move on to point of order 4, which was the Minister of Justice.

Point of Order Factual Accuracy

Mr. Denis: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Orders 23(h), (i), (j), and (l). I've stated many times that I had no prior knowledge of the RCMP's gun storage or seizure or whatever you may call it. I've stated many times that I found out about it when I went to the RCMP detachment at the end of June, and then I sent a letter immediately the next day, on June 27, to Dale McGowan, the former deputy commissioner of the RCMP, subsequent to which there was an investigation triggered by the RCMP public complaints office.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I've stated this almost for, I'd say, about nine different months. There is no evidence to the contrary. I recognize it is a serious offence for one to state in the House items that he or she knows are blatantly incorrect. I know this member is a trained lawyer. At the same time, he needs to stop making these types of intimations because there is no evidence to back up his particular claims and there's, in fact, evidence to the contrary. I would just ask that this member please withdraw those statements and refrain from making them in the future.

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

3:10

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, I would suggest that there is no point of order here. The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills was simply asking the Minister of Justice if he knew about this, and therefore I don't believe that it's necessarily a point of order. I don't know that there were accusations involved. It was seeking clarification on the facts as the Justice minister knew them at the time.

Further to that, I would suggest that in the answer if anyone is guilty of a point of order here, it was the way in which the Justice minister insinuated that the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills should stop practising criminal law based on the way he asked the question. This cuts both ways, and I would just simply suggest again: no point of order.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, again, it's been an afternoon of clarification and dispute as to the facts and accepting two different versions of the same event and so on. I don't have the Blues. I'll review them, and if there's a need to, I'll get back to you with that, but for the moment we'll just leave that as a concluded matter now that there's been quite a sufficient airing of it and a clarification of what both sides feel about the matter.

That should take care of it unless there are any other points of order.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 9

Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014

[Adjourned debate April 17: Mr. Horner]

The Speaker: Are there any speakers to Bill 9, Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act? It's been moved and adjourned, and we're looking for a second speaker. It will be the hon. Member for Airdrie.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is, indeed, an honour to rise and speak to Bill 9 and speak against Bill 9, the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014, as it is called. Along with Bill 45 and Bill 46, Bill 9 forms the unholy trinity of bills in this Assembly. You know, it really is amazing that you have a government that is trying to negotiate a good deal, a fair deal for taxpayers and a fair deal, obviously, for our public-sector workers. The strategy for doing so is to poison the well so badly that, really, there is no goodwill left right now between the government and our public-sector workers. So, of course, it follows that it then becomes somewhat difficult to enter into good-faith negotiations when one side completely mistrusts the other. That's exactly what has been the case here.

The PC government has failed to lead by example. In the midst of publicity around the obscene severance packages that their political staff is getting, they are ramming through public-sector pension changes. When the folks in the public sector see the stories of these ridiculous pensions and severance packages being handed out, they just shake their heads when the government then turns around and tries to nickel and dime their own pensions. It is extremely obtuse and tone-deaf of the government to do such a thing.

Mr. Speaker, I want to be clear up front with regard to our statement on Bill 9 so that there's no misinterpretation of it. We have issued the following statement on Bill 9: the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act threatens existing public pension benefits for hard-working Albertans across the province.

As usual, the PC government's standard operating procedure on labour relations issues is that of bullying instead of good faith negotiations. Wildrose has long supported the view that contracts and agreements must be respected. That includes the pension [agreements] promised to current public sector workers and pensioners who chose their careers in the public sector based, at least in part, on the promise of the current public pension arrangement. Although we feel some reforms to the current system may be needed to ensure the long term sustainability of public pensions, we believe that any such changes need to be negotiated openly and respectfully with union leadership, and that [if there are] any substantial changes [they] should only be applied to workers who have yet to be hired, rather than those already employed or retired.

Wildrose is committed to repealing Bill 9 if elected in 2016, along with Bills 45 and 46 which also unjustly ignore the legal rights of our public sector employees.

We look forward to members of this House, hopefully, holding us to account on that statement in 2016, Mr. Speaker.

We couldn't agree more that Bill 9 is a bill that absolutely is not only unwarranted but is an affront to the good-faith negotiating process, especially given that we have bills 45 and 46 before the courts right now. To add Bill 9 onto the top of it is only going to poison things further.

Now, I want to be clear. We can look at different jurisdictions across the country. I look at, for example, Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan faced an issue with pension sustainability. Now, let's pretend that right now there is a pension sustainability problem, for the sake of argument. Let's pretend that the government's actuaries and numbers and calculations are correct and that we need to make changes to make the pension sustainable. If that's the case, one might argue that the best approach would have been to follow the Saskatchewan approach, when back in the '70s it was decided that they needed to make some alterations to the pension arrangement that worked for them to make public pensions more sustainable over the long term. So they did so.

It doesn't necessarily have to apply in Alberta, but in the Saskatchewan case they switched over to a defined contribution pension plan as opposed to a defined benefit pension plan. That was back, I believe, in 1977 that they did that. Now, when they did so, what they did is that they grandfathered it in. They said: "Look. Everybody who has already paid into the current pension system and everybody who is a current pensioner: we are not going to change the rules for those folks. We're not going to change the benefits. We're not going to change anything for them. What we are going to do is grandfather it so that new hires, new people that have not been hired yet, will be under the new defined contribution plan." They did that, and now they're here today and have a reasonably sustainable pension program there in Saskatchewan, far more sustainable than it was in the past.

Now, that solution worked for them. I want to make sure I'm clear that I'm not saying that it's necessary in Alberta's case to have a defined contribution plan. Like our friend over there, my friend the Treasury Board president, I must say that in past years, before knowing too much about the pension issue, I was a bit of a fan of defined contribution plans as well, and I've said so. I'm not sure if I've said so in this House. I might have. [interjection] No, not last week, I assure you.

But I've looked more into the reports that have come out about the sustainability of pensions, about some of the other options like pooled pension plans, which I wasn't aware of four or five years ago but am aware of today, with regard to changing the contribution rates, and so forth. There are other ways that the system can be fixed and the system can be changed rather than just switching to a defined contribution plan. Perhaps that worked for Saskatchewan, and perhaps that's something that one day might work in this jurisdiction. Perhaps not.

The point is the grandfather principle. If you're going to make changes, you've got to make sure that it doesn't apply to our current workforce, that has already made plans for their retirement, has already made plans for their career choice based largely upon the pension arrangement. As an example, when I was coming out of law school at the U of A, I had to make a decision about where I was going to practise law. One of the options was one of those big Calgary law firms, which I eventually did go to, Borden Ladner Gervais. Or you can do other things. You can go to a mid-size law firm, which pays a little bit less but maybe has a

little bit of flexibility with family and so forth, or you can go to the city of Calgary or the city of Edmonton and practise law for them.

Now, the salaries at the city are much lower than what I could make at a larger firm. I made a decision to go with the larger firm at that time, but one of the things that the city of Calgary and the city of Edmonton offered that I found very attractive, the same with Justice Canada and Alberta Justice, and did twig me a little bit was the chance that even though I would take a lower salary, I could have a pension plan that was generous but I thought fair compromise for the fact that I'd be making far less as a lawyer at those institutions. That was part of the thing that made me at least consider working in the municipal legal department or Alberta Justice or Justice Canada.

3:20

I decided to go another way, but a lot of folks, when they go and work for government, part of their plan is to say: "Look. You know what? I could make more in the private sector, I could make more in oil and gas, I could make more in many different areas, but I'm going to go into the public sector because (a) I love the job that's being offered there, and I want to do it, whether it's nursing or social work or whatever, and also there's a pension plan. So even though I'm giving up some income at the front end, I'm getting a little bit of secured income at the back end." That pension tool is used as a recruitment tool, especially in Alberta, where it's competitive for workers. When it comes to trying to get employees to come and work for different organizations, it's very competitive. It's hard for the employers to compete with one another in that regard. This is a tool that our public-sector institutions use to try to get the best talent possible.

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

The problem with this bill fundamentally is that it changes the deal. It breaks the contract. Does it tear up their pensions completely and throw them out the window? No, it doesn't do that. No one is saying it does, but it does alter the agreement. It alters the benefits for existing pensioners as well as workers who are nearing retirement and soon to be pensioners and for those that are just in the system. They have made career choices. They have made decisions based on this pension arrangement. They have made investment decisions based on it. In my view, we need to respect those decisions.

Will it cost the government a little bit more to respect those decisions and those contracts than it would if they made these changes? Yeah. Sure. But does it mean that there's going to be a sustainability problem in the short term with regard to our pension plans? I don't think so. I think we can make negotiated changes. We can look at contribution rates. We can look at the way that the pensions are managed. We can look at a lot of different issues and different ideas to make pensions more sustainable rather than changing the promised benefits to our public-sector workers.

There's also a lot of uncertainty with regard to what the exact problem is. I know that the minister of intergovernmental relations was quoted as saying that the current \$7.4 billion unfunded liability with regard to public pensions would be corrected in the next 10 to 12 years or so without major changes. He was saying that in the context of the public pensions. He didn't think, at that time anyway, that there was much of a liability problem. Other studies have put that more at roughly nine years. It depends on who you talk to, frankly. I've seen lots of different studies ranging from "It's a very serious problem" to "It's not really a big problem at all" to a whole bunch of stuff in the middle. The point is that the

government I don't think has made the case that the pensions right now are, in fact, unsustainable.

The George & Bell analysis, for example, predicted that the unfunded liability in Alberta will be eliminated in nine years under the current pension arrangements. George & Bell is an independent actuarial firm that has been used by agencies of government in the past for several initiatives.

Madam Speaker, the services that our public sector provides Albertans are obviously of critical importance, and we all agree with that. It is so important that our front lines feel valued, that they feel secure, that they don't feel the need to go to a different jurisdiction, that they're not feeling undue pressure so they can concentrate on their job and not have to worry about illegal strikes and negotiated this and legislated 45 and 46 and bills like Bill 9 and so forth.

I'm getting and I'm sure all of us are getting literally hundreds of e-mails on this. People are upset. These are front-line workers that are doing important work every day, and this has thrown them into a very unsettled state very unfairly and probably unnecessarily.

So I would ask that the government, before proceeding with this bill, table this bill and make sure that they have done proper consultation with the union leadership as well as all stakeholder groups. I think it's fair to ask, Madam Speaker, that we wait until after we know who the next Premier is going to be. It is, I think, very unfair for this decision to be made by this Assembly when we don't know what the head of the executive branch in the next couple of months is going to think about this, and I think that's wrong. I think that there's a debate that's going to happen over on that side of the House about who should lead their party and, therefore, because they're the governing party, obviously become the Premier, and during that debate it would be a good time to have a debate about these ideas. You know, we can chime in. I'm sure the other opposition parties will chime in, and I'm sure the candidates will chime in. We can have a good, fulsome discussion. Did I just use fulsome discussion? I did. Fulsome discussion. Kudos to the Member for Calgary-Elbow. I'm now using her vernacular.

Mr. Wilson: With respect.

Mr. Anderson: With respect.

Anyway, I think we should have that discussion, and only when the new Premier is chosen do we then proceed with this legislation, if at all. I think that that would be a much more democratic solution to this problem. When the leadership is held and that discussion happens, my guess is that there may be a change of heart in this regard. [interjection] Perhaps. It generally happens. It depends on how competitive it is. If it's a coronation, then maybe not. Who knows? They're having trouble finding candidates right now.

Madam Speaker, I hope that this will be tabled. I hope the government will respect our public-sector workers enough to realize that they have made serious life decisions based on the current pension arrangement and that if they're going to make any changes to the pension plan, those changes will be negotiated in good faith with the union leadership, with the public sector, and that if there are any substantial negotiated changes, those changes only apply to new hires, the folks that have not been hired yet. That would be the fair, the sensible, indeed I dare say, the moderate approach – the moderate approach – that the reasonable right over here believes in.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is, as always, an honour and a privilege to speak in this House to bills

although my comments in regard to this bill, Bill 9, really reflect on what, in my view, are not positives for the average worker in this province, the average person who has worked very hard for this government and for the people of Alberta over the course of the last number of years and, of course, those that will continue to do so going forward.

Essentially this bill, Bill 9, introduces substantial changes to public-sector pension plans, and I think it's important to highlight who the people are that the government is going after, who will have their lives irrevocably changed when this bill is passed. In the main, Madam Speaker, these are the people who keep our hospitals running, who work at the Alberta Cancer Board, who work at the Alberta College of Art and Design, who work at the city of Airdrie or the city of Calgary or the city of Edmonton, public servants who are there doing work on a day-to-day basis ensuring that Albertans get the public services that they need to live a high-quality life in this province. We have a whole host of organizations: the Lloydminster hospital, Mackenzie Regional Waste Management Commission, Medicine Hat Catholic board of education. The list goes on. These are not some nameless, faceless people who we are affecting; it's the Albertans who work very hard on behalf of the citizenry to provide quality public services.

3:30

This bill, in concert with Bill 45 and Bill 46 from last session, in my view, constitutes an unprecedented attack on working people in this province, people who are working an honest day for an honest day's wages. Essentially, it ties into a whole host of ideas. I mean, what's in it for the average Albertan anyway? It ties into what all this prosperity in Alberta is about. It seems like we have a whole host of people in this province who are getting exceedingly wealthy as a result of our oil boom and our energy resource industry, and we have a whole host of people who are not supposed to be part of this, who are not supposed to be part of the good fortune of our living on 25 per cent of the world's resources. It appears that the government believes that people who work in our public services should not be entitled to some of the Alberta advantage of living on that resource wealth. It continues along with that theme.

We see that one of the major things that, in my view, is going to affect not only Alberta but probably the rest of the world over the course of the next 40 years is inequality. We continue to see a portion of our population throughout the world doing very well and other groups of individuals who are continuing not to do very well. There's a continuing gap between the wealthy and the poor not only throughout the world but in Alberta as well. This contributes to this and does not rectify it. It does not do anything to work towards solving that issue or having people understand that Alberta is a place for everyone.

If we look at this, what are the changes? We'll be talking a lot about this over the course of the next couple of weeks, and I'm glad for that. If you look at what this is for the average person who receives a pension, who works for one of Alberta's four major public-sector pension plans, the average retirement package that they're currently getting is in and around \$12,000. That's not large sum of money, Madam Speaker. We are looking at that as the average payout of pension benefits to people who have worked for this great province. We are not talking about egregious pensions. We are not talking about buyouts of AHS executives or people who have close ties to this government or the like. You know, we have had countless examples over the last number of years since I've been in this House of people receiving golden handshakes or gold-plated pensions. This is not an example like those individuals, and let's be clear about that.

Let's face it. Pension benefits are negotiated between a government and their employees. That's what they are. Simply put, the employees have contributed their wages to these pension plans. The government as the employer has contributed as well. So it's part of a negotiated contract settlement. Now, in the future when the government goes to negotiate these contracts and there's no longer a pension plan to offer to find quality workers to do the services that Albertans need, does the government just think that these workers are going to continue to work for exactly the same wage? Or do you think that maybe they might demand a higher average hourly wage? Do you think that might happen? I don't really know where the cost savings or the certainty is coming from in this. All I know is that it seems to be an attack on the average working man and woman in this province.

Here are some of the specific changes that the government is now proposing. They're proposing to move the retirement age from an 80 or 85 factor, depending on the plan, to a 60 and 90 factor. That means people will be working longer to obtain any pension that they would have otherwise received. There are also cost-of-living adjustments for pension benefits earned after 2015, and the cost-of-living adjustments for pension benefits earned up to 2016 will remain – oh, just wait. I'm rambling here, but I've got to get my place. If you look at how it is, as part of the pension reforms the government will transition all – well, what we're basically going to here, Madam Speaker, is that we will only have a COLA, which people will be entitled to on their retirement savings, to be paid out at 60 per cent of inflation.

But here's where the kicker is. It will be dependent upon whether or not the plan actually makes money or is doing well or not because the government is limiting the contribution rates. It is saying: look, we are going to limit the contribution rates of both employees and employers. This puts the beneficiaries, the people who are involved in the plan, in a very difficult place. If we run into a situation like we did in 2008, where the market crashes, where you have a fundamental breakdown of what is supposed to happen in our world economy, well, those pension plans will no longer be able to raise revenue from their workforce in order to keep pension benefits for those members who are still involved in the plan.

Having this happen will simply make the plan – in my view, it won't serve the purpose of getting people the funds they need when they are in retirement, which is essentially what they're designed to do. You know, if you look at the changes as indicated, the end result will be that the pension plan, in my view, will not be workable or sustainable or provide people who have retired, most likely in their senior years, with any guarantee of an income. How can they figure out what their monthly benefits will be? How can they be assured that they can pay their bills, assured that they can handle their basic living arrangements when they have no idea what their actual benefits will be in the future? I think it's specious at best to say that this new arrangement will provide any predictability or sustainability to pensions. That is the reason why they were first intended to be there for individuals, to allow them to have that certainty of limits.

We can go through a lot of this later on: the hard cap on contributions; the end of the 85 factor; the increased penalties for early retirement that are, in fact, egregious; a reduction or removal of the cost-of-living allowances for pension benefits; and long-term benefit reductions of a nature that, in my view, will make it very difficult for the average person who works for us in our public service to retire in any kind of dignity.

3:40

To sum up, Madam Speaker, in my view, a lot of the noise around this is politically driven. I think at one time the government was looking up ways to support its right-wing flank as they saw the Wildrose as their natural competition in the upcoming election. I think that has driven them to this type of extreme, where they've gone after pension benefits and they've done things like Bill 45 and Bill 46. In my view, it is not in our society's best interest to be going down this path. Basically, while these changes appear to be what the government thought at one time would be an election-winning strategy, I think that if we observe them in the cold light of day, they're not in the best interests of our citizens' long-term health, the long-term sustainability of our workforce here in Alberta, an ability to have some equality in our society, some recognition that Alberta is a place for everyone, including our public service workers, and trying to eliminate some of the inequality that is out there.

Really, I don't know whether the government at the end of the day is going to get very far ahead economically. I think they're going to be better off – well, if you don't have people on pensions when they're retired, what's going to happen? Well, one has to look at, you know, the relatively low contribution rates we have for RRSPs and other things like that and understand then that the government eventually has to carry the can anyway, whether it's through government-assisted housing or through benefits of some kind to try and keep people's lights and heat on.

In any event, Madam Speaker, I think that the much more humane way to do this, the much more sane way to do this is to recognize that pensions work and to provide people with a reasonable place to work at a reasonable wage and allow for people to live in retirement in a reasonable fashion.

I would submit that the government should revisit this after they get a new leader because I know that what I've watched previously with PC leaderships is that they've all denied everything that happened in the past and have tried to run away from it as quickly as they can. This may in fact be the case in this case: it wasn't me; it was her. That may actually happen, Madam Speaker. I've seen it happen before. Actually, I saw the hon. minister of Treasury Board, last time he ran for leader, say a lot of that stuff: "No, no, no. That was that guy, not me. Not me." I saw that. I read your platform. It was different.

Anyway, there you go.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a). Are there any members who wish to comment or question the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo?

Seeing none, I will recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's my honour and privilege to rise and speak to Bill 9. In what may come as a shock to many of the members, I am adamantly opposed to this bill and everything in it, so I'm going to go through as concisely as possible the issues that I have with Bill 9. I mean, this is an unprecedented attack on our public-sector workers. In fact, it may not be unprecedented because bills 45 and 46 started that attack, and this is just a continuation of it.

Madam Speaker, it's important to note, first of all, that this bill has far-reaching consequences, which I'm going to go through, but as far as oversight of the pension plans there's as well the shifting of risk, that is shared by the members and the government. This bill is essentially shifting all of the risk, the responsibility onto the very workers who have spent their lives contributing to these plans.

I'd like to begin there, Madam Speaker. You know, many of the members of this House may not understand or recognize that the concept of pensions fits under an employee's remuneration. It is part of their salary. They are choosing to accept a lesser salary today in order to have a pension and be able to collect a salary once they retire. The public-sector pensions as they are were negotiated in good faith between the workers and their representatives, our union leaders, and the government and had worked and have worked for decades.

It's quite frustrating that the government continues to use this rhetoric of: they're unsustainable, and we need to make these changes. The reality is that they are sustainable, and there are ways and methods within the plan to accommodate a downturn in the economy. For example, after the downturn in 2008 employees increased their contributions in order to bridge that gap in the unfunded liability. Now, what's frustrating and simply untrue is when the government says: well, the unfunded liability is too large, and we won't get it paid off. The fact of the matter is that there have been different figures batted around. I'll ballpark it that within 10 years the unfunded portion of the pension liability will in fact be covered, Madam Speaker.

I think it's interesting to note as well that Alberta is the fastest growing and has, I believe, the most young people of any province in the country, so the concern that there are not enough younger workers, younger generation, coming in simply is not true in this province.

The other thing about these plans. Part of the reason that the Alberta NDP is completely opposed to this bill and to Bill 10 is that this is an ideological attack. This is set out by this PC government to attack the very workers who make this province function every day. We're talking about the front-line workers, that this government will praise in one breath yet put a wage freeze on them, claw back their benefits, and look at making life much more difficult for our friends when they're retiring.

You know, one thing that's going to happen with this bill is that it's going to make public-sector jobs less attractive. This is one of the ways that we attract and retain quality workers when we're looking at comparing to the private sector. The private sector often pays more, as the Member for Airdrie had talked about, that before he got into politics, the private sector had offered a larger paycheque. But where the public sector can counter that is, again, in looking at benefits – health benefits, dental benefits, life benefits – and also looking at retirement benefits, which is a way to attract and retain quality workers. By reducing those benefits and attacking the very plans that workers have been paying into for many, many years, many of them for their whole lives, first of all it's going to weaken the pool of public-sector workers because they'll be driven out and more attracted to jobs in the private sector that can pay much more.

The other thing about this plan and the pension plans as they currently stand and why they are sustainable and cost-efficient is that risks are shared equally and over long periods of time. When these plans were set up, there was a recognition that there will be downturns in the market, absolutely. There are provisions currently for that, as I've already said. Employees increase their contributions, which has been helping to pay down that unfunded liability.

3:50

You know, I honestly believe, Madam Speaker, that part of this government's intent is to attack pensions across the board; I mean, this and the private sector. This is the start, but they'll be going after pensions in general. Some say that it could be because of lobbying from companies and corporations that stand to profit off

people making individual decisions. You know, if they lose their money, then, hey, that's great. It works for some of the companies. Canada has the highest mutual-fund fees in the world, which is interesting to note, which does reduce the value and protectability of pension benefits.

Now, I'd like to just touch again on the fact that this bill is one way, one form of attack and method that this government is using to privatize our services. Again, make the public service less attractive for Albertans, and maybe more of them will not go into the public service, which will continue to weaken the system, which allows a nice little road for the government to continue its agenda of privatization.

You know, the frustration is that we should be looking at ways to expand our pensions, and in fact the Alberta NDP has been a strong advocate of expanding CPP. All working Albertans should have access to a pension. Instead of bringing everyone up, this government is choosing to remind us that many Albertans don't have a pension and that therefore we should just take it away from all of them, which is quite absurd.

For us, the answer is not taking away defined benefit plans from nurses, firefighters, front-line workers, who have been paying into it and counting on it for years. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that my office has received hundreds of letters, e-mails, and phone calls from irate Albertans. You know, they're asking me: how dare they threaten or touch my pension, which I've been contributing to my whole life? In fact, these decisions are being made unilaterally. They're not being made in consultation.

You know, Madam Speaker, if there is one word that this government does disservice to more than any other, it is the term "consultation." Previously the board's recommendation was required for fundamental changes. Within this new piece of legislation that's gone. All the powers are being shifted to the minister or the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

This bill reduces the required input of the board to simply consultation. The minister no longer needs the recommendations of the board to change any of the plan's benefits, and the board simply acts as an adviser. Basically, the minister is saying that he has the expertise, not the board, and can make these unilateral decisions.

You know, there's as well a clause applying to all changes to the plan rules that flow from this bill, deeming consultations done prior to this bill as sufficient for meeting the already watered-down requirements for the board members' input. This gives us an idea of the government's concept of consultation, which, by the way, as usual, is not defined anywhere in this piece of legislation. There are no guidelines, no guarantees for what is adequate or acceptable consultation when we're dealing with the retirement security of over 300,000 Albertan families.

You know, I could go on. When we look at how this government fails to consult, we need to look no further than to many of the aboriginal consultations, including the ironically titled Aboriginal Consultation Levy Act, on which they were not consulted on a levy that affects them even though it's in the title of the bill. Again, Treaty 8 was shocked and dismayed. Treaty 6 was surprised. They hadn't been told the legislation was coming. Again, this government often references information travelling one way and terms that consultation. Sadly, that couldn't be further from the truth.

Now, some of the major issues of this bill are, basically, the attack on different areas: changing the age requirement and basically forcing Alberta workers to work longer and, again, to receive less than they're currently entitled to; the attack on the cost-of-living adjustment. I do want to point out that Alberta has the highest rate of inflation of any province in the country. I'm

just trying to find my one number here because it's quite surprising what it's up to. In March Alberta's inflation rate surged to 3.9 per cent, the highest jump in five years and more than double the national rate of 1.5.

With the cost-of-living adjustment taken out, this is a serious attack on the value of the pension to ensure that dollars in the pension plan retain their purchasing power as opposed to losing money every year. Moving to a targeted COLA, I think, is simply ridiculous from the fact, Madam Speaker, that year after year that could remain zero or very, very low, in which case seniors or retirees would be losing money. So with all the money that they've put in over their lifespan and working in the public service, they're now losing money because of the changes to the cost-of-living adjustments.

The other issue, Madam Speaker, is the contribution cap and the fact that by imposing a contribution cap, the PC government has essentially handcuffed the board and all of its members from finding solutions in the future. You know, should another market downturn occur, you've basically stifled any options that would preserve the defined benefits. Now, at the other end of the equation the government will say: well, the only thing we can do, then, is to lower the benefits.

Madam Speaker, again, this is an unnecessary attack on pensions, on public-sector workers, on over 300,000 Alberta workers and their families. I can tell you that the Alberta NDP will be fighting bills 9 and 10 tooth and nail and is asking the government to shake its head and get rid of this piece of legislation and send it back to the drawing board. This is unnecessary.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Standing Order 29(2)(a). Are there any members who wish to comment or to question the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview?

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Hale: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an honour to rise and speak to Bill 9. The Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014, is yet another example of the government's structural failures. The minister has tried to position himself as a good steward of public pensions and public-sector workers whose aim is to prevent unfunded pension liability for taxpayers, but nothing could be further from the truth.

This bill serves as yet another slap in the face to front-line workers in our province, escalating the labour relations problems caused by bills 45 and 46. While political staffers are receiving costly severances from the revolving doors of the Premier's office, they are ramming through public-sector pension changes. They expect public employees to take one for the team while they are lavishly spending on their personal staff, sky palaces, and jet-setting trips across the globe. I have heard from many, many of my constituents who are outraged by the lack of respect they're showing for the front-line workers. While they claim to be defending the public pension plan and the promises that they have made, it is clear that they are using this as a means to undercut public servants and blame them for their own government's lack of foresight.

4:00

Madam Speaker, there seems to be a lot of doublespeak around this issue: the minister on one hand saying that there's not a serious crisis, and on the other he's claiming that the unions are undermining the seriousness. The government hasn't done a

decent job of explaining what the real problem is. The Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations said himself that the \$7.4 billion unfunded liability would be corrected in the next 12 years without major changes whereas another study puts it at more like nine years. So why are they putting 300,000 workers' benefits at risk when this government isn't clear on their own numbers?

The Wildrose recognizes the strain public-sector pensions can put on public finances, but we would negotiate. For a government that is seemingly always engaged in conversations, they clearly do not listen. Legislating wages and silencing in those bills 45 and 46 have made that loud and clear. Even if some changes are needed, we believe that any such changes need to be negotiated openly and respectfully with the union leadership. Furthermore, I believe that any changes need to apply to new hires only going forward. The government has promised that current retired pensioners are safe; however, only time will tell, and actions speak louder than words.

I have spoken with many constituents on this issue, and they are worried. They are worried about the power the minister will retain through regulating caps. They are worried that the rules will be in the defined contribution regime, and they cannot trust this government.

I will not be supporting Bill 9, and I hope others do the same.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, I'll move to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Madam Speaker. Well, I'm glad I've got the opportunity to speak in second reading to Bill 9, which is the first of the one-two pension punch from this government. Bill 9 is affecting public-sector pension plans. Just for anybody that's going, "What is a public-sector pension plan?" well, our world divides itself into two pieces. One is the private sector, which is business, and the other is the public sector, which is any form of public administration, so government, hospitals, education, municipal government and administrators, libraries. All the not-for-profits would fall under that sector because they are not driven by a profit motive. So it divides itself that way. One group is out there to sell their product or service to as many people for as much money as possible. Fair enough. We are very happy to have them do that, and hopefully most of them are really good at it.

The other side tries to provide a program or a service, and they do it for the most part very responsibly. Any surplus that they have, so when they take away the money they made from what they spent, if there's money left over, is a surplus, and they reinvest that into the product or the service that they are dealing with. So it gets reinvested into health care, for example, or reinvested into seniors' care. It doesn't go into a shareholder's pocket. In health care I would sure hope that it doesn't.

Here we have the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014. Now, I just want to talk a little bit about the history of pension plans. Typically these were annuities, and they still are. The idea was that they're not for a specified period of time. A pension doesn't say: okay; this is for 10 years. It says: this is what you're going to get upon your retirement – it's always based upon retirement – every year until you die.

Some of them have survivor benefits, where you can agree at the very beginning that – well, I'll speak for myself. With my parents, they were teachers, so they could agree that they would take a smaller amount all the way along, but then there would be a

survivor benefit for the spouse after their death. Both my parents worked. They each had their own pensions. They didn't take that option, but it was certainly available to them. It's meant to be a payment, a revenue, that is going to pay your living expenses for the rest of your life. Okay. We're clear on that one.

Where did this come from? Is this just a newfangled thing? Well, actually, according to my research the original pensions were for the surviving spouse. They were for widows of – you've got to love this – ministers, people in the church, so that when the local minister died, their spouse would be looked after with a pension. That was established in 1645 and 1662, so it's not as though this is a newfangled thing. This has been around for a long time, with the concept that it's going to last until the recipient dies.

Now, Bismarck really was quite an amazing administrator. Otto von Bismarck established pensions in Germany in 1889. In Ireland the clans or the kins were expected to look after each other, and they did that by purchasing annuities, for example, which would pay out a certain amount of money for the life of the recipients.

The English system was based more on poverty, coming out of the poor laws and the relief of distress. Theirs was more a sort of social-based state allowance for people who were in distress. They were in poverty. Smart move. Ours tends to be sort of a flow-through from that one. We do have state-sponsored ones like the Canada – oh, no. That's not exactly true. Old age security and guaranteed income supplement. Canada pension plan: remember, the employees are also contributing to it, so it's not just an assistance program; the individual is also contributing to it and, of course, to the pension plans like we're talking about amending with Bill 9.

What's the deal with the timing of this? We've got a government that says, "Well, okay. I'm thinking about this," in a budget speech a year ago. Then it rolls around to September, and they go: "Okay. Here, I'm releasing this, and I need you to have your responses back in less than four months." Then we get into this spring, and here we are – tah-dah – and we need to pass this pronto. Well, okay. And it would take effect when? Eighteen months from now. Yikes. Okay, well, hmm. That's not a lot of planning time, especially if people are going to be having reduced pensions or reduced parts of that benefit package.

I'm very curious about this because CPP has got more than a 10-year lead-in. I'm one of the happy campers that is in the first group that will have a delayed kick-in for CPP. Just, you know, a little kind of funny aside here. My partner, who is exactly six months older than me, got in under the line because he was born in a different year. So he will be eligible for his CPP when he is 65. This girl: 66 or 68. The point is that they've given me a decade to figure this out and to work it into my retirement plans. They didn't give me 18 months. They've given 10 years for me to work this into how I'm going to figure out my retirement plans.

I don't understand what the rush is, and I also don't understand how the government expects people to be able to deal with a complete change in their retirement income in 18 months. I know I couldn't. I wonder how many people in here could. I think it's terribly unfair, and the timing is deplorable. I think it's just about a rush in getting it through before there's actually an election.

Perhaps someone could assist the Member for Edmonton-McClung. He seems to be having a hard time of it this afternoon.

I would suggest that one of the things the government – no. Actually, I really don't like this bill, and I think there's not much to recommend it. Really, what I'm going through is the list of all the reasons why I really don't recommend it. But I'm just making a few helpful suggestions to the government if they wanted to try

to do it better. I suspect not. I suspect that that isn't what they're all about at all.

Well, my goodness, he is certainly enjoying his afternoon siesta.

4:10

The Acting Speaker: Relevance, hon. member?

Ms Blakeman: Absolutely, Madam Speaker. I just couldn't be more interested.

Let me talk about poverty, talk about the history of pensions, the timing of this pension, poverty. Why would the government take a dual contribution scheme, especially when we know that there are already a number of seniors who are in poverty, and add more seniors into poverty with this reduced pension scheme? Poverty costs a lot of money, so why is this government going to cost themselves and the individuals a lot of money? That's what's going to happen here. This scheme may save the government a few dollars on one side or the other, but it is going to cost you a lot more when you have ill, destitute seniors.

As several of my colleagues have mentioned, we're not talking about pensions that are \$36,000 or \$50,000 or even \$24,000. The average pension in Alberta from the public-sector pensions: 12,000 bucks. Let me just remind you that AISH recipients, who we recognize – oh, I'm getting a real sad look from one of the ministers over there, so I'm sure he'll get up and correct me. They're from actuaries. I'm not going to question them. If he wants to – we give assistance benefits of a little over \$1,000 to people that we deem will never be able to participate fully in the workforce on a Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 4:30 basis. We offer them an assistance benefit of just a little over \$1,000. My goodness, we are now subjecting a group of seniors to an average salary that is below that rate.

That's how much we value our public-sector employees? That's how much we value firefighters and librarians, your administrative assistants, the security guards that look after us and our life and limb all the time? That's how much we value the people that work in our municipal governments in every little town, in every little county, that, you know, keep everything running? That amazing woman at the front desk that knows where everything is in the town hall: that's how much we value her, less than we give as a benefit to AISH recipients? Seriously? That's pretty bad.

Mr. Bilous: It's pathetic.

Ms Blakeman: It's pathetic.

We know from looking at the statistics that we have a widening gap between the rich and the poor in North America. Widening. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the middle income are sliding into poverty. We're going to accentuate that by now giving them a reduced pension. What did I say at the start of this? Poverty costs money. And what are we planning on doing? Putting more people into poverty. I'm sorry, but you're going to have a hard time convincing me that this is a brilliant move. Actually, you're not going to convince me.

We also know that wages are not keeping pace. People are not getting increases in what they're making that allow them to have a better quality of life than they did 10 years ago. Also, for the first time we now have a generation that is not going to do better than their parents. Their quality of life, their standard of living, by any measurement you want to make, is going to be lower than that of their parents, which is supporting everything I've just been saying.

Who is this? I've talked a little bit about who is going to be affected by this. It really is anybody in municipal governance, in the health sector, advanced education. Remember that this is approximately 50 per cent of the workers in Alberta. It's a lot of

people, and it's the people that deliver those services that we so want to be there when we need them.

One of my colleagues was kind of going through a list of who would be affected by this, and I had seen the same list. It's kind of scary, actually, because it does go through every little town, every little county, you know? The town of Picture Butte. Whoever works in the Picture Butte town hall is going to be affected by this. The town of Elk Point. Anybody represent Elk Point here? Well, your person is going to be getting less of a pension here. How about the town of Didsbury? Anybody representing them? Or Castor? Or Beaverlodge?

How about the Stollery Children's Hospital Foundation? The staff working there: that's whose pension you're fooling around with. How about the Red Deer Museum? Anybody represent that? I know somebody here does. Well, those people that work there, you're fooling around with their pension.

How about Olds College? I know somebody here represents that. Or the municipality of Jasper? Or the Kneehill Housing Corporation? Or the Health Quality Council of Alberta? I know that is a favourite one of yours. I cannot believe you would want them to have their pensions affected. Crowsnest Pass seniors' housing. Drumheller and District Solid Waste Management Association. That's important. How about the irrigation districts? Oh my goodness. People that work for irrigation districts. That's whose pensions you're fooling around with here. That's who you think isn't worth getting more money or getting a decent wage when they retire.

How about the Calgary Parking Authority? Ooh. I'll let you guys make the enemies out of those folks. Capital Power Corporation. The Calgary Convention Centre. The Badlands ambulance service. Hmm. That one's not going to go over so well, is it? You're affecting those people that provide those services that we all want.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would love to ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre if she's aware of other groups that are going to be affected by these changes and if she'd like to further espouse her opposition to this bill.

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

Ms Blakeman: Well, thank you. There are pages of them. I mean, it's the staff that work at every single village, every single town, every single city, every single municipal district, every single country, every single library, all the irrigation districts, all of the regional boards, all of the waste management, anything that's offered by a municipality. I mean, this is a long, long, long list of people.

An Hon. Member: Flood workers.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, yeah. Flood disaster recovery and flood mitigation people. All of those people that everybody couldn't wait to say enough good things about, those are the people whose pensions you guys want to reduce. That's who you want to affect here. That's who you're doing this to.

If it's okay with you, I just want to go back and pick up one little thing on the history. There are three groups that I forgot there. The other ones that followed on the Scottish clans were military pensions. That's the first time we really had pensions that recognized service, that service was given by those that were in

the military, particularly starting in North America with the Revolutionary War and then the Civil War in the U.S., and those people were granted pensions. Federal civil pensions were started in 1920, recognizing individuals who served in the federal civil service. In World War II we started what we would think of as the normal pension plan today, which was where you were paid less because they were really strained in those circumstances. You were paid less than what you wanted to get, for example, but you got retirement benefits. We've heard a lot of people here talking about the choices they made to take a lower paying salary in public service, but they were going to get the pension that made up for it.

What I'm beginning to see here is the breaking of a deal, that in a number of ways a deal has been struck for quite some time that the government is looking to tear apart: the timing of it, who's affected by it, the sort of balance of the pay that people are earning versus what they're getting through retirement. We really have pensions that were in place for an extended reward for services like the military, alleviation of poverty, and lower wages than people wanted to make or that employers could afford to pay them that were offset by the pensions.

4:20

I think the final thing, aside from who's being affected by this, is the fact that it's being imposed, not negotiated. Now, generally we negotiate with the people that work with us and for us rather than saying: this is what you're going to get. Everything is negotiated in the public service. You negotiate the different levels of pay and even the days off and the extra benefits that go with that. It's a long process. But this government doesn't seem to have any time to do that.

As I've said, we've got a process that's 18 months long, and it's going to pass right now – thank you very much – never mind 10 years to ease people into it, and they didn't get a choice to negotiate. I've heard the hon. President of Treasury Board say: oh, we consulted the board members of these pensions. Well, good on you. Not the recipients of the pensions; just the board members. Well, I don't think many of the people that are recipients are going to take that as a great consultation process, especially when they now find out they're going to get less money.

Let's talk about the add-ons. I find it really curious that the government talks about these add-ons. What's an add-on? Well, the cost-of-living increase: I don't think that's considered an add-on anymore. That might've been an add-on 20, 30, 40 years ago. It sure isn't nowadays. That can affect how much money you've got for a long period of time in a big way.

So the government is going to take away and legislate instead of negotiate. They're going to take away choice, take away transparency, and take away accountability. Wrong. Totally wrong.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Seeing as there's only seven seconds left in 29(2)(a) and I see no members wishing to ask any further questions, we'll move on.

Are there any other members who wish to speak in second reading on Bill 9, Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014? The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak, actually, against Bill 9, the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014. I find this an interesting bill to stand up and discuss. As the Health critic I'm busy enough dealing with health issues. I get, as I've told my colleagues, between 50 to 75 e-

mails a day on health alone. Then, all of a sudden, up pops Bill 9, which has increased the e-mails that I have been receiving from people within my constituency and, actually, people across the province that have become very frustrated from not getting any response from their MLAs when they contact their MLAs' offices to discuss their concerns about the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014. I guess as an MLA I always feel that we have to be accountable to our constituents. Even if we agree to disagree, it's important that you at least call them back. So we're logging and documenting all of the calls that we're taking from across the province, especially from Calgary, that they're not hearing from their own MLAs in regard to this bill.

I just wanted to get some things on the record. I know we talk in second reading of Bill 9 about the intent of the bill. It's quite interesting because it's a fairly large bill. It's 49 pages.

I just got a letter, actually – and it's a well-written letter – that's about seven pages. It's a letter to all MLAs, and its signatures are from Guy Smith, the president of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees; Heather Smith, president, United Nurses of Alberta; Elisabeth Ballermann, the president of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta; Marle Roberts, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Alberta division; and, of course, Gil McGowan, the president of the Alberta Federation of Labour. It's dated April 16. They talk about:

As a Member of Alberta's Legislative Assembly, you are about to embark upon a debate that has huge implications for the life-savings and retirement security of 300,000 Albertans. Because most of these people have spouses and dependents, your decisions will actually affect at least 600,000 Albertans.

They talked about:

To put that . . . in perspective, [about] 1,290,000 Albertans voted in the last provincial election. So, the number of Albertans who have a personal stake in the outcome of your debate on changes to the Public Sector Pension Plan Act is huge.

You know, when you get that in perspective, that's a lot of people that are going to be in affected by a bill that's hit this floor, that's 49 pages.

What I like about the letter is the fact that they've put some pointed questions out that, I think, probably in committee will be the minister's responsibility to answer because I think it's important to refute questions that are put before the Legislature. We don't have a lot of time to read all of this into the record, but the first thing they said is:

You've been told by the Minister that Alberta's public-sector [pensions] . . . are struggling under the weight of large and growing unfunded liabilities. Specifically, the Minister says the unfunded liability for the four pension plans under review amounts to \$7.4 billion.

Then they go on to explain – and it's very interesting, and I'd just like to read this into the record if I may. It says:

It's true that unfunded liabilities in pensions around the world grew in the wake of the global recession. But, the unfunded liability in Alberta's pension plans is no longer \$7.4 billion – and it's not growing, it's shrinking.

I think it's incumbent upon the minister to answer that question because, in my mind, it's a great question.

According to a recent analysis conducted by the independent actuarial firm George & Bell (a company which has been used by agencies of the government), the unfunded liability in Alberta's two biggest pension plans, the LAPP . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I just want to ask you if you have tabled that document.

Mrs. Forsyth: Sorry; I can't hear you. Just a sec. I've got to get wired up.

The Acting Speaker: Have you tabled that document?

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes, Madam. I'd be pleased to table that document.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Forsyth: Can I continue?

The Acting Speaker: Yeah. I think you have to go back a few sentences, though.

Mrs. Forsyth: Sorry. Just a minute.

Mr. Hale: You have to go back a couple of sentences.

Mrs. Forsyth: Sorry. That's why I have a service dog.

The Acting Speaker: Yes. Would you please just go back a few sentences?

Mrs. Forsyth: Absolutely. Sorry, Madam Speaker. I have to be wired up to hear you. I apologize.

According to a recent analysis conducted by the independent actuarial firm George & Bell (a company which has been used by agencies of the government), the unfunded liability in Alberta's two biggest pension plans, the LAPP and PSPP, has shrunk by about \$1 billion over the past year alone. George & Bell estimates that the unfunded liability will be gone entirely within nine years.

When unions pointed out that unfunded liabilities were shrinking, not growing, we were dismissed – even mocked – by the Minister. But, just a few days ago, PC MLA . . .

They say his name, and I believe it's the MLA for Red Deer-South.

. . . admitted to the Assembly that the unfunded liability would be gone in 12 years.

Then they use his name again, so I'll say that Red Deer-South's . . . comments were not a mistake – they reflect the projections of the Boards themselves, and can be confirmed by looking at their valuation reports.

We think that [Red Deer-South's] projection is too pessimistic, but at least he admits that the strategies to eliminate unfunded liabilities put in place years ago by Pension Boards, are working. Clearly, the Minister has not been entirely straight with you on the question of unfunded liabilities.

I don't know if I'm going to have a lot of time to read this into the record, and as you've asked, I will table it.

They talk about in sec. 2:

You've been told by the Minister that Alberta's public-sector pension plans are unsustainable in their current form because people are living longer.

They go on quite eloquently.

While it's true life-spans are increasing (and the last time we checked, that was a good thing) the reality is that all of Alberta's Pension Plan Boards have had strategies in place to deal with these trends – the same way they had strategies in place to pay down unfunded liabilities.

In fact, actuaries and pension experts now agree that the impact of changing trends in longevity on the long-term health of pension plans will be much smaller than previously feared.

4:30

The Boards of both of Alberta's largest pension plans, the LAPP and the PSPP, are set to release detailed updates on the health of their plans in June. Both reports are likely to show that

unfunded liabilities are shrinking and that...risks are manageable.

Why is the government in such a rush to pass legislation before this information is available? Could it be that they want this legislation passed before you, as an individual MLA, realize that the challenges being faced by pension plans are not nearly as serious as you've been led to believe?

They go on again in number 3. You know, I don't want to use all my time reading this into the record, so I think it's important that you've asked for it to be tabled. This is actually addressed to all MLAs. Every single MLA in this Legislature will be in receipt of this particular letter. It's dated April 16. I think it's important to read it. The third one is: "The Minister has told you that pension costs for public-sector employers are too high and that these costs are rising."

The letter is very, very well written, very articulate, and there are some serious questions that have to be answered, in my mind. It's a seven-page letter. I think it's incumbent upon each of us, every single MLA in this Legislature, to have the Finance minister answer these questions because then it sets out for us how we're going to be able to vote on this bill.

I can tell you that the conversations I've had over the long weekend, including driving up – that's three hours on the phone hands-free, I'll say – you know, are these poignant stories. I believe it was the opposition NDP that brought up the issue of the effects of these pensions on people who were planning their life. If their pension is even deducted, say, by \$300, that's a lot of money when you're on a fixed income.

I find that there are always two sides to every story. I think it's important when we're dealing with a significant bill to hear both sides of the story. I think it's important and it's interesting to watch. Right now we've been debating this bill for – I don't know – maybe an hour at this particular time, maybe an hour and a half. Gee, Madam Speaker, it's been opposition, opposition, and opposition again. We have not heard from one single government MLA on this issue, not one single government MLA. I could be wrong. Other than the Finance minister. I'm sorry. He introduced the bill, and he gave his speaking notes. He has colleagues all around him that can get up and speak with regard to this bill – I imagine they're going to speak in support of this bill – so that we can hear what they have to say.

I can't imagine in a million years that people are only calling the MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek or the MLA for Medicine Hat. None of the other MLAs, whether it's Calgary-Cross or – Strathmore-Brooks, I know, is getting calls, because we sit beside each other. I think he said that he's received 120.

Mr. Hale: Thirty.

Mrs. Forsyth: A hundred and thirty. That's a lot of people contacting an individual MLA. That's more than I got as the Health critic. Wow. It's a lot for MLAs.

I have always judged in my political career whether I have an issue or not by the amount of calls that are coming into my office. It always sets my spidey senses off when I start getting calls. For the people that I have talked to, it's not a one-issue sort of thing like they're reading out of a song book. They're very articulate. They have some good questions, some that I can't answer, some like what I indicated earlier from the five different union representatives. They're representing, obviously, the employees that they represent in the individual unions. It's the individual calls that are coming in, passionate and concerned, about: what are you doing to my pension; what are you doing to my family? I think that not only the questions that are articulated in the letter that I started to read into the record – and I will table it, Madam

Speaker; it would be my pleasure – need to be answered by the government.

We know that this bill will pass. There's no question that this bill will be passed, and I expect at any time that we're going to have time allocation on it. That would be my gut. Maybe not. I could be wrong. We're here for another two days, and then we're on a break, and then we're back for another two weeks. We don't control that agenda. Hopefully, we can continue to debate this and we can continue to bring forward questions that we're hearing from constituents and, for that matter, Albertans.

Whether it's in second – I doubt if it'll be in second because we're talking about the intent, but in committee I'll make sure that the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance gets a copy of the letter. I know as a former minister of the Crown the amount of mail that you do get as a minister, so when we get one of the pages a copy, I will personally make sure that I send him over a copy of the letter so that he can read it and, hopefully, answer all of their questions. More of the questions you're going to hear probably in the debate in second, about the intent of the bill, will be answered when we get to the committee stage.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a). The hon. Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I did feel somewhat compelled to rise because I wanted to ask the hon. member a bit of a question. Just to confirm for her, I do indeed have the letter from the labour group and, in fact, have met with them and talked about the contribution cap discussions that we're about to embark on, the joint sponsorship discussions that we're about to embark on, which this bill actually allows to happen, something that, quite frankly, the unions have been asking for for some period of time in terms of the joint sponsorship.

The other thing that troubles me a little bit, which is why I wanted to ask the question of the hon. member, was that there seems to be a bit of a theme here amongst some of the opposition speakers around trying to tell people that their pension promise, their best five years or three years of their salaries over their life's career, is somehow going to be reduced after the passage of this bill. Madam Speaker, that's not true. The cost-of-living adjustments will be paid if the funds can afford to pay them. By virtue of the opposition's claims that there's nothing wrong, that there's going to be enough money there to pay for that, they shouldn't have a concern about that either because it's going to be there.

Certainly, the joint sponsorship, which will be responsible for that, will have the payers and the employees sitting at the table. They will be able to make that determination, which they should. Right now it's based on the trusteeship of the Ministry of Finance. I disagree with that. I think it should be in their hands, Madam Speaker, and that's what this bill is going to do.

I have to ask the hon. member if she has actually realized that the pension promise is not the add-ons, it's not the early retirement subsidy, it's not the cost-of-living adjustments that may or may not be able to be paid if the funds cannot be paid because the unfunded liability will rise if it cannot; it's the actual pension promise that they will get, the guaranteed amount, a percentage of their best five years' average salaries for the rest of their lives regardless of how much they put into it. I'm wondering if the hon. member has actually figured that out from what she has seen in the bill. If there's confusion there, I'd be more than happy to clear it up. Her party actually wants to get rid of defined benefit plans, so I'm having difficulty listening to the Wildrose Party talk about

protecting defined benefit plans when in their budget document they talk about getting rid of that.

The second question for the hon. member. When they talk about moving and cutting everybody off and changing it so that everybody new coming in doesn't have the defined benefit, I'm curious whether in her research she looked at the Alaska model, which did exactly what the Wildrose is asking to do, cut off all new entrants to the defined benefit plan and move everybody else to defined contribution. Is she aware that there is a \$12 billion unfunded liability that the Alaska government is now going to have to deal with because they have no new contributors to the defined benefit plan? I'm curious whether the hon. member has researched either of those two issues.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

4:40

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

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you. I'm pleased to stand up and respond to the minister. I guess, here's the problem, Minister. You know, I've known you for a long time. Albertans do not trust you anymore. They don't believe what you're saying. Unfortunately, that is an unfortunate fact of life.

Mr. Horner: I didn't resort to name-calling.

Mrs. Forsyth: I apologize. I was with you for 17 years, and that's the problem right now. When I was an MLA, from 1993 to 2010 . . .

Mr. Horner: I wasn't elected then.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, we were together. We might not have been together for 17 years.

The problem right now is that Albertans don't trust you. Obviously, the people that are writing this letter don't trust you either, and that goes back to bills 45 and 46. Yes, I'm aware of the ARIA, which is the alliance, the Alaskan legislators, and the comments that you've made at this particular time. The AUMA doesn't like your reforms. You know, it's just a fact of life.

What I would like you to do so that you can change the minds of not only myself – I can't speak for my party because, quite frankly, we believe in free votes – is to stand up and answer the questions on this. [interjection] You know, it's amazing how you get – they haven't got the guts to stand up and speak on a piece of legislation, but they can yell at you when you're standing up speaking. You know, it's just amazing to me.

If he answers the questions . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members who wish to speak on Bill 9? The hon. leader of the Liberal opposition.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to vote against Bill 9. The Alberta Liberals seek to build a strong economy and a strong society. In building a strong society, having a good public-sector pension plan is part of that promise. The Conservative government here has a pension promise. They do. They promise to cut the pensions of our public servants, who each and every day work hard to build this province. Public servants: those who 24 hours a day stay awake to guard us and protect us, whether they're on the street in police cars, fire trucks, ambulances, or in hospital departments. These are the good people who each and every day teach our children, care for our sick and elderly, clean our hospitals, and are the very public servants, the civil service, who advise all of us here.

I don't understand why the government would attack the very people that help them to do their job, who help this building run, the good men and women who have spent a lifetime serving this province and serving democracy, why they would go on an attack of their very benefits, that they have paid into for years. I can't understand why this government would change the rules more than halfway through the game for hundreds of thousands of hard-working men and women who have contributed to their own pension plans and contributed to building our province.

Madam Speaker, I know the Finance minister read a book and got all scared and got all panicked. He got all scared and panicked because he read a book. Yeah. *The Third Rail* it's called. He read a book by somebody from Ontario, and he panicked. It's bad enough that they actually attacked the public servants with bills 45 and 46, with unconstitutional bills that will fail a Charter challenge, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but they've gone above and beyond by attacking the very pensions that front-line workers have contributed to.

Madam Speaker, I'd like to talk just about certain facts. Alberta is actually a younger province. We're not a province that is aging. We're getting younger. We're one of the youngest provinces if not the youngest in the country. We have a baby boom. Albertans are having children, and many young families are moving here. That's a good thing. So the argument that we're an aging population does not hold any water in this province. We are not an aging population.

Ms Blakeman: Our average age is in the 30s, isn't it?

Dr. Sherman: Well, it's getting younger, hon. member. It's getting younger.

This is an argument that's been used by Republican-type Conservatives for years, whether it's to blame the seniors for health care – now they're blaming the seniors for our pension plan. The reality is that they are not to blame.

Now, you know, Madam Speaker, it's tax time. Every Canadian is going to pay when we file our taxes if we haven't done so already. We're going to be paying into the Canadian pension plan. There's a reason they brought pension plans into place. They brought them into place because people were retiring into poverty. We have the Canadian pension plan. We have private industry pension plans.

You know, my father worked in the mill, Weldwood, for 35 years. He was a good union man. In fact, I worked in the mill, Madam Speaker, and I've still got my union card from the International Woodworkers of America right here. There's something good about having collective labour bargaining rights. The reason a group of people bargain collectively is so that worker safety is protected, standards of work and standards of education and standards of training are protected, but also worker rights are protected. When collective bargaining units negotiate with government – we've had years of inflation in this province. Well, the leaders of our unions didn't take pay raises. At a time of inflation they said: you know, in lieu of pay raises we want to protect our pensions.

Now, they will say that the pension plan is unsustainable. As you know, the cowboys on Wall Street were fiddling with the market, and the market crashed. So there was this \$7.5 billion unfunded liability, and the leaders of the unions, working with government, said: "You know what? Our workers will increase their contributions if the employer, the government, increases their contribution." Now, they didn't take pay raises at a time of inflation, so essentially the employees, you know, directly and indirectly subsidized both sides of the pension.

That liability has come down from \$7.5 billion to \$6.4 billion. The Minister of IIR himself says that the pension plan is healthy. To me healthy means sustainable. The Finance minister says that it's unsustainable. The Minister of IIR says that this can be paid down in 12 years. Well, you know, the leaders of the unions say that at this rate this can be paid down in five years. The market is doing well, and contributions are up, and when the unfunded liability – maybe the truth is somewhere in the middle. It might be between five and 12 years. Even if it is 12 years – we'll go with you, Minister – this can be fully funded. When it's fully funded, the contributions for the employer and the employees are going to drop.

Employees have significantly increased their contributions, and in lieu of wage increases – they have not taken wage increases – they have said to the government: "Look, we won't take a wage increase. As long as you do your share, we'll get this unfunded liability paid up. We'll get caught up." So that argument doesn't hold any water. It's going to be fully funded in a few years, and contributions will drop.

Now, Madam Speaker, these pensions aren't lavish pensions that the government gives to its senior people, the SERPs, the supplementary pension plans that are, you know, \$5,000, \$10,000, \$22,000 a month, that they've been giving to some senior health execs. They're not the fancy management pension plans that they've given to their buddies. We're talking – I don't know – 1,200 bucks a month. [interjection] Somebody here disagrees with that. Maybe it's \$1,400. Even if it's \$1,500, how much is that? In today's economic climate what's 1,500 bucks a month? You've got to pay your rent. You've got to pay your bills. You've got to pay for food. You've got to pay room and board.

I'll tell you one thing. Seniors need to maintain their independence, to live in their own homes for as long as possible. We've got amongst the highest bills in the country – amongst the highest bills in the country – for gas and electricity. The cost of everything is going up, and these public servants, who built this province, need to have independence when it comes to driving their vehicles. While the cost of gas is really high, the cost of the vehicle is high. Essentially, by cutting the pensions, cutting the cost-of-living adjustment, our seniors are going to be retired into poverty. We already have so many seniors struggling with poverty today, as we speak, because many of them have lost their life savings. We know the effects of poverty on individuals, especially on seniors.

4:50

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Well, I'll give you some certain facts here. Poverty leads to poor health, and poor health, in turn, leads to even more poverty. You know, a study came out years ago in the Capital health region where poor men were dying seven years before high-income men. I'll tell you one thing. Before these poor men die before rich men, there's a lot of suffering that happens, a lot of visits to the hospital. Because of the paramedics and the nurses and the doctors in the health system, the health staff that do such a great job, we can actually say to people when they come into our hands that the costs to health care of dealing with poverty are absolutely immense.

The cost of poverty to the taxpayer for housing folks who can't afford to live in their homes is immense. Because seniors can't afford to live in their homes and there is such inadequate home care and long-term care today, we've put about 550 seniors in hospital beds, at 1,200 to 1,400 bucks a night, causing the whole

ER crisis. That alone costs a quarter billion dollars directly to health care.

To retire a whole new generation into poverty is bad economic policy. It's bad business. It's going to cost the taxpayer way more down the line in terms of money, but it's going to cost society in terms of human suffering as well. This decision is short sighted and it's ill conceived. The fact of the matter is that the pension plan is sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, here's another thing. People are living longer right now because they lived healthy lives 60, 70, 80, 90 years ago. The fact of the matter is that the next generation, the children of the current seniors, will not live to the same age as their parents. Their children are getting sicker even before then. Because of childhood obesity rates, inactivity, and processed food, we have a triple tsunami of illness coming down the pipeline. Okay? So the baby boomers and their kids will not live to the age of the octogenarians and the 100-year-olds that we have today. To those who are using that, these are incorrect facts that they're spelling out.

Now, they talk about targeted benefits. Well, my question to the government is: "What if the market doesn't do so well? Does that mean there's no cost-of-living adjustment whereas inflation continues?" That's exactly what that means.

Mr. Speaker, really, the most fundamental issues of our society are the issues of inequality, fairness, and justice, and that's what this issue is really about.

You know, really, these are Republican Party policies. I thought that these guys were the Tea Party, but even the Wildrose opposes this bill. Thank you, members, for opposing it. When the Wildrose opposes a bill – you know what? – the Conservative Party definitely should be passing this bill. It's really a policy of right wingers who talk about trickle-down economics. It's about trickle-down economics, and they have essentially doubled down on trickle-down economics, where if you give a few people a couple of billion dollars, they think that benefits will trickle down to the regular working folk. Well, I'll tell you that benefits don't trickle down; burdens trickle down. And this is one of those burdens.

Income disparity, Mr. Speaker, is one of the biggest issues facing our society today. In Alberta, the wealthiest place in the country, we have 90,000 children living in poverty. That's 90,000 children living in poverty. Well, here's a fact. Poor kids have poor moms and dads. You know what? Now you're going to give these poor kids poor grandmas and grandpas as well. We've got 90,000 kids in poverty, their parents are in poverty, and now you're going to retire their grandparents into poverty as well. Thank you very much.

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

My mother is a widow. My mom is turning 75 this year, God bless her soul. Dad left us a few years ago. She doesn't get a heck of a lot of money from his pension. It's barely enough to pay the bills, you know. She doesn't have a fancy house. In fact, she's over the limit, where her teeth aren't covered. She goes to India to get her teeth done because the limits here are so low and she can't afford the \$5,000 bill. We pay for our mom's flight. Thank God Mom's kids did all right. We look after our mom.

Madam Speaker, not many families have children that have done very well in their lives, right? Many families have children. Remember that I talked about their children also being in poverty and their grandchildren being in poverty. With my mom and dad we got lucky that we had such good parents and we got lucky that education was cheap and we got lucky that we had a good public education system that was affordable. We all did okay as kids.

Madam Speaker, we are going to have tens of thousands of widows. This is going to affect the women in our society, not only the seniors, not only the men, but it's going to affect women and grandchildren.

I urge members of this government to vote against their own bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a). Are there any other members who wish to question or make a comment to the leader of the Liberal opposition?

Seeing none, we'll move to the next speaker, the hon. leader of the ND opposition.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to this bill. It's been interesting. You know, I happened to be speaking this morning to the Alberta Chambers of Commerce. One of the members before I got up and spoke asked where I thought this pension legislation was coming from. He said: "It certainly didn't come from us. We the business community didn't tell the government to go and attack their own employees' pension plans. It didn't come from us. Why are they doing this?" To be honest, I didn't have an answer. It certainly seemed to come a bit out of the blue.

We've taken a look at the government's numbers. We've looked at their rationale. We've looked at the changes they've made from what they originally proposed. We've also, of course, been working with the affected unions and going through their numbers and their analysis of what's happening here. We've also heard from hundreds and hundreds of people who are directly affected. The e-mails are coming in fast and furious every day. We've actually had a chance to really, I think, get a good handle on the positions of the various affected parties with respect to this, and it doesn't illuminate for me why the government is doing this.

It's pretty clear that the pension boards themselves, that include representation from the employers and the employees, have not sanctioned these changes, have not recommended the changes, and are firmly committed to the course of action that has been undertaken, which will, according to their work, eliminate the unfunded liabilities within nine years even if you do nothing. Again, it doesn't help explain in any way what the government is doing. I think that when you really press the government and the ministers on this, they will admit that ultimately without these changes that they're proposing, the plans will eventually get back to the point where they do not have an unfunded liability, which just leaves the reason that I think is lying behind this, that the government is trying to save some money.

5:00

The government doesn't like the temporary increases in the rates that they have to pay as an employer in order to get the plans back on track, and as a result of that, they are prepared to dilute the plans, to make them weaker. They're doing that in a number of ways. I think one of the most important ways is to make people work longer. So the 85 factor, which is the number of years you've paid into the plan plus your age, is changed to the 90 factor. It means that people will have to work two and a half, three years longer to qualify for the pension. That's the first thing.

There's also a COLA clause that applies. It has never been a hundred per cent of the cost-of-living increase, but it is being reduced. What that means is that the benefits that people receive over time will fall farther and farther behind the cost of living, and they'll do so at a faster rate than they do now. So the bottom line for employees under this government's plan is that in order to save

some money for itself, the government is making them work longer for a smaller pension, and that's just not fair, Madam Speaker. That's why we've been so strongly opposed to it.

If it was absolutely necessary, if the government could prove that it was necessary and that it would really save the plan, then I think they would have a case, but it's pretty clear that the pension boards have the matter under control, and the government is not acting out of necessity but out of a desire to save some money at the expense of pensions that are extremely modest. These are not rich pensions. People are earning, actually, very little under these plans. A reduction, as we indicated earlier last week, in the plan's payout benefits maybe amounts to a few hundred dollars a month, which is an enormous amount for people who are living on a fixed income.

For the government to try and save money at the expense of its own pensioners and the pensioners who work for cities and health care institutions and so on is just a very, very mean-spirited thing to do given the amount of waste that we've seen in the government, given the amount of subsidization of business, given the fact that the tax system heavily favours wealthy Albertans at the expense of middle-class Albertans. For the government to actually try and save money on the backs of pensioners I think is extremely mean-spirited, and I think that accounts for a lot of the negative reaction from the public, including from people who are not expecting to draw a local authorities pension plan or a public pension plan.

The other thing that the government isn't really telling us the truth about, in my opinion, is that this is to save the defined benefit nature of the pension plan. Now, they're quite right about the Wildrose position until recently being that we could no longer as a society sustain and support that kind of a plan, but the government isn't being honest about what it's doing. By putting a cap on contributions and hamstringing the boards, it may result in a position where they are unable to raise enough money to get the plans back on track should they run into difficulty. Normally they run into difficulty because the stock market runs into difficulty. This is invested money; it's not because they're mismanaged. If the pension boards can no longer get the plans back on track because of this cap, then they're going to have to reduce the benefits.

What the government is actually doing here is transforming defined benefit plans into targeted benefit plans. That means that should the plans run into difficulty – if the stock market is bad, if there's some reduction in the number of people who are working and paying into the plans that was unanticipated and so forth – they'll have to reduce the benefits that are going to be paid, and they'll have to change the benefits. So it's not under this plan, under this legislation, going to be a defined benefit plan anymore.

When the Minister of Finance stands up in this House day after day and asserts that they're trying to protect the defined benefit nature of the plan, he is some distance from the truth, I think you could say, Madam Speaker. It's something, I think, that people who are in these plans really do understand. They do get that, and they're very angry about it.

We have a situation, for example, in the United States. Some of these things have happened in other places, and I want to deal with a couple of states. The Minister of Finance has mentioned Alaska, and I'd like to come back to Alaska, but I'd also like to talk about Nebraska. Now, way back in 1964, Madam Speaker, Nebraska switched from a defined benefit system to a defined contribution plan for state and county government workers. The first thing that happened was that their administration costs went up. It required more record-keeping fees, investment management fees, educational

programs, and other administrative lines. In 1999 the state of Nebraska found that the expenses of its defined contribution plan were double the cost of its defined benefit system. It also found that when employees hired under the defined contribution plan managed their own investments, investment returns were lower than under a defined benefit system.

Now, there's lots of other information here, but ultimately what happened is that they took a hard look at the benefits that were being received under this plan by their retirees, and they found that participants in the state's defined benefit system with similar pay and service credit meanwhile had an annual retirement benefit of only \$16,797, which is \$3,100 more than the poverty level of a family of two. That was under the defined benefits system. So that's \$3,000 above. When they looked at what the defined contribution retirees with 30 years of service and an average annual salary of \$30,000 were getting, they had only about \$11,230 annually, which is \$2,460 less than the poverty line for a family of two. So, Madam Speaker, what they did in 2002 was that they went back to a defined benefit plan. I believe that this government will place many retirees at risk of living in poverty if it proceeds with this erosion and reduction of the plan.

Now, the Wildrose has a plan, and their plan – and I think I should deal with this a little bit as well – is to keep everybody on the plan now and grandfather them and continue to pay them a defined benefit plan and then to place all the new hires on a defined contribution plan, which is their philosophical preference. They've made that very clear over the years: in the last election, in their budget submissions, and so on.

5:10

I think the Minister of Finance raised the question of Alaska. We've also looked at what's happened in Alaska, and I think he's quite right. What happens if you do that, what the Wildrose is proposing, is that you no longer have new people paying into your defined benefit plan, but you are responsible to pay all of the retired people all of the benefits that they were guaranteed, so you get a deficit in the plan. You get a large, growing deficit because you don't have any new money coming in from employees to support the ones that have retired. People are living, you know, longer, so there's a huge liability there, which in Alaska's case has grown to \$12 billion. I think that is the actual figure. This year alone Alaska had to put in \$3 billion of public money just to keep the defined benefit plan afloat. Now, it's a good thing that they have a decent royalty system in Alaska, unlike you guys, because they can afford it, but I don't think we can afford it if you're going to keep all this corporate welfare stuff that you've got going on.

Is that one minute? Oh, my goodness.

I think, just to wrap up, that we should defeat this bill, and we need to maintain and support our existing pension plans and support the boards that are managing them. I think they're doing a good job, and I think the plans are solvent in the long run, and we need to avoid, as the Wildrose is suggesting, eliminating the defined benefit plan going forward for new employees because I think that would come close to bankrupting the province.

With all due respect, Madam Speaker, we think that the position that we've taken and that the Liberal Party caucus has taken is the correct one, and that is to stand up and fight for the pensions of public employees in this province, and we will continue to proudly do that.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. Did you have a motion that you wanted to present?

Mr. Mason: Oh, yes. Thank you very much. Can I do that at the end of 29(2)(a)?

The Acting Speaker: We have 29(2)(a) in place. Are there any members who wish to question or make comments about the member's presentation?

Seeing none, we'll move on. The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise here and speak to Bill 9, the Public Sector Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2014. Before I say anything, I think it is important to know that every single public-sector pension plan this province created was created by this PC government and was agreed to in good faith with public-sector unions. If there is a problem with these public-sector pensions, then the government should be approaching the unions, explaining why they believe they are no longer sustainable, and negotiating in good faith on any changes that they wish to make.

Still, this is a government that simply ignores doing the right thing. Instead, the government has brought forward changes they wish to mandate through legislation. These changes are not supported by workers or by the public-sector employees who work on the front lines, front-line Albertans who see this province misuse everyday resources.

Madam Speaker, let's talk about our public-sector employees. The government doesn't seem to want to have this discussion. First and foremost, they don't seem to want to make changes to their own benefits. One can only understand how it must be hard for our front-line people, who are providing fantastic service and fantastic care to everyday Albertans, to see that one of the first things this government did was to double the RRSP contribution they receive every single year. This amounted to approximately \$11,000 more every year, or an 8 per cent pay raise. In the case of even this past year that amount exceeded \$11,000. The perks don't stop there. We have ministers and potential leadership candidates that charge taxpayers \$10,000 for new office furniture. We have ministers that use government aircraft like it's their own personal airliner, even to fly them to PC Party fundraisers when they might need a lift.

It is almost embarrassing to say to our front-line staff, to say to 300,000 workers from over 54 unions: you must take it on the chin, but we're not going to set the example in this Legislature first. For that this government should really be embarrassed. Bill 9 says nothing about MLA pay raises, nothing about excessive government perks paid out from tax dollars, and nothing about using the government aircraft like a political party's airline. Instead, it involves taking away existing benefits from public-sector retirees.

I understand this is an uncomfortable conversation for many of the members on the other side. I understand you want to stop having a conversation about how we as Albertans and we as legislators are responsible for everyday taxpayer money and to everyday taxpayers. I get that that's uncomfortable. I get that when they were knocking on the doors in 2012, they didn't bang on a single door and tell them they were going to introduce bills 45 and 46 and then take away worker rights. They sure as heck didn't bang on any door and tell them that with Bill 9 they were going to do a full review and actually penalize everyday Albertans who are doing hard, hard work in the front lines. They also didn't tell them how they were going to abuse taxpayer money each and every day and then not answer for it in the House. I get that they don't want to talk about how they used the government plane to go to PC Party fundraisers, because that's uncomfortable.

Well, it's just as uncomfortable for everyday Albertans who are providing services to our seniors, to our vulnerable, to our disabled, cleaning our Legislature, applying all the services for our plant maintenance. They don't want to have those conversations with those Albertans when they tell them how this is going to negatively impact their everyday lives. Yeah, it's uncomfortable. But you cannot go and put this on the backs of front-line people when you haven't taken the step to actually set the example.

There's no question. Did we have to look at pension reform? Probably although the minister of intergovernmental relations would tell you that it was going to be solved in 12 years. The government keeps refuting that and saying that that isn't actually what he meant when he said that or that he meant something different. Well, the reason this pension plan is in this position – if it truly is in the dire straits that this government says that it is, then you should have been planning for that over the last 12 or 20 years. The fact that people age and they stay alive longer isn't their fault. You really couldn't see that one coming? You really couldn't see that people are going to age longer and that the people contributing were dwindling if that's the case? You had no plan?

You could have done these kinds of reforms graduated so that it didn't hurt them quite so much as they're doing right now, and you sure as heck could have done it while you were setting the example by cutting back on all the things that you're taking away from Alberta taxpayers. You sure as heck shouldn't have given yourself a 50 per cent raise on the RSP on one side, and then turn around to the union employees and say: "We're going to do this on this side. We're going to set a terrible example, and then we're going to expect you to take the higher ground and take it on the chin."

Let's take a look at another group that the government doesn't seem to want to touch, the inflated bureaucracy at Alberta Health Services. They previously had more than 90 vice-presidents until they shuffled those people into new roles with no change in pay. Now, the Minister of Health will tell you a thousand times from Sunday that, you know, they got rid of all the vice-presidents and now they're down to 10. The reality of it is that they didn't get rid of any. They fired five, which cost us a fortune because their contracts are so bloated with bureaucracy. Literally what they did is that they gave them all new name changes, and they expected the public just to look the other way. You cannot sit there and say, "We're going to make mediocre changes to Alberta Health Service's bureaucracy," which is really a cost to the taxpayer, and then turn around and penalize everyday front-line people who are providing the great services that we see at the likes of Michener, the likes of every single seniors' home. Our municipalities fall under this union as well.

Alberta Health Services gives out nontendered contracts for things like yoga, and executives are even treated to some New Age, out-of-this-world, six-figure coaching, but the government doesn't want to attack those perks. Instead, they bring across Bill 9. They didn't campaign on it. They didn't campaign on ending any of this. What they do is they sit there and they tell Albertans every single day, "We're working for you", when in reality what they're really doing is taking from them. Instead, you want to legislate changes to nurses' pensions, LPNs, health care aides, service personnel, sheriffs, health sciences that would take away their cost-of-living allowance.

5:20

This is the fundamental problem. You lose all credibility when, on one hand, you're robbing from Peter not to give to Paul but to pad your own pockets. That's exactly what's going on here. A 50

per cent raise in the RSP allowance goes into your own pockets. [interjections] The sole-source contracts at Alberta Health Services is a benefit to them themselves. There is no benefit to Albertans from executive coaching. There's not a single executive – and I would take you back to the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. She gave an amazing member's statement. You can yell out all you want. I get that that's what you need to do because this is uncomfortable. I totally understand that. I get the heckling. That's fine. I'm happy to have you guys stand up in the House and address all of your comments and concerns to the chair. That's great.

The reality of it is that today the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek gave a moving member's statement talking about what front-line people do every single day: how they hold your hair back when you're getting sick; how they can't even put people in the patient restroom area, like where they can go and make phone calls, because it's full of beds; how our front-line personnel are honestly talking about how they might have to go to bunk beds to actually deal with clients who are coming in.

That's the problem with the waste in our system. You can't literally say to those folks, those folks who are changing your catheters, changing your diapers, rolling you over for bedsores, taking care of our children in foster care, making sure that those who are disabled have all the supports that they need – you can't turn around and say to them: you need to take less, but I'm going to take more. It's embarrassing, and the public isn't buying it.

You can make this about the unions wanting to protect their membership. You can make this about: we didn't take as many perks as we thought we could take. The reality of it is that you cannot enforce something on someone else until you yourself have set the example. Every single one of us who is a parent has seen this every single day. I cannot expect my daughter to do something that I would not do myself or that I haven't set the example of doing. I can't expect her to do that. This is a fundamental problem with our society, and this government is literally perpetuating it. It is symbolic of a government's lack of priorities. It is symbolic of a government that ignores the front lines while allowing the bureaucracy to grow. It is symbolic of a government that wants to freely take more benefits for themselves while legislating to take benefits away from others.

I can understand the argument on behalf of the unions wanting to protect their membership. I understand that. I also can understand the government saying that we need to do something to have pension reform and we need to roll out that process. The problem with this government is that they don't do things in consultation. They don't set the example. Two years ago you ran an election and you never, ever even brought this up.

The other problem that you have is that this government continues to download costs onto municipalities, onto everyday Albertans, roles and responsibilities that they are supposed to shoulder. Everyday Albertans can't take anymore, and everyday Albertans, our seniors, are maxed out. I know because I take care of my parents. I take care of my parents, who make a total of \$43,500. That's it. That's not huge money, and my mom works full-time. My dad was self-employed. He didn't have much of a pension, and I'm sure there were lots of bad decisions along the way. But that's all they have. My dad's pension is 844 bucks, and my mom makes a total of \$1,600 a month. That's it. And my mom is one of the people who is going to be affected by this. When you start telling people like her and telling people like LPNs that their pensions are going to be affected, they go into panic mode.

There's one thing this government could have done, and I don't know why they don't think about it. You could have campaigned on it, you could have made it clear, and you could have done it in

consultation with the unions. Instead, it's like this constant force of nature where this PC government decides: I'm going to do something, fly off the handle, and literally put in legislation that nobody supports and is going to impact 300,000 Albertans. I'm not exactly sure who they think votes for them, because 300,000 Albertans are going to remember this, and 300,000 Albertans' families are going to remember this bill. Mark my words. Bills 45, 46, and 9 are going to lose the 2016 election for the PCs. If that's their choice, that's their choice. Then, clearly, they made a campaign message, and that's the message that Albertans will get.

In the past the government negotiated all of these agreements. If they were inadequate, it is a problem of their own making. They cannot now put all of the blame directly onto unions and their front-line service workers and then literally come back and say: "Oops. Sorry. It wasn't our fault. It wasn't our fault." If this problem is as big as it is, it literally should have been at the forefront of at least the last two – two – terms of this current government, so since Premier Stelmach, because this didn't just come to light yesterday. You could have run a whole campaign on it, and you could have garnered support from unions and their membership.

You can achieve the reforms that you might want to achieve if you started talking about new hires and the impacts that this would have on new hires. You don't have to be retroactively punitive. You don't have to do that. There is no requirement for wholesale legislative change at this point in time. If it was there, it was there two years ago when you were in a campaign, and you could have been honest with Albertans.

The other thing I would just like to remind every single member in this House of. We can get into an ideological debate about whose plan is better. It's not what this is about. What this is about is literally every single person on the front line doing the best they can to provide services to our loved ones. So just remember that.

With that, Madam Speaker, I'd like to move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 10
Employment Pension (Private Sector) Plans
Amendment Act, 2014

[Adjourned debate April 17: Mr. Horner]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'll keep this mercifully short. The original Employment Pension Plans Act reached royal assent, of course, less than two years ago, at the end of 2012. The original act was a regulatory response to the introduction of new types of pension plans, specifically involving targeted benefit pension plans and jointly sponsored pension plans as well as the implementation of the recommendations from the Alberta-British Columbia Joint Expert Panel on Pension Standards. There were some i's that were not dotted and some t's not crossed in that legislation, so we're back here fixing a couple of things that were missed. Essentially, it's been introduced to update and modernize the private-sector's pension plan legislation, and it gives the private sector the flexibility to use targeted pension plans if they so choose.

The Wildrose supports that choice being given to the private sector, and that is all we have to say about that.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members that wish to speak on Bill 10 in second reading?

Mr. Anderson: I would love to move to adjourn debate if that's okay with the Legislature.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

5:30 **Government Bills and Orders**
Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Jablonski in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: I'd like to call the committee to order.

Bill 8
Appropriation Act, 2014

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm really glad to be able to get the chance to speak to Bill 8, the appropriation bill, in Committee of the Whole. I tried in second reading, but it turned out I had four seconds left before the vote was called. So I really appreciate this. The issue for me is that the way the budget debates are structured now, I can't be in every debate, so I've missed my opportunity to question and comment in the other 19 ministries that I wasn't able to attend the debates for.

A couple of things. I know I can't get responses back from the ministers, but maybe I can at least put some statements on the record. One of the first things that I want to note in Bill 8, the Appropriation Act, is the very first series of numbered votes, which is support to the Legislative Assembly. Specifically, I want to talk about the officers of the Legislative Assembly. Over the time that I have sat on the Legislative Offices Committee, which is from 2001 till now – this is our bastion. By "our" I mean Albertans' protection and also the government's protection. If something fails and it fails because the Auditor General didn't catch it – you know what? – it's not me that's going to catch heck for being on the Legislative Offices Committee; it's the government for not doing whatever they were supposed to do or the Auditor General says that they're supposed to do.

I think we have to be very careful when we examine the budget of those officers, making sure that we are funding them to be able to get the work done rather than approaching it by saying, "How little are we going to increase their budget by this year?" or, you know, "How much can we hold them back this year?" These are the areas that I think as officers and as members of this Assembly we really have to be careful about.

If the office of the Chief Electoral Officer fails because they couldn't get a good voters' list, who suffers from that? Democracy suffers. Every single citizen in Alberta suffers. Everybody in here suffers. It's a major problem. You know, we could end up in court and have the results of an election completely overturned. So that office having enough staff to be able to do the work they need to do is really critical.

That's for all of them. You know, that's for the Auditor General, the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is the court of last appeal. It's the last place where a citizen can appeal to get a fair hearing, let's call it. It's meant to be administrative. I think people often think that if they don't get the answer that they want or if they're, you know, unhappy with what the rule is, they can go to the ombudsperson and say, "Well, I'm unhappy because of this" or "I got ripped off because of this rule." That's not really their job. Their job is to make sure that the individual was treated the same as any other individual would be treated and that the full

administrative opportunities were offered to person A the same as they were offered to person B. Often the ombudsperson will say: "You know what? There is nothing here that would have helped this person, but there should be." And they spend time with the department negotiating to say: you should have some processes in place, and this is how we recommend you do it and fulfill some of this, you know, put some stuff in place.

I talked about the Chief Electoral Officer.

The office of the Ethics Commissioner. That's the public's belief in us. If that office doesn't have credibility, we don't have credibility. If we don't have credibility, then the legislation that we pass in here, people will blow it off. Why should they take it seriously if they don't take us seriously? That becomes a much larger problem because it's far beyond us. It's not personal anymore. It's that the work we've done here is not credible, which, frankly, is mostly going to, you know, come down on you guys. So I really don't need to be worrying about this so much, but I'm a nice gal, and I'm worrying on your behalf.

Mr. McIver: Bless your heart.

Ms Blakeman: There you go. Bless my heart. I know.

Actually, I'm worrying on behalf of democracy and all that good stuff. You know, that's why I'm talking about this.

The office of the Child and Youth Advocate is relatively new, about 18 months now, I think, or two years. We've talked a lot about how important it is to make sure that children have a voice in the way things are done here. That's certainly what that office is set up to do.

The office of the Public Interest Commissioner. That's the whistle-blower person, which I think hasn't really done anything because nobody felt protected enough by the legislation to blow the whistle on anything. But that's another conversation. Frankly, I don't think giving them any more money is going to change that. Unless you're going to change the protection for the people that are considering coming forward, that office isn't going to get a lot more business.

I just wanted to really underline that before we started because we do tend to approach those offices with that same sort of, you know, "How do we hold the line on these offices?" in the same way that we approach the other ministries, and I don't think that approach is appropriate for those offices.

My caucus, the third party Liberal opposition caucus, voted in favour of the budgets for Aboriginal Relations and Agriculture because our critic, the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, felt they were reasonable budgets and both ministries were doing a fairly good job of administration. I have one little disagreement with him about that, about the elk, but for the purposes of my argument here, I'll just keep going. We were willing to vote in favour of that, so they were pulled out for separate votes. But we didn't vote in favour of the rest of it, and I think that there are a number of reasons why.

It's really frustrating to me how badly we have done with the Culture budget. You know, there is a lot of lip service. Tourism likes to put the picture of all those tens of thousands of people on the Folk Festival hill in their brochures and take advantage of all of the festivals and the arts that we do here. Lots of people talk about the economic development. We talk about the films coming in and revitalizing smaller communities. Lots of lip service but when it comes right down to it at Treasury Board, no money.

This is a particular job creator. It costs less money to create a job in the cultural industries and cultural community than it does in any other sector, so if you're trying to create more jobs for people, this is an area we could be concentrating on. It also is the

hub, the start of our creative industries. If we're trying to diversify Alberta, as we all keep mouthing for decades now about how we want to diversify our economy, but nobody actually does it, this is one of the ways to do it.

You know, Alberta has a sort of small, fingernail hold on being a centre for gaming in North America. We have a number of companies here that specialize in electronic digital games. I'm sorry; I don't actually play these, so I'm a bit at a loss here. I'm looking around for anyone under 40 that might be able to help me with the language. I'm thinking BioWare and some of the other ones that have sort of a story-based interaction that goes on, where you select an avatar or character and go through a series of storylines. We have amazing digital artists here, animators, voice-overs. There's a lot of talent that is coming out of the theatre pool, the dance pool, artists that are already here that are contributing what they know to a different sector, and that sector makes money, a lot of money. It's a great place to diversify.

5:40

In education I think there are a number of issues. The ones that I hear most often being brought up are overcrowded classrooms and the fact that we now have integrated classrooms and very high numbers. I admit that when I went to school I travelled through in a cohort that was between 36 and 39 students, which was okay. I don't have any bad memories of that. But you know what? There was not one kid in those 39 that had an issue with the English language, that needed ESL or whatever they call it now. There were no kids with any kind of behavioural problems. If there were, they got whisked off to a private school or an institution before you could say, "Gee whiz, I . . ." Nope. They were gone. There were no kids in that class that had any kind of physical or mental handicap. So the teachers taught, and the 39 of us learned. If the teacher needed to spend time with an individual student, they could do that, but there were no teacher aides in those classes.

Now we're expecting teachers to perform miracles. We keep cutting the budgets and changing the way that we code these kids and not giving the resources, which isn't always money, by the way, and not allowing the resources for the schools to support the students that are in it. I've talked about how wonderful my schools are. They have become experts in how to deal with kids that are nonverbal, that come from different language backgrounds, from different faith backgrounds, but also kids that come from trauma and torture. That may not be something that a lot of the rest of you deal with, kids in your school system that came out of Somalia or the Sudan, where they were born into war, where they were perhaps a child soldier, where they lived in a refugee camp somewhere else for a period of time before they came to Canada. Those are just not things that we considered, having kids like that in our schoolrooms. There are things that we need to do to help them become full, productive, engaged citizens that are contributing to our society.

Environment and Sustainable Resource Development. I did get my 10 minutes of questioning the minister in that. There was a conference last week that the government participated in, and so did the city of Edmonton. Everything I looked at coming out of that conference just underlined that this government doesn't get it. They keep hoping that if they just put out enough PR and if they just say it often enough, it will be true. There has to be more. Talk is not enough. Pretty pictures are not enough. Nobody gives the government credibility when they say that they are great and responsible environmental stewards. There's just no credibility there . . .

An Hon. Member: Or that they're transparent.

Ms Blakeman: . . . or any kind of transparency, any kind of accountability in that whole file. People snicker and start to do other things because they're just not engaged and listening anymore.

Seriously, we have to look at a price on carbon. We have to look at how we're subsidizing coal and allowing it to continue to be what drives our electricity sector. We're just so far behind on that, and we just look silly now. I'm an Albertan, too. I don't want to look silly in the eyes of the world because my government just won't grapple with climate change and what really has to be done and action that needs to be taken.

Let me talk about some of the other ministries I didn't get to be involved in. In Executive Council I still see a lot of duplication of services between Executive Council and International and Intergovernmental Relations. There always seem to be two different departments, and they're each kind of delivering the same sort of thing. There have always been reasons about why that is, but they still don't ring true to me after all these years, and I think there are some ways to save some money there that could be used in other places by getting rid of that duplication.

Health. You can't explain to me and you can't explain to the people, you know, that are outside right now walking home how on earth you could put that much money into health care and not improve the access to it. It's just mind-blowing. And so much money. I know that people that work in the health sector, of all of the not-for-profit and public sectors, get paid the best salary. Anybody can look that up and find that out. But, holy mackerel, I don't know who was signing the paycheques and saying that this was okay over there. It's out of line, and there's a lot of waste and mismanagement, to anybody's eye, where we could be either saving money or redirecting money back in so that we had better services and better access times. The fact that we keep changing our targets and our monitoring benchmarks so it's harder for people to figure out if we've actually improved: it just looks really bad, and it's very frustrating.

Each year I see more and more money put into those departments and not put into other departments. Then everybody runs around, you know, with their hair on fire going: "Oh my God. Look at how much money we're putting into health care. That must mean that it's the best health care system in North America." Well, no, it's not. There's something very wrong if you're putting that much money into health care and you're not getting better results, if you're not getting better outcomes, and you're not. In comparing ourselves to others, we're just coming lower and lower on the measurement scales every time.

Human Services, the ministry of everything. You know, can I just jump ahead? I'm wondering how long we're going to have three associate ministers of disasters. Is that forever? Are those permanent now? Who am I asking this to? Municipal Affairs, I guess. We've got three ministers of different regions that are all responsible for flooding and disasters. I think: "Well, okay. Are you anticipating more disasters this year so that you need to keep people in place?" Or they haven't finished the job from last year, which also doesn't speak very well. [interjection] I don't begrudge you being a minister, sir, but there are – what? – nine of you that aren't a minister of something or other, just a few of you back there, good, hearty souls that are kind of holding down the teeter-totter on that side. I mean, honestly, you've got two full benches full of people that are some kind of minister or associate minister. You might want to look into that.

Anyway, let me get back on track here. Innovation and Advanced Education. This whole thing about the social . . .

Mr. Bilous: The social policy framework.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, yeah. Well, the social policy framework just dissolved. It just went poof. None of you mentioned it. It wasn't mentioned in the throne speech. It wasn't mentioned in the budget. It's just, like, gone. Thousands of people put a lot of time into that, and I don't know what you did with it. Lit it on fire and smoked it or something? It's gone. That's not a good thing because we needed some framework that we could move forward on, so kindly give it back or reconstruct it or whatever. Spit it up so that we can have it back.

In Finance and in Innovation and Advanced Education the idea of these social justice funds, the social bonds: I just can't find very many places where these have really been successful. Where they have, they've been successful in a very narrow, very defined way, which is excellent, and I'm delighted when that happens. But as much as I hear this government kind of banking on these three funds – you know, in budget debates I say, "So how is this going to work?" "Well, we're figuring that out, and we'll let you know later in the year." How did you get a budget if you didn't know what you were doing?

5:50

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I rise to speak to Bill 8, the Appropriation Act, 2014. As New Democrats have been saying since this budget was tabled, we have clearly a tale of two Albertas, one set of rules and standards that apply to the very wealthy and the friends of this PC government and then one set of standards and realities for the rest of the province, which is probably more than 95 per cent of Albertans.

You know, I want to just list a couple of ways in which there is this tale of two Albertas. For example, in Budget 2014 there is \$150 million going in in-kind royalties to oil companies. Instead of, again, us collecting royalties from our natural resources, that are owned by all Albertans, today and future, we see these same companies getting \$150 million in in-kind royalties. This year's budget paid \$8.6 million in corporate subsidies to industry in the postsecondary education budget and a million dollar increase to the former Premier's office.

Meanwhile we've got middle-class families, your average Albertan, feeling the effect of this year's budget, with no reinvestment into postsecondary education, starving our students and placing Alberta at a disadvantage when it comes to a knowledge-based economy. Now, that's in spite of the fact that postsecondary institutions saw a \$147 million cut in last year's budget. We see the continuation of a broken promise of funding for full-day kindergarten – the former Premier, before she left, even said that it's unlikely that it will even exist by 2016 – and we saw a \$120 million tax cut from seniors' drug benefits.

You know, it's quite frustrating, Madam Chair, because the picture of Alberta could look much, much different. I think, first and foremost, some of my colleagues here in the House have talked about mismanagement of dollars, a waste of taxpayer dollars. I mean, look no further than AHS, when we look at how much goes to higher management. They play the shell game versus paying front-line workers, the folks who really make this province tick every day.

Also, this government is reluctant to look at three other areas which would increase the revenue that the government brings in, which would mean we could actually have smaller class sizes, that we could repair our crumbling infrastructure, whether it's schools,

hospitals, highways, bridges, and again cut down on our wait times and ensure that Albertans get the services that they deserve, especially from the fact, Madam Chair, that we are living in the wealthiest province in the country. Yet you wouldn't know it if you walked into the Misericordia hospital or into some of our schools that have 40-plus kids in a classroom.

The way to address these, Madam Chair, is obviously cleaning up the mismanagement of wasted dollars that this government has. AHS is one example. I just want to highlight the fact that it was the Alberta NDP that put forward amendments this year that would have eliminated the associate ministers' offices. I find it quite rich that more than half of the PC MLAs that are elected have some sort of ministerial post. I mean, I'd venture a guess that there might be more ministers in this provincial government than there are in any provincial government across the country.

Mr. Mason: Or the world.

Mr. Bilous: Or the world.

As well, we proposed an amendment to freeze the Premier's office budget. You know, those two different amendments would have saved over \$3 million in this budget, Madam Chair. So that's one example of cleaning up some of the mismanagement of dollars.

You know, to briefly touch on it again, the NDP has been calling for a review and an overhaul of our royalty regime within the province. Royalties are the lowest here of anywhere in North America. Again, we've got examples from our friends in the United States in jurisdictions like Alaska, that are run, you know, by Republican Senators and by the Republicans, and they pay more in royalties. And guess what? The companies aren't going anywhere.

Second of all, Madam Chair, again, within the last 10 years there has been a race to the bottom with corporate taxes. We went from 15 down to 10. I think a modest adjustment, still remaining competitive with other jurisdictions in the country, would increase revenues.

And then, of course, a move to a progressive taxation system, which I would like to highlight for a few members. You take a household income of, let's say, a hundred thousand dollars, and you compare what that family pays in taxes in Alberta under a flat tax at 10 per cent versus British Columbia or Ontario, where there is a progressive income tax system. With an income of a hundred

thousand dollars or less, they actually pay less than 10 per cent in taxes, so their take-home at the end of the day is actually larger than Alberta. In Alberta the flat tax for many Albertans is actually an Alberta disadvantage, yet this government continues to peddle that it's advantageous for everyone.

There are different ways to address revenue, but I just want to point out some of the issues that I have with this budget. Again, you know, this PC government continues to attack Alberta's most vulnerable. Not only have they abandoned their plan to eliminate child poverty – and I'll remind members that we're almost halfway there, and very little has been done on the promise that was made – but they've cut \$20 million from the PDD budget. There have been cuts to help low-income families get out of poverty. As well, funding to Human Services was well below the rate of population and inflation.

You know, again, it's almost humorous, if it wasn't so sad, when a minister gets up and says that we've increased our budget this year. Yeah, well, if it doesn't keep up with population and inflation, it's actually a cut. We see that in many, many areas as well as in our education system, Madam Chair. I'll get to it when I speak about Infrastructure, but we have aging infrastructure in this province. Again, I was speaking to a member earlier who said: "Yes, but Alberta has no deficit. We've cleared our books." Well, what we did was that within the last two decades we – and by "we" I mean this PC government – downloaded much of our debt onto the books of municipalities and off its own books.

You know, we've got hospitals that are crumbling. We've got schools that are aging. We've got a government that's forcing school boards to have to close schools in order to get one new one in a mature neighbourhood, which is really tying the hands of folks. I would have liked to have seen so much more out of this budget.

Let's see. What else can I talk about? Again, we have soaring child care costs in this province, Madam Chair. I have had friends and constituents that have two or more children come in and say: "You know what? Both of us parents could work, but it's not worth it for both of us to work because it's just as expensive."

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I hate to interrupt, but it's 6 p.m. Pursuant to Standing Order 4(4) the committee is recessed until 7:30 this evening.

[The committee adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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