



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday evening, December 7, 2016

Day 59

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 29th Legislature

Second Session

Wanner, Hon. Robert E., Medicine Hat (ND), Speaker
Jabbour, Deborah C., Peace River (ND), Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (ND), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Anderson, Wayne, Highwood (W)	MacIntyre, Donald, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake (W)
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Coolahan, Craig, Calgary-Klein (ND)	Miranda, Hon. Ricardo, Calgary-Cross (ND)
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Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake (W), Official Opposition Deputy Whip	Notley, Hon. Rachel, Edmonton-Strathcona (ND), Premier
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Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South West (ND)	Panda, Prasad, Calgary-Foothills (W)
Drever, Deborah, Calgary-Bow (ND)	Payne, Hon. Brandy, Calgary-Acadia (ND)
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Fildebrandt, Derek Gerhard, Strathmore-Brooks (W)	Rodney, Dave, Calgary-Lougheed (PC), Progressive Conservative Opposition House Leader
Fitzpatrick, Maria M., Lethbridge-East (ND)	Rosendahl, Eric, West Yellowhead (ND)
Fraser, Rick, Calgary-South East (PC)	Sabir, Hon. Irfan, Calgary-McCall (ND)
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Gill, Prab, Calgary-Greenway (PC)	Schneider, David A., Little Bow (W)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (ND)	Schreiner, Kim, Red Deer-North (ND)
Gotfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (PC)	Shepherd, David, Edmonton-Centre (ND)
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Hunter, Grant R., Cardston-Taber-Warner (W)	Sucha, Graham, Calgary-Shaw (ND)
Jansen, Sandra, Calgary-North West (ND)	Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Jean, Brian Michael, QC, Fort McMurray-Conklin (W), Leader of the Official Opposition	Taylor, Wes, Battle River-Wainwright (W)
Kazim, Anam, Calgary-Glenmore (ND)	Turner, Dr. A. Robert, Edmonton-Whitemud (ND)
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Larivee, Hon. Danielle, Lesser Slave Lake (ND)	Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (ND), Deputy Government Whip
Littlewood, Jessica, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (ND)	Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (ND)
Loewen, Todd, Grande Prairie-Smoky (W)	Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (W)

Party standings:

New Democrat: 55 Wildrose: 22 Progressive Conservative: 8 Alberta Liberal: 1 Alberta Party: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, December 7, 2016

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.
The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to request unanimous consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

The Acting Speaker: Please go ahead.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you. It is my pleasure to introduce to you from our grassroots, incredibly strong EDA in St. Albert, Vice-president Tom Genore and his lovely girlfriend, Amanda Archer, who is also a member.

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

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

Bill 37

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2016 (No. 2)

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

Mr. Ceci: It's my pleasure to rise and say a few words about the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2016 (No. 2). As all members of this Legislature know, the \$1.45 million provided by this bill is required to support the Legislative Assembly to fund the very important work of the Electoral Boundaries Commission. I think all members of this Legislature agree that this is important, and on that note I would ask all members of this Legislature to support the bill.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.
Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill?
Seeing none, I shall call the question.

[The clauses of Bill 37 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: I am. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I will move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

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

Mr. Sucha: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 37.

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

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Any opposed, please say no. So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 34

Electric Utilities Amendment Act, 2016

Mr. Rodney moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 34, Electric Utilities Amendment Act, 2016, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 34, Electric Utilities Amendment Act, 2016, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that the bill does not adequately address and minimize the adverse long-term financial implications of changes to the Electric Utilities Act with respect to debt financing.

[Adjourned debate on the amendment December 7: Mr. Bilous]

The Acting Speaker: Any members wishing to speak to the bill?
The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise on such a lovely Christmasy evening. A very Merry Christmas to you. It was nice to hear the carollers this evening on the steps of the Legislature. I know that visitor services does such a wonderful job at this time of year bringing the best of the season here to the Assembly. It's my hope that we'll be able to bring the best of the season here to the Chamber tonight. Let me tell you, Madam Speaker, that the best of the season for Albertans would be that this government would take a pause, just like my colleague from the third party has asked them to do by moving this reasoned amendment earlier in the session. The best Christmas present that Albertans could have is this government actually listening to Albertans.

I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that when I am in the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills talking to folks about the direction that this government is taking, they are alarmed. They're alarmed that in a bill like Bill 34 the government would be willing to write themselves a blank cheque, a blank cheque of unlimited borrowing opportunity for this government. You know, I'm going to tell you a lot about how they're frustrated this evening, but one of the things that they're most frustrated about is that this government created a problem, and now they're creating legislation to solve the very problem that they created. This government acted quickly, without thought or care or consideration with respect to the PPAs. They acted without doing their homework, without checking the facts, and as a result they got themselves in a pickle. The worst part about that is that the people who are holding the pickle jar are Albertans.

Mr. Nixon: Their hand is stuck. Their hand is stuck in the jar.

Mr. Cooper: And that is exactly the problem. Their hand is stuck in the pickle jar.

Madam Speaker, now they're in a bind, just like this government was in a bind, so they started looking around for answers. They started looking around for answers, and the only one that they could

come up with was that the government create legislation that would give them unlimited borrowing power to the Balancing Pool. Now we see the Balancing Pool losing significant amounts of money while the PPAs are returned to them, and essentially they need a bailout.

Now, this isn't the only problem that this government has created with respect to PPAs. At the first of it, they started attacking corporations that are owned by Calgarians.

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. They don't really like corporations.

Mr. Cooper: Well, you know, it's interesting. They sometimes like corporations, and other times they don't.

Mr. Nixon: It's confusing.

Mr. Cooper: It is confusing.

Sometimes they stand and make accusations about the opposition, how we don't like companies like Suncor.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, through the chair, please.

Mr. Cooper: Madam Speaker, you know that what I am saying is absolutely the truth. Sometimes they attack. In fact, they sue corporations. They're in multiple lawsuits. Multiple lawsuits. I know that I've heard from the third party on numerous occasions about some of their concerns around the type of lawyers that they hire in these types of situations. Let me tell you that what's happening right now is more than disappointing for Albertans; it's frightening, because they're spending hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars to sue companies that had legal contracts in this province that are owned by Calgarians. Calgarians are likely to see, if it proceeds, quite possibly a 4 per cent hike in their property tax, which is what we've heard the mayor of Calgary say.

7:40

At every single turn with respect to our energy market and our electricity market this government has acted recklessly. I can tell you that the members on the other side believe that there's no trouble on the horizon, but we are headed to a big wreck. This is a \$7 billion gamble on our electricity market, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Nixon: How much?

Mr. Cooper: Seven billion, with a "b."

In fact, those weren't just my words about the \$7 billion gamble; those were respected columnist Chris Varcoe's words. It is really quite something else to see this government that has this train on a track that's headed towards a bridge that is on fire. What is quite likely to happen – and I can tell you that this isn't the holiday train they're driving. It's a train wreck they're driving. It's a train wreck. [interjections] I've got all night, Madam Speaker. Remember to tip your waitress.

Let me tell you that it's unfortunate that the government is committed to putting Albertans at risk, because what Bill 34 does is exactly that. What Bill 34 does is exactly that. It is writing a blank cheque for the Balancing Pool to try to cover the mistakes of this government.

I can tell you that if you've been in the House at all lately, Madam Speaker – and I know that you have because I would never refer to the absence of a member – I know that you've been here when my hon. colleague from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake has spoken at length efforting to get through to the government. It's not just about talking; it's about letting Albertans know exactly the problems that are being created by this government.

As we move towards the end of this session, I hear from more and more Albertans and more and more folks in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills that are just asking this government to put a pause on legislation just like this. The good news is, Madam Speaker, that right now, this evening, this government has a chance to do that.

We've seen a very reasonable amendment from the third party that would require the government to do an economic impact assessment, to provide information to Albertans on just exactly what the costs are going to be. But, like we've seen time and time and time again, this government isn't interested in listening to concerned Albertans. They're interested in heading headlong over a cliff, some, like my hon. colleague – or at least my colleague – from Strathmore-Brooks, might say a fiscal cliff, a fiscal cliff that ends in disaster, with the tax burden on Albertans skyrocketing, with the debt on Albertans skyrocketing, with power bills of Albertans skyrocketing.

Madam Speaker, I don't know what got into the government during the break. I don't know what happened between 6 and 7:30, but it sounds like for the very first time in a long time they're listening. They're listening, and they're paying attention, and they're hearing and acknowledging that what we are on is a path that doesn't end well for taxpayers. It doesn't end well for Albertans.

Mr. Nixon: How does it end?

Mr. Cooper: It ends with every single Albertan having a significantly higher amount of debt. You know what, Madam Speaker? I would love to give you what that number is, but you know what the problem is? They don't know because in this piece of legislation, Bill 34, they've written themselves – what? – a blank cheque. That blank cheque provides an incredible amount of latitude to the Balancing Pool. I'd just like to remind you: do you know why the Balancing Pool needs a blank cheque? They need a blank cheque because this government created a mess. This government has been in power for long enough to at least read contracts and didn't. So now they're suing the people of Calgary. They're borrowing unlimited amounts of money for the Balancing Pool. It's more than a bit disappointing; it's frightening. And the Government House Leader knows it.

Madam Speaker, I know that when I look across the dinner table at my children, certainly my nine-year-old – and many in this House will know my children. From time to time I like to share a story about them. Every time I share a story about them, it's true. I know that at Halloween I was teaching my kids about taxes, obviously, which every good dad – I was also teaching them about socialism when I took all of the nine-year-old's candy and then gave a bunch to the littlest. He's, like: "Whoa. I went out and did all the trick-or-treating. How come she gets some?" And I was explaining the concept of socialism, where even though one person does all the work, you can divide up all of those, say, revenues so that everyone has it equally. He was a little concerned about this principle.

But, you know, I want to make sure that I'm being relevant to Bill 34 tonight, so let's get back to the very important issue of taxes and how taxes are going to be going up because of this government. I mean, we've seen it at every turn. They haven't seen a tax that they don't want to increase, with one exception. I will give them that. With one exception. They listened to a recommendation from the Wildrose about reducing small-business tax, and for that, we say thank you.

Mr. Nixon: They didn't thank us for that.

Mr. Cooper: No. They didn't thank us, but we've thanked them. We've said thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Sometimes I wonder who's on first, but that's fine.

Speaking to 29(2)(a)? Please go ahead.

7:50

Mr. Nixon: Yeah, absolutely. Great. That went by very, very fast, that 15 minutes, Madam Speaker. I thoroughly enjoyed the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. I particularly liked the concept of pause as he was referring to this reasoned amendment, you know, and the need to pause. Sometimes pausing is a good thing. I think you can think of examples in your life where if you paused for a few seconds, you ended up not making a worse mistake. [interjection] I know that maybe the postsecondary minister is used to making mistakes, but I'm not.

Earlier today I was calling my twins, 10 years old today.

Mr. Cooper: Speaking of which, isn't it their happy birthday today?

Mr. Nixon: That's right. I called them when we had the supper break to wish them a happy birthday, and if they're watching, I will through you, Madam Speaker, say happy birthday to Austin and Chyanne Nixon. We were talking about how cold it was on the farm, back home by Sundre. It's well below minus 30, so I was concerned for my favourite horse, Tank, which I've talked about in this Chamber many times.

Now, I know everybody laughs. I know that the Sergeant-at-Arms' staff love to hear stories about Tank, and I haven't talked about Tank in a while. Let me first assure you, Madam Speaker, in case you do not know, that Tank has earned his name. He's a big guy, okay? He carries me, and he's a great horse. I love him very much. I wanted to make sure the kids had given him extra feed today when it was that cold.

The reason I think about it when I hear the concept of pausing is that Tank knows where you are in the house. I don't know how he knows that. He comes up to the fences with his grain bowl, and he shakes it. If you're on the living room side of the house, there's lots of room, but if you go to the bottom of our house on the walkout side, what we call the family room, if he goes in there, he gets stuck in this kind of side fence thing. He'll sit there shaking his grain bin, convinced that we're going to come outside. Now, my daughter is convinced that she's trained him to do that. What happens is that my daughter goes out to give him grain, and I tried to explain to her that, actually, Tank has trained her to come outside and give him grain. Then he gets so excited that he's in this thing that he doesn't pause to figure out how to get out of it, and he keeps running at the dead end on the fence, and he's stuck in there.

An Hon. Member: He's a horse.

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. But when you manage to whistle at him and get him to just stop for a second, then it dawns on him that all he has to do is take two or three steps back and back out, and he's not stuck in the corner anymore. Then the now 10-year-old will give him as much grain as he wants, and Tank is happy. When Tank is happy, I'm happy because I like Tank.

I think the hon. member had a valuable point. Just like Tank, it might be time for the government just to go: "Whoa. Wait a minute. Seven billion dollars. Whoa. Whoa. Just take a few moments."

An Hon. Member: Where's the wheat?

Mr. Nixon: He doesn't like wheat, Madam Speaker.

Just like I whistle at Tank and say, "Whoa," and he stops, the government should take the hon. member's comments and go:

"Okay. Wait a minute here. What's going on? What is going on? What is this \$7 billion going to do to the people of Alberta?" So I wonder if you can expand a little bit more on the need to go: whoa.

Mr. Cooper: Why, thank you. I was thinking to myself that Bill 34 and whoa-ing are virtually the same thing. Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague has a very good point. This reasoned amendment – you know, you remind me a little bit of Penn and Teller, I think. Sorry. I got a little sidetracked there.

This is a chance for this government to say, "Whoa," to put the brakes on, to step back from the edge, to allow all Albertans to provide feedback. This is a very reasoned amendment on why Bill 34 should not proceed, and I encourage all members present and all members that may or may not be to vote in favour of this amendment and say whoa to Bill 34.

I look forward to hearing from my hon. colleague from Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre because I'm sure he has some comments as well.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak to 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, any members wishing to speak to the reasoned amendment? The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre is going to speak to the amendment.

Mr. Nixon: Thanks, Madam Speaker. It's great to have the opportunity to rise this evening and talk about Bill 34, in particular the reasoned amendment that we're here to discuss. I thank the hon. member from the third party for bringing forward this important amendment. I think it is a very reasonable amendment. I think it's important that this House takes the time to consider why the member brought forward this amendment, what the need is for a reasoned amendment. I think that as we look at Bill 34, it's pretty clear that this bill is just basically coming forward because the government has to cover its tracks in the debacle that they made out of the PPA situation, that we've seen over the last little while.

The biggest problem I have with Bill 34, and the reason I think that we need a reasoned amendment on it, is that the bill itself is completely and utterly irresponsible to the people of Alberta, the people that have sent us here to protect them, to stand up for the people of Alberta and to manage the business of this province. Of course, the cabinet, that sits across from me, Madam Speaker, has the ultimate responsibility for that. Because of the mess that they've made with the PPAs at the beginning of their term and throughout their term, they've ended up in a situation now where they've essentially got to come up with, you know, upwards of \$7 billion just to begin to fix that situation, using a bill that puts in place no checks, no accountability, no public forum required to explain the minister's request for funding, just a blank cheque to the Balancing Pool for an undisclosed amount of money.

Now, I think that, first, that is what we should start with, the concept of a blank cheque. We've seen with the NDP government, since they've taken power, that over and over and over they have come to this Assembly and have asked for blank cheques. Bill 6 would come to mind, the idea that they just wanted to pass that and remove exemptions for certain farmers and ranchers and that, in exchange, they wanted the opposition just to trust them that they would get the regulations side of that right later. And the people that we represent in our communities – our friends, our neighbours, our family members, often some of our other hon. colleagues – should just trust them that they will get that right. "It's going to be okay, Opposition. Don't worry. Don't worry; it's going to be all right."

I will note now that last year at this time we were discussing Bill 6. Right about now. We might have been just done, Madam

Speaker. We're now a year later, and we still don't have the regulations situation fixed. We're still hearing complaints about the panels that have been put forward. We're still hearing concerns from the farmers and ranchers inside our province. That was as a result, again, of a blank cheque request from the NDP government trying to govern and put rules in place, in that particular case, for people and, you know, not including the people that they wanted to legislate in the process.

Now, here we are again, back here in this House about a year later, and again the government has come here and said to the opposition: give us a blank cheque.

Mr. Cooper: A blank what?

Mr. Nixon: A blank cheque. Give us a blank cheque, with no accountability, no controls in place, no proper explanations, all of it being put in place to try to be a stopgap or try to fix the problem that was created by this very government.

Now, I have to ask myself, and I think that you would, too, Madam Speaker, on behalf of your constituents: why would you want to give another blank cheque to this government? What has this government done to show that they could be, quite frankly, capable of dealing with another blank cheque? They still haven't fixed some of the things I just raised from the last time that they asked about a blank cheque.

The concept, though, of that is extremely important because they're asking Albertans to just trust them with a blank cheque, an unlimited amount of money, no clear rules or regulations put in place from this House to hold the government accountable for how they spend that money or how much of that money would be used, all this at a time when the government, in regard to this area that now requires all this money, is suing Alberta-owned companies, is suing Alberta municipalities.

8:00

The concept of trust: I have to say, Madam Speaker, that with the constituents I represent in Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, I don't find a lot of people left there that trust the government. The idea is that they would want us to stand up and say: "Yeah, it's going to be okay although you didn't provide us, really, with any reports or justification why you want this. You've created the problem, and you've shown no ability in the past on other legislation to be able to handle a blank cheque." To say, "Opposition, just stand up and give us another blank cheque; it's going to be okay this time," I don't know about you, but I certainly don't feel very comfortable doing that. I just don't.

The NDP raised taxes on power companies with no regard for the consequences both in the law and on the ratepayers across the province. Our responsibility, Madam Speaker, is to the people of Alberta. They're the ones who pay the bills for this place. They're the ones who keep the electricity on while we're here debating late at night. They're the ones who pay the bills for the needs all across this province.

When we're dealing with this issue of power, if we look at other provinces in our country, we are already seeing significant problems in other jurisdictions that have gone there before us. Recently we saw the Premier of Ontario apologize – and to her credit, I think – for the mess that got made with their power system, and the ultimate consequence of that mess was to the people of Ontario, who have outrageous power bills because of the decisions of the Ontario Premier.

So we have to ask ourselves as we're debating these bills here: what happened in that other jurisdiction? What went wrong? How is this government, who's shown no ability to handle a blank cheque

and who's suing corporations, trying to break contracts that were made by previous governments, going to ensure that our ratepayers, our taxpayers, the good people of the province of Alberta, are not going to get stiffed with outrageous power bills, just like they did in Ontario?

That is not an unreasonable question, and lots of people are asking it. I suspect people that voted for the NDP are asking that. I certainly know that people who voted for the opposition parties are asking that. Definitely the Wildrose members are getting asked that. I assume members of the third party, through you, Madam Speaker, are getting asked the same question.

It's concerning – it's concerning – because ultimately we need to know what the costs to our constituents will be over the long term for the decisions that we make inside this Chamber, particularly when we're already seeing a situation where so many people in our province have lost work, where people are losing homes and jobs and are facing tough times because of the economic downturn. They're already facing drastic tax increases because of this government's ideological policies. They're already seeing the energy industry suffering because of concerns about investing in our energy industry in Alberta because of this government's policies.

Again, now they're going to go to the opposition, who represent those people, and say: "It's going to be okay. Just give us a blank cheque. Give us a blank cheque." I've got to say, Madam Speaker, that I don't think you would be comfortable giving the government a blank cheque either given that in the last few months they've attempted to or are ripping up existing contracts between the province and corporations. How does that give trust to the people of Alberta? I don't know. I can't see in those actions any trust from the people of Alberta.

I don't see any reason why the opposition should support this amendment from a government that has already shown, as I've said before, that it can't be trusted with a blank cheque, that has shown itself not capable of following through on other legislation that they forced on the people of Alberta, that is now suing people and corporations and municipalities in our province that are associated with stuff associated with Bill 34, who have provided no research or documentation or evidence on the amount that this will cost the people of Alberta in future years. Instead, they expect the members opposite to just take their word for it.

Now, I'm sure that in some cases it may be fair that opposition members may just take the government's word for certain things but certainly not on a bill that's going to cost at least \$7 billion, by some estimates, at the same time that we're going to see property taxes go up in the city of Calgary because of the carbon tax, that we're going to see the cost of fuel go up in my constituency because of the carbon tax, that we're seeing businesses in my constituency shut down because of the minimum wage mess, that we're seeing youth unemployment go up because of the minimum wage situation.

So if you take that and then you put in this reasoned amendment, we have to ask ourselves, I would say, Madam Speaker: why would we stand up and vote for this legislation? Instead, it clearly needs to go back to the drawing board. It clearly needs to go back, to hold up, take a pause, have a look at the situation, and go from there.

The reason this is relevant to this reasoned amendment, Madam Speaker, is that there are other situations that we've had already in this Legislature, in the 29th Legislature, when the opposition has said, "Whoa; hold up; let's talk about this a little bit," and the government has listened and had a discussion and a dialogue with the opposition, and the government ended up making situations less bad or ended up stopping what would have been, clearly, a mistake and an affront to the people of Alberta.

We've talked lots in the last few days about the government's decision not to proceed with a campaign funding subsidy, which was a good decision. That's a decision, again, where they heard from the opposition, and they went: okay. Granted, it took a while, Madam Speaker. I think it took several months of long discussions between the opposition and the government, but in the end the government made the right decision on behalf of the people of Alberta. That's because the opposition did their work. If the opposition didn't do their work over the summer, the government in this case would have brought in motions and legislation that would have put in a campaign subsidy.

So now here we are back with another bill. We're back with another bill, and you've got opposition members from all parties saying: "Okay. Hold on. Let's talk about this. Let's make sure that we're not making a mistake or that we're not making things worse for the people of Alberta." I don't think that's unreasonable. I don't see anything unreasonable about that. I can think of situations in my life where I have paused or my family has taken a pause and looked at the situation and went: "You know what? That's probably not the best idea. Maybe we should adjust that. Maybe we should talk a little bit more with the people that are involved in it, the people that are going to be impacted by it."

Maybe we should gather a little more evidence on what the consequences may or may not be to the people of Alberta because, ultimately, we're entrusted by the people of Alberta to get this right. You would agree with that, Madam Speaker. I think the government members would agree that that is our responsibility. I certainly know that my hon. colleagues would agree with that as our primary responsibility.

Instead, though, time and time again, Madam Speaker, I find myself having to rise in this Assembly and caution the government to slow down the legislation that they keep moving through. More often than not they don't do the right thing, like they did with the campaign subsidy, and they bulldoze right through it. They proceed with the legislation, and then we end up with the drastic consequences on the people that I represent and on people all across this province.

Maybe when the government can finish some of the projects they've already started, maybe when they can get the panels done with Bill 6 and they can make sure that farmers and ranchers aren't having to deal with the terrible situation that's been created now for over a year, maybe when they stop suing corporations, maybe when they stop bringing forward taxes that are putting a tremendous burden on the people of our province, the people who I know, Madam Speaker, just like in my riding and in your riding, people that are losing jobs, that are struggling to make ends meet – they are now about to face drastic increases in their heating costs, drastic increases in their vehicle costs, drastic increases in the cost of everything from the indirect costs.

Often this government forgets that when they're raising the cost of fuel, this raises the cost of everything in our society – everything – from the care to the grocery stores to the iPads that the members are enjoying tonight or laptops or earphones or whatever we use tonight, the binder I use. I don't want to use a prop, of course, Madam Speaker. It raises the cost of everything. And now the legislation that we are debating in the final days of this sitting has the real risk, with the true evidence from other jurisdictions, in our province of raising the cost of Albertans' power bills.

8:10

Madam Speaker, the reason we need a reasoned amendment on this and that this should pass is that this government has to start to acknowledge that their policies are putting a tremendous burden on the people of Alberta. They are putting a tremendous burden on the

people of my constituency and your constituency and their constituencies. They are raising the cost of everything.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak under 29(2)(a)? Please go ahead, hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Yes. Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think it's been a very lively and totally interesting discussion. It reminds me of a couple of years ago. We had a different team in here, and there was a similar type of event that took place. It was quite interesting to watch, and a lot of people were getting a lot of entertainment out of it.

I know that the hon. member here has mentioned something that's near and dear to my heart, and that's horses. He's got some great things to say about horses. Earlier on we were talking about "whoa," and I'm thinking "whoa," too, because I know for my operations that I'm going to be paying more for power bills and so on and so forth in the next few weeks. I know the hon. member will be paying more to maintain his horse, to heat the trough and keep things from freezing up. I wonder if the hon. member would like to talk a little bit as well about the power company he deals with and how much more he expects that he's going to have to pay in the ensuing months and years because of this bill. [interjections] Perhaps he can enlighten us on how much more he's going to have to pay to water his horse than what he is now.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for the question. I did hear some great comments as he was speaking. Well, I don't know about great comments but interesting comments from the government as he was speaking to the effect that, to answer his question, I should get solar panels on my place. I already have a couple of solar panels, to be honest. They help with my electric fences, with the heater I put in the water for the horses, although at this time of year even that can't quite keep up when it's this cold. I think it was well below, as I said, minus 30 at home today. But that, I think really shows – that comment from the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud is concerning because it's very similar to what the hon. Premier said today, and that is that the carbon tax essentially will force Albertans to make better choices. That's a little bit insulting.

Over time we may see things change. I actually think my house is fairly efficient. I do own a large property, so there's more stuff. There are more shops to heat, that type of stuff, watering facilities to heat for livestock. But I don't have a full-fledged farm operation like most of my neighbours do and, of course, that will even increase that. They're pretty concerned, back in my community, about how much power bills are going to go up, particularly when they see what is happening to our cousins in Ontario. They're certainly asking themselves right now: is this government putting in policies that are going to force us into the same situation, with astronomical electricity costs?

They already are putting us in a situation where our fuel costs are going through the roof. Our fuel costs are going to go through the roof. Our heating costs on our homes are going through the roof. And some of our communities – Hanna, for example; the hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler represents the great community of Hanna – is almost being wiped out, when you go down there, absolutely petrified people because of this government's coal policy.

So that's all happening in many communities that we represent, but not just to us. Many members on the other side of the aisle

represent communities that are suffering because of the decisions of this government. If the power bills are now going to go up on top of that, how much more do we want Albertans to take? Are the Premier and her members suggesting, by her comment to make better choices, that the people back in Sundre or Rocky Mountain House should just turn the heat off to their houses today, in minus 30? I mean, I can't see her suggesting that, but that's what it sounds like when she says that we should make better decisions. Should we not put heaters in the water for our livestock and let their water freeze over? Of course not.

We're still going to have to use energy. Some of the members represent very different constituencies than I, and that's fine. You might be able to use different types of vehicles in that constituency, but you're not driving down the driveway at my house in a Smart car. You're just not going to get down it, particularly at this time of the year. I'll have to come and push you the rest of the way down the driveway so that you can get there, and then you're going to come into my warm house, that I'm heating while paying the carbon tax.

I think that the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod has a very fair question of what this is going to mean, you know, not just for us in this House but for the people of Alberta, who are often currently suffering terribly because of some of the government's decisions. Increased power bills and the consequences from the decisions that could come from these pieces of legislation that we're debating right now in this House will make life worse for many Albertans. It will take money out of many Albertans' pockets. It will prevent vacations and certain things that they will do with their kids. It'll prolong retirement. It'll raise the cost of raising livestock. It'll raise the cost of bringing 4-H calves to sale. It'll raise the cost of everything.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to speak to the reasoned amendment? The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. MacIntyre: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, any time we in this Legislature have a bill come before us, unless, of course, that bill is completely frivolous, there's always a reason for it, and it behooves us all as legislators to ask the question: why? Why are we even looking at any particular piece of legislation that comes before us? The last thing Albertans need is laws for the sake of laws. They've got quite a few, and not all of them are real good.

We have before us right now Bill 34, which is essentially going to give the Balancing Pool unlimited financial resources to cover losses that the Balancing Pool is going to experience.

One of the things that I have come to understand from the responses from the other side of the House is that the members opposite either have not read their electricity bill or don't understand what it's telling them. We've heard repeatedly from the other side: well, Albertans are protected now because there's a cap on the regulated rate option, the RRO. Well, news flash: the cost that shows up on your electricity bill for consumption is just one of many line items on your electricity bill, and some of those line items are not directly related to your consumption whatsoever.

So having a cap on the RRO does not protect Albertans from price volatility in the all-in price of electricity, especially when we have a situation occurring in our Balancing Pool where it is hemorrhaging money. Some estimates are in the neighbourhood of about \$70 million a month. It wasn't all that long ago that the Balancing Pool had a net balance of over \$700 million. If memory serves me correctly, it was \$709 million – \$709 million – and because of this government's mishandling of the PPA file, that has been eroding to the tune of some \$70 million each and every month.

Now, as it goes, of course, the Balancing Pool by mandate is not in a position where they can just absorb losses to infinity. Those losses are going to have to be passed along to Albertans at some point in time. The government, of course, does not want to have Albertans see their electricity bills go up, so thinking that they were going to protect themselves – that is, the government – from the embarrassment of seeing electricity bills go up, they've capped the RRO at 6.8 cents for the next four years.

But what they then had to do was to somehow protect the Balancing Pool and keep it whole. That brings us around to the reason for the bill that we have before us right now, Bill 34. To protect the government's image in their claims, their repeated claims, that their climate action plan, their renewables electricity plan of 30 per cent by 2030 are not going to result in increased electricity bills, in order to maintain that narrative, the government capped the RRO. However, all those other line items still come into play. The Balancing Pool has to account for its losses in some manner.

8:20

Again, the government – and I've got to hand it to them – did some very creative Enron accounting here. They simply said: look, we are going to backstop the Balancing Pool with an unlimited line of credit to the Balancing Pool. Now, in the world of bookkeeping this is how it will look: the Balancing Pool will have a debt that they owe, but on the government's books a debt owed the government is an asset. So whatever the debt is that the Balancing Pool runs up, it doesn't show as a debt to the government; it actually shows as an asset. Brilliant. It's going to be raising the net assets of the government. All the while the government is in reality sinking Albertans deeper in debt. Brilliant.

Andersen accounting would be proud of this government. How many of them ended up in prison, hon. member? It was two or three, I think, from those shenanigans. The American Securities and Exchange Commission did more than just slap them on the hands. Here's the reason why that method of accounting became known as Enron accounting, because it presented an untrue picture of Enron's health as a corporation. And that's precisely what this measure is going to do. Because the government of Alberta can show this as an asset, it's going to present an untrue picture of the net assets of the province; in other words, the health of the province. Not only is it brilliant; it's also skulduggery in the true sense of the word.

An Hon. Member: Skulduggery?

Mr. MacIntyre: Skulduggery, yes. It's a pirate term. For those of you who . . . [interjections] No, I was not a pirate, but don't look real hard.

Madam Speaker, the result is that this government has very creatively attempted to pull the wool over the eyes of the Alberta public by extending an unlimited, uncapped amount of money to the Balancing Pool to cover whatever debts the pool is going to incur. Yes, the pool will have now a debt on its ledger, a debt owed.

But the government has even gone a step further and said to the pool: look, guys, we're going to give you 14 years to pay that back. In other words, that's going to be 14 years of having an asset show on the government's books. Quite frankly, the reason why that thing has no cap on it is because, I believe – and, granted, this is conjecture, but I haven't been far off as I've been following what this government has been doing. I and my colleagues have pegged it all the way along. We were charging that this government was going to go to a capacity market a way, way, way long time ago, and here we are today.

An Hon. Member: What's wrong with that?

Mr. MacIntyre: There are lots of things wrong with that, and we will get to that later. Stay tuned. Stay tuned.

Back to Bill 34, that we have before us. Fourteen years the Balancing Pool will have to pay that debt back, a debt that has at this moment no limitations. It makes me wonder: what more is this government going to do to the Balancing Pool that they would have to give the Balancing Pool a lending limit with no limit? What else is coming down the pipe here?

An Hon. Member: Oil.

An Hon. Member: Bitumen.

Mr. MacIntyre: Not to the Balancing Pool, no. That doesn't work in the Balancing Pool, hon. member. Read your electricity bill.

Madam Speaker, it is deeply concerning to myself and to others that we have a situation where the government is extending an unlimited amount of credit, which does provide the government with an asset offsetting the government's books, making them look a lot healthier than they really are. As brilliant as that bookkeeping might be, in the United States that would not be allowed, but here in Canada in this government, of course, that would be allowed. It's very unfortunate. Nevertheless, it is still a questionable practice to be doing this, especially when the Balancing Pool already has in place a mechanism that has been there from the beginning.

An Hon. Member: That sticks it to consumers.

Mr. MacIntyre: Does the hon. member think that the consumers and the ratepayers and the taxpayers are three different people? It matters not how you stick it to them. You are sticking it to them. If you're not sticking it to them on their electric bill, you're sticking it to them as a ratepayer, or you're sticking it to them as a taxpayer. But one way or the other, Member, you're sticking it to Albertans. There's only one person in Alberta that pays the bill.

Mr. Schmidt: I know where you should stick it.

Mr. MacIntyre: Point of order. Madam Speaker, that is definitely a point of order.

The Acting Speaker: Would you like to speak to the point of order, Member?

Mr. MacIntyre: He's not even in the room.

The Acting Speaker: All right. We were having such a good start to our evening. If we could please try to control our comments back and forth to each other and the tone of the evening so that we can move forward on these discussions in a more positive manner, I would appreciate it.

Hon. member, if you would like to continue with your debate, please.

Mr. MacIntyre: There was a point of order, madam.

The Acting Speaker: Please, go ahead.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Unfortunately, we have a minister that is on his way out of the Chamber. I probably need to say sorry for referring to the absence of the minister, but here we are.

The minister said: you know where you can stick it. I don't have the Blues available to me, but that is pretty inflammatory, and I will

say that, if anything, it definitely is 23(h), (i), and (j). How exactly is it that a sitting minister thinks that's appropriate language in the House, especially at this time of evening? I'm hoping that the minister is able to speak on the fact that this is just something that – we want to have lively debate, there's no doubt, but this is not lively. This is not constructive. This is very unfortunate, that the minister feels this is the right way to go with it. We are trying to make sure that all Albertans are hearing our concerns, and this is taking up time of debate, when we can be actually dealing with something that is important like Bill 34 and explaining how bad this bill is.

Madam Speaker, I encourage you to rule that minister out of order.

The Acting Speaker: The Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Schmidt: Madam Speaker, I retract my statement.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, would you like to continue?

Debate Continued

Mr. MacIntyre: Thank you, Madam Speaker. To continue, as I began, with why we have this bill before us and explain some of the reasons why we have this bill before us, it is abundantly clear that the government is attempting to cloud from the people of Alberta a reality, a reality that this government's mishandling of the electricity file is going to be costing Albertans hundreds of millions of dollars.

It is abundantly clear to me that the government is terrified to have that charge show up on our electricity bills because, as opposed to perhaps some members on the opposite side who may not read their electricity bills, there are lots of Albertans who do, especially commercial users and industrial users, whose electricity bills are massive. They pay very close attention to their electricity bill. It's in the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of dollars each and every month, and they watch those bills closely, looking for every and any opportunity to save money, to make their businesses more efficient.

8:30

Here we have a bill before us that will effectively cloud from Albertans a sobering reality that this government doesn't want Albertans to face. What's rather strange is that by the government's own estimations, on residential bills at least, the charge that would be indicated may only be less than \$3. Some independent estimates are in the \$2 range as well, but it's not particularly a great sum of money, yet the government wants our people to not know that, that their mistake is costing them anything.

Now, up until recently Albertans were receiving a credit on their electricity bill. That credit has been there for a very, very long time. The total amount of money returned to Albertans is in the many hundreds of millions of dollars through that line item as the Balancing Pool was being profitable in its operation and passing the profit on to you and to me. Now for the first time Albertans are going to start seeing a charge, or they would ordinarily have seen a charge, but the government doesn't want that. So we have this bill where the government will lend the Balancing Pool all the money they need, but: do not show losses on Albertans' power bills.

Now, I would surmise that because the charge on a residential customer is actually going to be so low – I can't see that that would have been necessarily a motivation for the government to attempt to hide that reality from Albertans, but then when I was looking at some of the commercial and industrial bills that constituents of mine have, that painted a very different picture. Now we're looking

at a situation where the Balancing Pool would have to put on a commercial customer's or an industrial customer's bill thousands and thousands of dollars that weren't there before. Now I can understand.

All right. We come back again to the reason for this bill. This government doesn't want to appear antibusiness, so they are afraid of showing the true cost of their mismanagement to the business community and the industrial community, which would show up on their bills. Instead, the Balancing Pool is going to have an unlimited supply of borrowing, and they can amortize this thing out over 14 years. I believe this government is hoping and praying that the Balancing Pool will get back into the black again and be able to pay down over time the debt that they owe the government.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to speak under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. Schneider: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Very interesting. You know, it's an honour to serve with a gentleman that has the knowledge that our friend from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake has. He knows more about electricity than a lot of people, I've got to say, probably a lot of people in this House. We're honoured to have him here, and we're lucky to have him here. He is able to speak about just about anything that can go on with electricity without a note in front of him.

You know, there are some things with Bill 34 that we have heard over and over and over, but I really would like to hear the member's take on PPAs if he would be interested at all in talking about PPAs: a lot of issues going on there with the government suing many companies over contracts, not a position that we like to see a government in, and maybe the consequences of their actions.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacIntyre: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, of course, the whole reason that we have Bill 34 before us is because of the mismanagement of the PPAs to begin with. What is rather interesting about those PPAs is that they had a fixed life to them, and we were approximately 16 years along in those PPAs with, give or take, about four years to go, just four years left to run them out.

The consequence of the government moving ahead as quickly as they did is that what would have taken care of itself in just four years is now stretching out beyond a decade. Had the PPAs just kind of trucked along and run their natural course, it would have been done, and it would not have resulted in this mess that we are faced with right now. It would not have amounted to the multibillion-dollar fiasco that we currently have before us, with all of the different ramifications we are now seeing, on account of the mishandling of the PPA file to begin with. Had the government just cooled their jets when they got into power and let the PPAs run their natural course, it would have saved Albertans billions and billions of dollars. Billions of dollars. We would not have issues with stranded assets. We would not have issues where we've got to lend the Balancing Pool money. We would not have an issue with the Balancing Pool hemorrhaging like they have been. All of that could have been prevented.

That's the frustrating part of this entire mess the government has made of our electricity system. It was all entirely preventable. Industry experts and myself and other people who were watching this, consultants that I know, colleagues of mine, everyone was saying to the government: "Stop. Whoa. Hold it. You're making an enormous mistake here. Just let things run their natural course." But no. No. The government really thought they knew better, better than the people who have been in this business for a long time, experts

who've forgotten more than I'll ever know, the guys in the industry that live with this each and every day. This government refused to listen to any of them and just pushed on ahead anyway.

Now here we are, one mistake after another, causing a crisis. Like they say, crisis management: you're running from crisis to crisis to crisis, and the solutions you put in place to deal with one crisis actually cause the next crisis. That's crisis management. It results in businesses and governments crashing to the ground. Here we have Bill 34, and I've got to say that we're not done yet. This government is not done messing with the electricity system. There's going to be more. Every time they make another move, it's another billion, another two billion.

They don't seem to care that the reality is that those great big numbers fall on the backs of just one population: Albertans. You can call them consumers, you can call them ratepayers, you can call them taxpayers, but ultimately it's the moms and dads of this province.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the reasoned amendment? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, this is a very saddening bill that's being moved forward. I'd like to start with exactly how it was brought into the House. I would like to start with *Hansard*, November 29, 2016, page 2114. This is when it was introduced for first reading.

Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 34, the Electric Utilities Amendment Act, 2016. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

The proposed bill would enable the government of Alberta to manage the impacts of the coal power purchase arrangements on the Balancing Pool and provide consumers with stable electricity prices.

I didn't see anywhere in there where it said unlimited borrowing. That actually sounds really good. I want that. I don't want this.

8:40

I'll tell you, it comes down to the fact that when we're looking at the Balancing Pool, it was something that was working before. Now we've got a government that decided that they know how to do this better, that they know how to do it better than Ontario. Yet here we are. We're looking at an unlimited line of credit with the government.

Now I'd like to go to the Balancing Pool website. It's balancingpool.ca. This is where I'm getting a lot of my information from. Specifically, I would like to go to the 2014-2019 strategic plan, but let's start off with a few things first. Let's start off with the mission statement, which is right on the website.

The Balancing pool supports the transition to a fair, efficient, and openly competitive electricity market in Alberta by performing the duties and responsibilities set out in its mandate including managing the risks and maximizing the value of the assets held on behalf of Alberta's electricity consumers.

There are a few things here that I would be nervous with being on the board. I don't think it's a coincidence that we had 4 out of 5 board members resign because, in the end, this mandate no longer is achievable. We're never going to see, in my opinion, this Balancing Pool back in an asset position, just a liability position.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I apologize for interrupting, but we are speaking on the amendment.

Mr. Cyr: Absolutely.

The Acting Speaker: I just want to make sure that you're talking about the amendment and not debating the actual contents of the bill right now.

Mr. Cyr: Absolutely, the reasoned amendment, Madam Speaker.

When we start reviewing exactly what it is that we're moving forward, is this Balancing Pool still doing what it's been mandated to do? That is the big question here because this is not what it was set up to be, a great big bank for the government.

I know that I'm uncomfortable with ABCs having unlimited ability to borrow money because we're starting to move away from the government taking it upon itself to have unlimited borrowing to now giving it to its agencies. This is frightening because, in the end, we're not going to know exactly how much the government owes. The Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake has been very clear that this is a practice that is avoided in other jurisdictions. Why would we want to practice that here? I'm uncertain.

When we start looking at the rest of the website here, I would like to say that on the website what we've got – this is something that is important because this is something that they are striving towards. “Avoid a consumer charge”: that's one of the things they wish to do. Okay. Okay. This unlimited debt will avoid a charge. That does seem reasonable here. “Maintain a stable consumer allocation”: well, that will be zero, so that's pretty stable if you've got anything here. “Avoid mid-year adjustments to the allocation”: well, with unlimited debt, there's no reason to. It does seem that when we look at this, the mandate seems to be out, but they do seem to be going through some of the things that they wish to move forward on.

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

Now, I would argue, going back to the mission statement, that this direction that we're going in is not fair, efficient, or openly transparent. We are looking at new markets, it says here. Well, what does that mean? I guess that we're looking at banking markets. It'll be TD or CIBC or somebody that's borrowing money. There are not going to be any assets to maximize, so it's going to be how much we can prevent debt, which seems to be something that is unavoidable with the government. Lastly and most importantly: responsible to Alberta's electricity consumers. Well, it seems like we have to trash the entire mandate. We have to go – and I'm thinking off the cuff – and get unlimited debt into the incredible future. That's more of a vision statement, I guess.

You get my point that this really isn't responsible. This isn't something that I would consider Albertans to be wanting to move forward. I do understand why the government is hesitant to go with debt caps because it failed once already with the government themselves.

Let's talk about the Balancing Pool when it faces the different concerns that we've got here. They've got three areas of concerns on the website that are in their strategic plan. The first one is “uncertain wholesale power prices.” Now, this is something that the government has been bringing up consistently, saying that the radical adjustments in the power price mean that we should go down this road. Well, that does seem to be a risk. I will say, though, that when it comes to power on my bill, it's never my kilowatt usage that seems to be the problem. It does seem to be the distribution and transmission fees.

The second one is “potential PPA liabilities.” Well, that does seem to be a big concern for this government as now they're suing everybody to get out of their liabilities. That seems to be a good reason to be putting that as a risk.

Uncertain performance of the investments within their portfolio: well, they can get the wrong people managing the money within the

accounts, and then they could lose money. That does seem to be reasonable.

Those are the three. I think that what we need to add is a fourth, though. There should be a fourth point: unstable government or NDP government. That needs to be a risk that is identified by these guys because that seems to be the biggest risk that the Balancing Pool has got, and it's not here.

Moving forward here, they go into extraordinary events. Extraordinary events. Now, I will tell you that through my experience working as an accountant, there are different types of events that happen. Extraordinary events are something that would happen once in a generation.

An Hon. Member: Extraordinary.

Mr. Cyr: Extraordinary. That's right. This is exactly what it is.

They do have some strategic initiatives here: “Assess and verify extraordinary events using internal and external expertise. Dispute as required.” Well, it appears that the experts, who are government now, making decisions, are deciding that the PPAs are not the direction we want to go in.

We've got, “Maintain financial reserves to cover potential liabilities,” which seems to be – well, why even bother having that point anymore now that we're going to unlimited debt?

8:50

But the last one, this one here, is the one that strikes me as interesting: “Reduce the consumer allocation or invoke a charge should a ‘black swan’ event transpire.” I actually have never heard of a black swan event. I had to look it up. I assumed that I knew what it was. Well, this, I would argue, in this case would be the NDP winning the 2015 election. That would be categorized as a black swan event.

I have a lot more to say about this area, especially about the strategic plan, but – you know what? – I think I'll wait for my next speech. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Any other speakers under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Clark: Actually, I'm going to move one-minute bells, Mr. Speaker. It looks like we may be inching ever closer to a vote, and I would ask for unanimous consent, please, to move to one-minute bells.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Acting Speaker: Any other speakers to RA1?

Hon. Members: Question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment RA1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:52 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

For the motion:

Aheer	Gill	Nixon
Clark	Hunter	Panda
Cyr	Loewen	Schneider
Drysdale	MacIntyre	Stier

Against the motion:

Babcock	Hoffman	McPherson
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Carlier	Horne	Miller
Carson	Jansen	Phillips
Ceci	Kazim	Piquette
Connolly	Kleinsteuber	Renaud
Coolahan	Larivee	Rosendahl
Cortes-Vargas	Littlewood	Sabir
Dang	Loyola	Schmidt
Drever	Luff	Schreiner
Feehan	Malkinson	Shepherd
Fitzpatrick	Mason	Turner
Goehring	McCuaig-Boyd	Woollard
Gray	McKitrick	
Totals:	For – 12	Against – 38

[Motion on amendment RA1 lost]

The Acting Speaker: We are back to second reading. Are there any other members wishing to speak to second reading of Bill 34?

Having heard none, the hon. Minister of Energy to close debate.

Ms McCuaig-Boyd: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I now move that we close at second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a second time]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole (continued)

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

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

Bill 35 Fair Elections Financing Act

The Acting Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am going to move an amendment. I have the appropriate number of copies, and I will provide them to the pages and wait until you tell me to proceed.

The Acting Chair: Okay. This will be referred to as amendment A4. Please proceed, hon. member.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am going to move that Bill 35, the Fair Elections Financing Act, be amended in section 43 in the proposed section 44.1(1) as follows: (a) in clause (d) by striking out the word "or" at the end of subclause (v) and by striking out subclause (vi); and (b) in clause (g) by striking out again the word "or" at the end of subclause (v) and by striking out subclause (vi).

Mr. Chair, during the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee the government whip, a member who I enjoy working with in this Assembly, introduced a motion similar to this very amendment that I am introducing today. The member's motion in that committee read as follows:

That the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee recommend that [the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act] be amended to ban government advertising during general elections with the exception of ads required for government business that are certified in accordance with a process similar to [Ontario's].

9:00

Well, Ontario's rules are more relaxed than I would be comfortable with and, I think, most of my colleagues would be comfortable with. At least they don't have an exemption which writes the government of the day a blank cheque to spend on advertisement as much as they want. That's exactly, Mr. Chair, what the NDP government of the day in our province is proposing with Bill 35, a blank cheque.

Again, Mr. Chair, I know you probably have seen the pattern, that I have described many times inside this Assembly, of this government over and over and over asking for blank cheques. But here we are again, government again asking the opposition to provide them with a blank cheque on behalf of the people of Alberta. I think you know – and I know you would agree with me – that you certainly would not want to provide a blank cheque to this government in particular. I think you would agree with that.

I think what's important, though, about my first comments on this is what the government whip said in committee. The government whip moved a motion similar to this motion, which, I would argue and submit to you, shows that the government whip agreed with the opposition caucuses that this was a good direction to go. So I certainly would expect, Mr. Chair, through you to the government whip, and I eagerly await her rising and speaking in support of my amendment. I can't see why she would move an amendment for it in committee and then come to this House only a few short weeks later and say: "No. I changed my mind. I didn't like that." I can't see the member doing that.

With that said, though, Mr. Chair, the last time I sat in committee, the government whip and her fellow colleagues on the NDP side were fighting to get their campaign expenses paid for by taxpayers, and then when we got back after the committee, they had changed their minds about that. So maybe, you know, I'll let the government whip certainly speak for that member's self shortly.

Now, the Ontario Government Advertising Act of 2004, which is what the government whip cited during that debate, reads as follows:

Despite notice or deemed notice that an item meets the standards, a government office shall not publish, display, broadcast, distribute or convey the item during the period beginning with the issue of a writ under the Election Act for a general election and ending on polling day.

Now, unsurprisingly, the government whip then immediately adjourned the member's motion. Immediately. Now, we've talked about it many times in the last couple of days. That was pretty much what happened in the committee: 23 times the government adjourned their own motions.

Now, what happened, of course, Mr. Chair – and I know that you know because you were present at some of those meetings – was that the government would come forward with something, in fact, that was often described by the Member for Calgary-North West as pie in the sky, just numbers that they were reaching for in the air. They would bring it forward, and then good questions would start coming from all over, from all the parties, and then very quickly the government members would look at their laptops, and – I don't know – maybe because the government whip was in there, nobody was giving them instructions on what to say, so then they would adjourn debate. How many times? Twenty-three times. Twenty-three times they adjourned debate – 23 times – one short of two dozen. I'm shocked. I'm sure you are shocked.

Now, I've got to ask, Mr. Chair: how disconnected is the backbench of this government from its front bench? How disconnected is it? Quite frankly, can we even call the government whip really a backbench member? A member of the leadership of

her caucus? Clearly, it appears that only the Premier's office is calling the shots. It's shocking: 23 times.

When the government whip brings forward a motion, a good motion, I support it. It's a good idea that we should deal with this issue, and we're going to give the members an opportunity to follow through on what that member proposed right now and do the right thing for the people of Alberta and make sure that we truly, once and for all take big money out of politics. Big money out of politics: I believe in that. I've long said it, many times, in this Assembly. I said it before I was even elected. It's been a big part of the member-driven policy of the Wildrose Party, and the NDP, to their credit, have often pushed for that as well.

I mean, usually we lead; they follow. I like that. So today we're giving you an opportunity again. We're going to lead, and you should follow. If you don't take my word for how good this amendment is, I think you should take, through you, Mr. Chair, to the members across the way, the chief government whip's word for it because I just think that what the member, the chief government whip, brought forward is excellent, and it's what we're going to consider today. We're going to, with this amendment, truly give an opportunity for the government to actually follow through on what they keep saying they're going to do, which is to take big money out of politics.

Let's look at what they've done so far. We've lowered the \$15,000 limit, something all parties agree with. Parties on this side of the House tried to lower it to \$1,000 at the constituency level. This party raised it to \$4,000. A thousand dollars to \$4,000 is a drastic increase. A drastic increase. That doesn't sound like they're getting big money out of politics. They like to rise and say: hey, it's the opposition that didn't want to get big money out of politics. Well, we wanted to go to \$1,000. You guys wanted to go to \$4,000, and that's the legislation that you've brought forward.

But the most glaring amount of big money that is left in politics right now is what this government is spending, is the ability of the government to use the taxpayer purse to attempt to influence elections, to attempt to slant the system in favour of them. Now, in the case of this government it's not going to work. Albertans are wise to them, and when they finally drop the writ, Albertans will deal with that at the ballot box, and I think that they will deal with it in a very drastic way. They're the ones who should. They're the boss.

But is the NDP more interested in entrenching its own advantage than properly managing provincial finances, than properly managing our democracy? This party used to be in opposition. It used to be a relatively small party compared to the opposition parties that are here now. They could be back in that position one day. That's not unreasonable. Governments change. The party across the way knows that governments change. They should be thinking ahead, in my mind, not only to how this will impact their party when they're in opposition but to how this impacts other parties in opposition. If they truly want to take big money out of politics, they should stand with the government whip, like I'm about to, and they should say: let's do this.

Now the difference, Mr. Chair, between the chief opposition whip and the government whip is that I'm not going to adjourn my motion. We are going to vote on the motion, so the members across the way are going to have to stand at some point on the record and make a decision on what they want to do. In committee they adjourned and waited for more feedback from the Premier's office or wherever it comes from on the computers during that. I don't know. I'm giving a little bit of warning, I guess, for the word from the top to come if that's what you guys choose, but I would suggest instead that you stick to the principle that you have articulated, that you have put forward, that the government whip has put forward,

rightly so, and that is: let's once and for all take big money out of politics.

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

Madam Chair, great to see you.

The government has come so close – it has come so close – but along the way it's been distracted. It's been distracted with trying to force through motions in committee to get their campaign expenses paid for, to get their political party campaign expenses paid for. But now we're here in a situation where they don't have to be distracted anymore. They're going to have to make a decision on behalf of their constituents if they truly want to take big money out of politics.

Now, Madam Chair, I know without a doubt that you want to take big money out of politics. I think you share that goal with all of us. I know the government whip clearly shares that goal with all of us and recognizes the importance of dealing with government advertisements in our political system. You know, the NDP spent \$750,000 advertising their spring budget. Did you catch that? Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars advertising their spring budget.

An Hon. Member: How many nurses is that?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah. How many nurses is that?

The NDP spent \$700,000 advertising the carbon tax in 2015 and another \$4.4 million in 2016 advertising a tax that they were putting on the people of Alberta that is going to raise the cost of every product that they buy. That's big money in politics. Now, with this legislation, when it passes, Madam Chair, do you know how much a political party will be capped to spend inside a general election? Through you: does anybody know? I can tell you that it isn't \$4.4 million. That sure sounds like big money in politics.

9:10

The members across the way have talked a big game on this, and they have had many opportunities to do the right thing, and they will have another opportunity shortly. The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler gave them a great opportunity with a private member's bill, which was sabotaged inside this Assembly. Then when the press started to ask questions about why the government was making decisions like that, the government used some procedural things to get it back into this Chamber and then, ultimately, put it back to a committee, that voted to be returned and then has not been returned by the majority in this Assembly.

Now, why has it not been returned? Because the members across the way got caught with their hands in the pickle jar, this time – this time – trying to get money for their political campaign expenses, trying to get my constituents and your constituents to pay for the campaign expenses of members across the way. Shocking. It's shocking.

But here we go now. We have another opportunity, an opportunity to do the right thing, an opportunity to stand up and show that you truly believe in getting big money out of politics. If you truly believe in getting big money out of politics – if you truly believe in getting big money out of politics – you will show it right now.

The question that will be asked, specifically on this amendment, at the end is: is the NDP more concerned about the ballooning debt in our society right now, or are they more concerned with using electoral legislation to stack the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about running deficits on operational expenses, or are they more concerned with stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about addressing double-digit unemployment in Calgary or stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about restoring our

advantage so that we can now stop losing out on new drilling projects to our neighbours, or are they more concerned with stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about finally fixing our broken FOIP system or stacking the deck?

That's what this amendment gives them, an opportunity to show that they aren't, that they are actually concerned with getting big money out of politics. But so far, each time that they have had the opportunity, even one given to them by their own whip, they have not taken that opportunity. They have not taken that opportunity.

Is the NDP more concerned about trying to improve Alberta's terrible track record on stayed charges and backed-up court rooms, or are they more concerned with this legislation on stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about protecting our wildlife and fisheries? No. What are they concerned about?

Mr. Cooper: Stacking our deck.

Mr. Nixon: It's obvious.

This is the problem that we have here. I want, Madam Chair, to give the government members an opportunity to stand up and prove once and for all that they truly want to get big money out of politics instead of what it certainly appears like, over and over and over, both in committee and today, as they voted down each and every amendment, except for one, that has been brought forward by the opposition. In committee, when they spend all their time trying to get their campaign expenses paid for, to Albertans and to this side of the House it looks like this side of the House is only concerned with stacking the deck. Only concerned with stacking the deck.

Is the NDP more concerned about training more apprentices and journeymen or stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about articulating how they will bring 2,000 new long-term care beds or stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about university grads entering the workforce or stacking the deck? The hon. members across the way are starting to see a pattern.

Why don't we today, led by the government whip and the Government House Leader – I encourage him to lead the way as a leader in his party – stand up and show the people of Alberta that you truly want to get big money out of politics and that you're not attempting to rig the election system and stack the deck in favour of the incumbent government? Stacking the deck.

Is the NDP more concerned about getting unemployed oil field contractors back on the road, or are they just concerned with stacking the deck? Is the NDP more concerned about making the government leaner and more efficient and stop putting debt on my great-grandchildren or – what are they concerned about?

Some Hon. Members: Stacking the deck.

Mr. Nixon: Stacking the deck, Madam Chair.

Is the NDP more concerned about helping our law enforcement keep our families and communities safe or stacking the deck?

This is their opportunity, with this amendment, to show that they are truly concerned about the people of Alberta. So far, as we have dealt with electoral reform in our province, what I have seen from the government is: attempting to get their campaign expenses paid for, attempting to get individual MLAs' campaign expenses paid for, changing the system to punish opposition parties' political structures to the advantage of the incumbent party, making things harder for volunteers to participate in our political process, and getting mad that we won't rubber-stamp them for doing what? Stacking the deck.

It's so obvious to the people of Alberta, Madam Chair. I just don't understand why the NDP won't stand up once and for all and truly show that they are with the government whip, that they are going to stand with the government whip and say: we want big money out

of politics, and we expect our party, the governing party of the great province of Alberta right now, to follow the same rules as everybody else.

Is the NDP more concerned about keeping Alberta seniors united or – what?

Some Hon. Members: Stacking the deck.

Mr. Nixon: Stacking the deck.

Is the NDP more concerned about improving transportation and infrastructure or stacking the deck?

This is the opportunity to show that your number one priority is not to stack the deck in an effort to try to make the situation better for you in the election of 2019. I don't know when you'll call it. I'm not sure if you're going to stick with the fixed election law or not, but we'll see.

Is the NDP more concerned about helping our teachers in the classroom, something they say is important – and I agree with them – or their priority to stack the deck?

Some Hon. Members: Stack the deck.

Mr. Nixon: Stack the deck: get their campaign expenses paid for, change the rules to make it hard for political parties, and keep them with the biggest purse in all of politics, the government purse, taxpayer dollars, in an attempt to buy votes. Or they could stand with the government whip and stop stacking the deck.

I'm happy to see, Madam Chair, that the Government House Leader is finally starting to see the pattern. I feel like I'm being listened to tonight. I might be getting through to him. I know that we got through to the government whip during committee. I hope that the government whip is still with us on this important thing, in fact. But, you know, the motion did get adjourned, so maybe the government whip changed their mind when they adjourned the motion for the 23rd time in the committee.

Is the NDP more concerned about encouraging more tourism to our province or stacking the deck? What are you more concerned about: rigging the system, manipulating the law to your advantage, stacking the deck, getting taxpayer money for your campaign expenses, or standing with the opposition and the government whip and getting big money out of politics?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you, Madam Chair. It is an honour and a privilege to rise on Bill 35, the Fair Elections Financing Act, on a night that we're getting such a poetic conversation going. There's rhythm in the way he's speaking. Of course, I'm honoured to rise and to speak after the opposition whip and to speak a little bit about what we talked about in committee. [interjection] It is dream work. It's a dream to be here because we are making history by putting the democratic process back into Albertans' hands. That's what we're doing here. We're renewing the democratic process, and we have been doing this for over a year. Of course, the committee has worked really hard to get us there.

You know, even in opposition our party has always stood for looking at ways to limit government advertising, and we will continue to do that because we believe it's an important step to making sure that the electoral process is protected.

Of course, what we need to remember, though, is that if we played out this amendment that the member brought forward – this is under the Election Act, so it really doesn't apply to the election finances one. If you were to pass this and to put this in place, then

you'd have to ask yourself: who are the contributors, who are the donors to the government advertising, and how would you list those people? It just wouldn't work.

9:20

I believe, you know, that the member has a point and has a shared interest with the government in making sure that there are limits put in place, and we're looking forward to working on that. I'm sure the minister responsible for democratic renewal will be looking at this issue as we move forward with the Election Act, because that's where it sits, in the Election Act.

I believe that not only are we looking at that today, but it's also an honour to talk about the fact that we are introducing a bill today that has contribution limits, has spending limits, and introduces items for third-party advertising. Of course, at the end of the day, we want to make sure that these rules apply equally to all parties, and we want to make sure that we're closing the loopholes that allow for big money to influence the political process.

Again, I won't be supporting this amendment from my friend across the aisle, not because we won't be working on this . . .

Mr. Nixon: Whip to whip.

Cortes-Vargas: Whip to whip. But, unfortunately, the whip needs to think about this a little bit more carefully.

We need to look at doing this within the Election Act. It's something that, of course, we have talked about. When we were in opposition, I know that our party talked about how we were going to limit government advertising during election periods, and we will continue to bring that conversation forward because it is important.

I really want to thank the members for their participation in this debate. It's been a lovely evening, and I'm looking forward to our late night together.

That's all, Madam Chair. I'm happy with those statements.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I'll recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I appreciate the comments from the Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park. For those of us on this side it's a pretty tough act to follow Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre. It's a tough act to follow, but I agree with absolutely everything he said. This government is . . .

Some Hon. Members: Stacking the deck.

Mr. Clark: . . . stacking the deck. I won't try to pull off what he did.

There's no question that they are tilting the scales to their advantage, that they have a thumb on the scale on this. There's no question.

You know, in all sincerity, Madam Chair, I want to just pick up on a couple of things that the Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park said.

She talked about renewing the democratic process. Really, what we're doing is making the democratic process the New Democratic process. Everything in this bill, especially when you see the better part of \$10 million spent by this government not to advertise programs that are available to Albertans but to try to convince Albertans that government policy is a good idea, things like the carbon tax – there's nothing that Albertans can do to take advantage of the carbon tax. All they can do is that they may get a rebate. There's no program to be taking advantage of. There's no public benefit. It's not about reducing drinking and driving, curbing smoking, encouraging helmet use. It is only about the best political interests of government.

So I'm an enthusiastic supporter of this amendment because the government uses their tremendous weight of taxpayer dollars to influence the opinions and views of Albertans, and that's fundamentally wrong. I can tell you that, being on the receiving end of some of that in the 2014 by-election, it's unacceptable. I know that this government knows it's unacceptable in their heart of hearts. Why, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, the hon. Government House Leader, sat in this very spot and railed against nonmajority governments. And if he were here today, I promise you that he would do the same thing. I absolutely promise you. It makes me wonder. How quickly things change when you find yourself on the government side. I am profoundly disappointed that you've done that. It doesn't need to be this way. It does not need to be this way.

The other thing that the Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park, the chief government whip, had talked about and, in fact, had yelled across the way at me was that one of the reasons it took so long and that the government had to adjourn 23 times was that I had the audacity in the committee to move that we actually step through each one of the recommendations brought to that committee by Albertans through the admittedly not very comprehensive consultation process. But such as it was, we had many, many recommendations from Albertans, and we on that committee owed it to Albertans to consider each and every one of those recommendations.

The ND government side, however, would rather that we had cherry-picked about a half-dozen or so of those, just gone through those and then just completely ignored any of the other recommendations. That included dozens of recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer.

The job of that committee – that is why that work takes time. Yes, it takes time. Yes, democracy takes time. But it's worth it. It's absolutely worth it. And it is shameful that the government majority on the committee would have thought that we would somehow just be able to cherry-pick through a few recommendations and completely ignore the rest of them, not give them any consideration. I can tell you that we passed many thoughtful motions unanimously as a result of having gone through that. So, yes, it took time, but it took time because it's important work.

What's interesting is that this government agrees that we need to reduce government advertising and eliminate it, certainly, during a campaign period. At least they say that they agree. But the amount of money spent on government advertising by this government in particular reminds me of another government they don't like very much. How many tens of millions of dollars did the Harper Conservatives spend on advertising? How did you folks feel about that? Like the Canada jobs action plan.

Every time you went by one of the old building Alberta plan signs, how did you feel about that? Did you think that was a good idea? Did you go: "Hey, I am thrilled that my tax dollars are being used for this noble purpose. This is wonderful. I think this is great." How many of you, in your heart of hearts, in the last campaign sat in an all-candidates meeting or talked at the doors about the fact that government advertising is wrong? "Doesn't it bother you that these Building Alberta signs show up in empty fields and promise a school that's never going to be built? Yeah, that drives you insane." I know that many of you did that.

But now you find yourself on the government benches, and somehow it's okay. "Oh, it's okay because it's us. It's okay because it's our plan." The amount of money that your government is spending on the carbon tax advertising greatly exceeds the amount of money that was spent on the building Alberta plan signs. You know what? That was one of those bricks in the wall that brought down the previous government. Don't think for one second that

Albertans don't see right through that, and they're going to bring you down as well as a result.

This is an opportunity to stop doing that. It's a thoughtful amendment. It's entirely reasonable, and it removes that locked-in government advantage. So I really encourage all members of the House, the government side in particular, to really think hard about supporting this amendment. I know that the front bench likely doesn't want to, but I encourage those of you on the backbenches, those government private members, who have a tremendous amount of power. I don't think you maybe realize sometimes how much power you have. Your job is to represent the views of your constituents, and I think that if you were to ask your constituents if they want you to reduce or eliminate money spent on frivolous government advertising of purely policy programs, not programs or services that Albertans can take advantage of, not truly public service, but trying to convince Albertans that a policy position taken by the government is somehow the right one, that that somehow is an appropriate use of government dollars – it isn't.

This amendment seeks to end that. That's in the best interest of Alberta, that's in the best interest of democracy, and that's in the best interest of the bottom line of this province as well.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I will now recognize the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Dr. Starke: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's a privilege to talk this evening on this amendment. I won't even begin to attempt to mimic the southern Baptist, Bible, revival-tent preacher style of the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, with his marvellous antiphonal style of delivery, you know, with the chorus coming back and forth across the Chamber. I think that's a performance that won't soon be repeated, perhaps to the betterment of us all.

9:30

Madam Chair, I will say, though, on an entirely serious note, that this is a very important topic. Indeed, it is sort of the issue that when this Bill 35 was first announced, it was the issue that was perhaps first identified by the media as being a critical issue; that is, one that is important, that needs to be dealt with. It needs to be dealt with because, once again, it speaks to the issue of fairness. Now, unfortunately, the government has had a couple of opportunities already to demonstrate that it understands the concept of basic fairness and has failed. Nonetheless, we will continue to try to point out – and especially in this case. I think the Member for Calgary-Elbow makes a very good point.

The Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, whom we miss, is now in a situation where no longer does he righteously rail against these injustices but somehow now has acquiesced to being part of the government caucus. And that is a sad statement. I miss him. I miss him, and I miss his consistent demand for social justice, that was once in this House, that once spoke with such clarity and such passion on issues such as this, and now that voice is somehow muted, somehow muzzled. It is so sad.

While I didn't necessarily agree with the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, nor do I agree with him much even today, I do have a basic respect and admiration for the fact that he was always consistent in his statements defending the right of fairness. That was something that I admired. In fact, the other three of his colleagues that now form part of the government caucus and are part of cabinet – all four of them I always admired because from their position here, where the Member for Calgary-Elbow is now

ensconced, those members were always consistent in terms of their ability to articulate a position that demonstrated a basic grasp of social justice. I think that that social justice was something that was an important sort of balancing that we needed here in the Chamber.

So, indeed, it is now disappointing to me that on an issue as fundamental as government advertising during election campaigns, something that is fundamentally unfair, that is fundamentally tipping the scales in the favour of the governing party... [interjections] Well, one might say that. I'm not going to because I think it's been repeated altogether too often. Nonetheless, I would say that this is an issue of fundamental fairness.

Now, some may say that the government needs to communicate with the people of Alberta. I agree one hundred per cent. The government must communicate, and that is important. But at least during the election period that sort of advertising needs to halt for the writ period, for the 28-day period.

I think the Member for Calgary-Elbow correctly points out that the use of advertising can be misused and abused. Once again, it seems like it's mea culpa day over here in the third-party caucus. When that particular bit of advertising went on during the by-elections in October 2014, that was not a proud moment for our party, and that was not a proud moment for democracy. To say it in another way, it was wrong. It was wrong, and it should not have been done. These are the sorts of things that when you're in government, you're sometimes – I won't use the term "blinded to." Let's just say that sometimes you perhaps don't have the clarity of vision to see that it's not the right thing to do. The ends for some reason sometimes justify the means, and that is fundamentally wrong. That cannot be used as a reason for doing something that is fundamentally wrong.

This amendment, this very reasonable amendment that indeed addresses the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act very definitively and addresses what is in Bill 35, seeks to remedy that situation, and it seeks to remedy a situation that is fundamentally unfair. It is fundamentally unfair for a government, that has the keys to the treasury and unlimited use of that treasury, to access those taxpayer dollars to assist with its campaign during an election. This is especially true when there has been a restriction or will be a restriction placed on the advertising that can be done within the bounds of that campaign.

Now, don't get me wrong. I think that \$2 million is a reasonable figure to be spending on an election campaign. Goodness knows, in the last one the two parties that were the most successful both spent considerably less than \$2 million, and the one that, arguably, got the fewest votes per dollar spent spent considerably more than \$2 million.

You know, it's interesting. We heard repeatedly during the course of debate in the committee about how important it was to get big money out of politics because ideas should matter and not who has the most money. Yet we are seeing that the constitution of the current members of the government caucus puts that statement completely to a lie. Most of these members were considerably outspent by other candidates running in their constituencies, yet they were victorious, and they won. They are, in fact, living embodiments, proof – walking, talking, sneezing proof – that big money does not necessarily carry the day. They showed that somebody could spend less money and, in fact, be successful, something which I myself sort of take a certain amount of personal hope from at the present time.

Nonetheless, I think that it is incredibly important that we recognize that the government's access to the treasury, that the government's ability to advertise – and we've seen, certainly, this government's ability to advertise – can be misused, and it should

not be. That is a concept that, I would suggest, my friends that sat over here in the former, somewhat smaller New Democratic Party caucus would have recognized, and I do so miss them. I say that perhaps to a certain extent tongue-in-cheek, but, Madam Chair, I do agree with the Member for Calgary-Elbow. There is something in that now that they are there, I've yet to have demonstrated to me, certainly in the course of debate on this issue, that they still have those ideals, that they still aspire to those lofty ideals of democratic socialism, of social justice. I'm not seeing it, and that indeed is disappointing because while I didn't necessarily agree with those policies, I always had respect and admiration for them.

I think that as far as a balanced society goes, it is critical that there are voices that articulate those positions. I think that is part of a just and overall balanced society. It's something that I believe in strongly because most of the issues that we deal with, whether it's here in the Chamber or out there in what I call the real world – this Chamber can be somewhat of a departure from the real world – most of the issues we deal with are not black and white. Most of the issues are many, many, many shades of grey in between.

With that, Madam Chair, I wholeheartedly support this amendment. I would certainly like to see, I hope to see that members of the government caucus who are actually still listening will vote in favour of the amendment because I think it establishes a basic sense of fairness and justice. If the members opposite decide to vote against this amendment, I would suggest that they are going to have some explaining to do. They will need to explain to their constituents, they will need to explain to the media, and they will need to explain to Albertans why they think that it's okay for the government, when it's restricted the amount that can be spent by political parties, can continue to spend in an unfettered and unregulated manner during the course of an election. That is fundamentally wrong. For that reason, I support this amendment.

9:40

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A4? The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Nixon: Thanks, Madam Chair. I know it's getting late. Certainly, as we were discussing just a few minutes ago, when I had the opportunity to rise and talk for 20 short minutes, stacking the deck is a concern. But the reason I rise again is in response to the hon. government whip, whom we started out this conversation with discussing the amendment that she moved forward at the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee.

I do appreciate hearing from the government whip tonight, Madam Chair, and her response to my questions in regard to her motion in that committee and where she stands today, now, and whether or not her colleagues in the government caucus across the way were going to stand with the government whip and support getting big money out of politics, just like she moved inside the committee, because the amendment that I am moving tonight is basically identical to the amendment that she chose to move at that time in the committee. I was happy to support it. I wish that I had an opportunity – I know many other members in the Assembly wish they had the opportunity, but of course, as I discuss, the government whip then adjourned that amendment, just like they adjourned 23 other amendments during the process.

The government whip's response today, through you to me, Madam Chair, to this side of the House, was that this has nothing to do with this act and then seems to indicate that possibly at some later date the government may address this very, very serious issue to get big money out of politics, the last portion of that that has to

be dealt with, and that is the government using taxpayer dollars. However – and I've already quoted this, but I'm going to quote it again – the government whip introduced a similar amendment, as I've told you, in committee that said that

the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee recommend that the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act be amended to ban government advertisement during general elections with the exception of ads required for government . . . that are certified in accordance with a process similar to [Ontario's.]

Now, earlier, when I was speaking, I described to the House Ontario's process, so I don't think I will do that again. The point of me reraising it through you, Madam Chair, to the government whip, is that very clearly, in her own words, she makes it clear that it's for the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act and now will rise in this Assembly and indicate to us that, no, what she meant had nothing to do with this act. That seems, to me, like a great contradiction, certainly.

We also have an amendment that has been approved through the process, fits within the legislation that we are debating today, and quite clearly, Madam Chair, there is no doubt – the facts are clear – that the government has the opportunity in the next few minutes to stand up and prove once and for all that they really want to get big money out of politics. But as we've seen over and over as we debate this important legislation in this Assembly, the government clearly is not indicating to Albertans that they truly want to get big money out of politics because their pattern has been to actually raise it in the case of constituency associations from \$1,000 to \$4,000. That's the opposite of lowering it. I know we've heard from some ministers today that they didn't agree with that, but in my world \$1,000 to \$4,000 is an increase. Maybe it's different in the NDP cabinet ministers' worlds. I don't know.

Then, when we come forward with an opportunity to once and for all limit the last big loophole that we have for opportunities for parties to use big money in politics, the government indicates that they want to do it at a future date. Madam Chair, this is a government that spent \$4.4 million advertising a carbon tax, that spent \$750,000 advertising their spring budget. Madam Chair, \$4.4 million on the carbon tax: let's think about that for a second. We've capped parties at \$2 million, and we're for that. But just on one issue this government has over doubled that cap.

Their own whip, the government whip, has indicated and moved forward, though she did adjourn it, that there is support for this from the NDP backbenchers, so how disconnected is the NDP backbench with cabinet? All of a sudden they get here and their beliefs in that issue are not valid anymore? Similar to when they were trying to pass stuff in committee to get their campaign expenses paid for – and then, ultimately, that was stopped, fortunately in that case, by the cabinet.

When I stood up earlier, I talked in great detail about the fact that clearly this government is just indicating to Albertans that they want to stack the deck in favour of them in the next election, that truly most of this does absolutely nothing to get big money out of politics in our system, that this is truly about trying to re-elect this government, that this is truly about trying to hamstring the opposition parties, particularly the small opposition parties. It's truly about stacking the deck and not dealing with the big issue of getting big money out of politics because if it truly was, Madam Chair, about getting big money out of politics, these government members would stand up and vote with us, vote with their whip, stand with their whip, and make it very, very clear.

Now, Madam Chair, you know my party. We don't have whip votes. We believe in free votes. Normally I stand in this Chamber

and I say to the government members: ignore your whip. I have spent so much time in my elected life standing in this building saying: please ignore your whip, and do the right thing for your constituents. But tonight I'm saying: listen to your whip, and do the right thing for your constituents. It's a win-win for the whip on the government side today. It's a win-win for the whip.

Now, in some ways it's funny – and it's late at night – but truly, at the end of the day, it isn't funny that we have to keep coming here to try to get the government to do the right thing, to try to get the government to stand up for the right thing, to try to get the government to follow through on what they promised to do. They promised to get big money out of politics.

When they started the process of the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, stuff like this amendment was exactly what we were supposed to be working on. During that committee, before it was derailed by the members trying to get their campaign expenses paid for, the members agreed with us on this.

Mr. Cooper: Remember when Drumheller-Stettler proposed this bill?

Mr. Nixon: That's right. And then Drumheller-Stettler proposed this almost exact same type of bill. It was through procedural stuff by the government that they tried to shove it aside, but then the media caught them and didn't like it, so then they brought it back, the first time, I think, that that's ever happened in the Alberta Legislature, that they managed to get a bill that was dead and bring it back. It was kind of neat. It was like magic.

Then they decided to take it and send it to committee, so we said: okay; let's go to committee. Then the government whip sat in committee and said, as I've read to you, Madam Chair: yeah, that's a great idea; that's what we should do. Then – I don't know – an e-mail or text message came, and they had to emergency adjourn the debate on it. There may be another level of whip in the government. I don't know what happens there, but they had to adjourn debate on that.

Here I am today giving the government the opportunity to prove once and for all that when I stand in this Assembly and I say, through you, Madam Chair, to them, that they are trying to stack the deck, trying to kneecap opposition parties, and trying to make sure that we can't spend money – rightly so; we want to get big money out of politics – but that they, the governing party, still have the ability to use taxpayer monies to manipulate campaigns and to use to their advantage, that's wrong.

Just like when we warned you and begged you not to use taxpayer money to pay for your campaign expenses, that's just like this. When we begged them all summer and they worked all summer, Madam Chair, to try to get their campaign expenses paid for and, in the end, somebody finally had a second thought and went, "Oh, that's a real bad idea; I guess we should listen to the opposition," I suspect that's because we talked to Albertans more than them. I don't know why it took them so long to realize how bad of an idea that was.

Here I am today telling you that if you truly want to get big money out of politics, if you're truly not trying to use this bill to hamstring the opposition and rig the system for you, then in a few minutes stand up and support your whip's comments in committee, stand up for Albertans, and get big money out of politics once and for all. If not, you are trying to stack the deck, and Albertans will remember that. I promise you that, Madam Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A4? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Chair. It is very hard to follow my colleague through his very, very focused speech on trying to convince the government. I am sad to hear that the government whip has brought this forward and that it is appearing that she's not going to be supporting ours after supporting it in the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee.

9:50

It's important to note that we heard a member from the past government say that they had made mistakes in this area and would like to correct those. I think that's very admirable. I heard that same member say that he knows the House leader very well, and he's hoping that the House leader would go back to the man that he knew before he got into government. Right after our chaos that happened with Bill 203, which our Member for Drumheller-Stettler put forward, all of that, we just heard that some really incredible circumstances moved around, and what happened is that they referred that bill to the standing committee.

But what happened here is that the deputy House leader said that – now, I'm going to read a quote from a newspaper, from Matt Dykstra. I should start there. It was an article on November 2, 2015: Alberta NDP Government Votes Down Bill Prohibiting Government Advertising During Elections. That member, who is a cabinet minister, explained that

the government "absolutely agrees with" the bill but voted it down in order to refer the issue to the all-party Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee which has already been appointed to review the Election Act, the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, the Conflicts of Interest Act, and more.

We've got the House leader, the deputy House leader, the whip. Who else could be more influential to make sure that we remove government advertising? It seems like we have a disproportionate number of members on the other side that believe this, but – wait – I actually have another person.

An Hon. Member: Oh.

Mr. Cyr: I know. This is shocking.

You know what? It's starting to add up. This is an important topic. It is. On December 9, 2014 – so before the election, before the election that made the decision to form this government, on May 5, 2015 – we had a press release from the NDP. A press release from the NDP. What we've got here is: [Premier's last name] Introduces NDP Accountability Priorities. I'd like to read the first part of this. It's a December 9, 2014, press release.

In response to PC legislation claiming to increase government accountability, NDP Leader [the now Premier] called for a series of changes that would effectively protect Albertans from several forms of inappropriate behaviour demonstrated by the PCs over the last several years.

"This PC party has continually flouted the basics of accountability and trustworthiness in government," [the Premier] said.

That sounds pretty familiar.

"We thought, at the very least, that [the former Premier's] widely-touted Accountability Act should fix the most obvious problems of recent years."

Let's be clear: "most obvious problems."

The New Democrats are proposing a number of necessary clauses . . .

I marked that word, "necessary."

. . . for [the past Premier's] upcoming Accountability Act.

This includes – there are lots of them here, and many of them have actually come up. I am, actually, very surprised that our government has been fighting on a lot of these things already.

The [past Education minister] clause . . .
I can't use his name for obvious reasons.

. . . fixing the Elections Act to prohibit MLAs from using government resources during elections or by-elections."

Wow. Isn't that what we're doing with this amendment? We've got the deputy House leader, House leader, whip, Premier. That is a stunning number of their cabinet that suddenly don't believe in government accountability. This is truly shocking.

I will tell you that for something that has been a passion of my colleague from Drumheller-Stettler, when he brought forward Bill 203 – it needs to be understood that when it comes to these private members' bills, because we sit so few days, you really don't get a lot of opportunity to pass a bill, which is why it is so saddening that the government was hoping to change the sound bite away from their irresponsibility in this area. They wanted to stop the story with political manoeuvring, that in the end was to send it to a committee. We talked about it with the committee. The whip put forward this motion, and then it died. Now the government has the opportunity to bring it back, and – guess what? – it sounds like they've given up on this, too. They believed in it before the election, they believed in this after the election, but now, when it's actually time to actually move forward with something that is going to take big money out of government advertising, they fall short. They fall short. This is a common practice of this government.

Thank you, Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A4?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A4 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 9:58 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

For the motion:

Barnes	Gill	Panda
Clark	Hunter	Schneider
Cooper	Loewen	Starke
Cyr	Nixon	Strankman
Drysdale		

Against the motion:

Babcock	Horne	McPherson
Carson	Jansen	Miller
Ceci	Kazim	Phillips
Connolly	Kleinsteuber	Piquette
Coolahan	Larivee	Renaud
Cortes-Vargas	Littlewood	Rosendahl
Dang	Loyola	Sabir
Drever	Luff	Schmidt
Feehan	Malkinson	Schreiner
Fitzpatrick	Mason	Shepherd
Goehring	McCuaig-Boyd	Sucha
Gray	McKittrick	Woollard
Hoffman		

Totals: For – 13 Against – 37

[Motion on amendment A4 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are back now on the original bill. Are there any comments, questions, or amendments in regard to the bill? The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Dr. Starke: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to move an amendment to Bill 35. I'll wait for the pages to distribute the same and provide you with the original copy of the amendment before reading it into the record.

Madam Chair, I will say as a preface that this amendment attempts to address what has appeared, at least, to be a very arbitrary setting of the spending limit for constituency associations or at the constituency association level. You will recall, when I spoke to this at second reading, that there is a certain amount of inconsistency in the setting of the maximum allowable spending from the time it was discussed at committee to what the committee eventually landed on to what has now ended up coming back in the form of a bill. This, I think, demonstrates that the government and the minister have not really landed on a number, and the number that they have landed on is completely and totally arbitrary. Certainly, something as important as this should not be left just to an arbitrary methodology – pick a number out of the air, throw darts at a dartboard – for determining spending limits.

So, Madam Chair, I move that Bill 35, Fair Elections Financing Act, be amended in section 36 as follows, (a) by striking out the proposed section 41.3(1) and substituting the following:

Election expense limits – registered candidates

41.3(1) No registered candidate and no chief financial officer of a registered candidate shall incur election expenses in respect of an election in an electoral division that exceed in the aggregate the greater of:

- (a) \$50 000 as adjusted in accordance with section 41.5, or
- (b) 50% of the amount established pursuant to section 39(1)(a) of the Legislative Assembly Act for the establishment and maintenance of a constituency office by a Member for that electoral division.

(b) in the proposed section 41.5(2) by striking out "41.3" and substituting "41.3(1)(a)", and (c) in the proposed section 41.5(3) by striking out "41.3" and substituting "41.3(1)(a)".

Madam Chair, what this amendment endeavours to do is to bring some rhyme or reason to the spending limit for a candidate in a specific election. You know, we looked at this, and at committee the initial recommendation was to have a \$40,000 limit for candidates except to have it at \$50,000 for certain northern constituencies. The rationale for having a higher limit for northern constituencies was to cover travel expenses, which, most people representing northern constituencies were quick to point out, is not necessarily a major contributor to the expense of running a campaign. Nonetheless, that \$10,000 differential was felt somehow to be a rational thing to do.

Then when it was stated that \$40,000 and \$50,000 seemed rather low, again, as this committee often did, there was an adjournment of debate, which happened a number of times. Later on a new proposal was brought forward where the limit should be \$70,000 and \$80,000, again with a \$10,000 differential for northern constituencies, again with no strong rationale for why that differential should be in place.

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

Nonetheless, the committee eventually landed on those figures: \$70,000 and \$80,000. You know, when you look at what most candidates who ran in the last election actually spent on their campaigns, that was a limitation that most candidates should be able to comfortably stay under. Now, there were some candidates who spent more than that. For the most part, interestingly, those

candidates were not successful in winning the election, which lends even more credence to the argument that big money didn't decide, certainly, the last election.

But that was the limit that was decided upon, and it was voted upon by the committee. Then, somewhat inexplicably, when the bill comes to the House, we now are back to a \$50,000 limit with some exemptions, certain exemptions on travel expenses and for certain other certainly very reasonable sorts of expenses that can be incurred during the course of an election campaign. I was personally somewhat disappointed to see that kennel fees were excluded from that list, but nonetheless.

10:20

Mr. Chair, I do look, though, at that number and consider it to be entirely arbitrary. There's no rhyme or reason to it: \$40,000, \$70,000, \$50,000. How do we come up with those numbers? I got to thinking to myself. You know, it's interesting. The gentleman that occupied the chair you're sitting in right now for over three decades, Dr. McNeil, recently retired, was perhaps known as the dean of clerks of certainly all the Legislatures in Canada and maybe perhaps even in the British Commonwealth.

One of the things that we were all as members familiar with is that Dr. McNeil developed the formula for the member's services allowance, the MSA. That formula takes into account a number of factors, including the number of electors, the population, the size of the constituency, and the distance of the constituency from the city of Edmonton. Using a formula that Dr. McNeil, an engineer, developed was how they arrived at the MSA. You know, it's interesting because I think most of the members in the Legislature will agree that the MSA is eminently fair in terms of taking all of those factors into account in determining what amount should be allocated to the budget to run our various constituency offices.

So I thought to myself: well, we have this model already. We have a model that is workable, that is generally agreed upon by most members as being fair and equitable, and that takes into account the fact that 87 different constituencies are in fact very different. To apply a one-size-fits-all \$50,000 limit to all 87 constituencies, some of which may have a population in the 50,000, 60,000 range and others which have a population that is barely 15,000 or 20,000, some which cover an area that is massive and cannot even be reasonably driven across in one day with a vehicle, whereas others are small enough that they could be comfortably walked across – we have a considerable diversity of constituencies: size, shape, population.

You know, in terms of the population, the ethnic mix in the population, the backgrounds, whether it's rural, whether it's urban, the point of it is that these constituencies are not all the same. So why should the spending limit be the same for all constituencies? It just simply doesn't make sense. To have something that is in fact a rational way of determining a constituency spending limit, we already have the formula in place. It is a formula that was worked out by Dr. McNeil, and I think it is a formula that has some rhyme or reason to it. It takes into account some of the different factors that are involved.

Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, my suggestion is that we simply take that formula and that we take one-half of the amount that is designated by the MSA and that that be the spending limit for that constituency, except in cases where one half of the MSA would be less than \$50,000, and that's the reason why it says in the amendment the greater of \$50,000 or one-half of the MSA.

I think that this provides an acknowledgement, at least, that not all constituencies are the same, that different constituencies will require different types of campaigns, and that in some

constituencies, by virtue of their geography or by virtue of their population mix, you'll have to campaign in a different way. I think that this particular amendment allows for that. It provides for that. I think it is a rational and reasonable amendment. It also provides for the fact that it's not just an arbitrary number. It is a number that will be very clear because it's set annually by the Legislative Assembly Office, so candidates will know exactly what their spending limit is, either \$50,000 or some number greater than \$50,000, and that will allow them to spend an amount that is comparable to the needs of their constituency.

Mr. Chair, I would encourage my colleagues in the Legislature to seriously consider this amendment. I think it provides for a level of flexibility within the spending limit, and that spending limit then has some relationship to the complexities and to the diversity of constituencies within the province of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A5? The hon. government whip.

Cortes-Vargas: Strathcona-Sherwood Park. Thank you, Chair. I was just looking over the amendment that was put forward by the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster. Of course, the main objective in bringing in the spending limits is levelling the playing field. When we look at levelling the playing field, we also have to acknowledge that there are things like differences in regions and in the amount of space you have to cover, which is of course why we also brought in an exemption for kilometres that wouldn't be included in the \$50,000 spending limit.

The proposal here is to link it to the Legislative Assembly Act. Of course, there's a matrix within the Legislative Assembly Act that determines how much money goes to each constituency office. That matrix uses the electoral count, and it takes different things into perspective. But, of course, in doing so, it's giving a certain set of monies for a year. It's doing that for a year. It's hard right now, just from seeing this, to give you a range of how much that is. I know that it's \$140,000 in some cases. I know that it's a little bit higher, it's a little bit lower depending on the electoral count, depending on what matrix score your constituency falls under. Of course, that does leave a variance.

What it does is that it moves away from this idea of levelling the playing field. What we wanted to do was to make sure that there is a number that we have the spending limit at but also take into account that, yes, absolutely, in certain situations there are MLAs, in this case candidates, that will have to travel more in their constituency to reach their electorates. In this instance I would say that it moves away from that. For that reason, I'm not supportive of this amendment.

I mean, it gives an option, right? The proposal is to move to \$50,000 or to 50 per cent of the matrix of the Legislative Assembly, which is an inconsistent way of establishing a level playing field, especially when you have this range that isn't easily accessible. You can't even determine what's going to be 50 per cent at a quick glance. In certain instances other members here might have a different number, so 50 per cent of that would be different.

Of course, because that is one of the main objectives, bringing something in like spending limits, and not only are just the candidates travel costs and transportations and meals not counting towards the spending limit, but the care for the candidate's or contestant's children and dependants, expenses related to disability of the candidate or contestant, all those things are not included, as well as audit and certain professional fees necessary for legal compliance and incidental fees like parking and gas. Those are examples of things we're exempting from the spending limit to

make sure that we do take into account the differences that candidates have when campaigning in different regions of the province.

Of course, we go back to the idea of how we're going to do this, and I think it's actually been very thoughtful, putting in these things, because we want to make sure that being a candidate is accessible for everyone independent of their personal circumstance. That is how we make sure that we have diverse representatives that are being elected. For that reason I very much support the proposal that is in the current bill, not amended, which is \$50,000 with the exceptions. For that reason I will not be supporting this amendment.

Thank you.

10:30

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Chair, I appreciate the comments from the hon. Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park, but I have to say that there are a number of flaws in what was said. Firstly, I have absolutely no issue with the carve-outs that are contemplated within the bill with regard to exemptions for travel costs and meals and that sort of thing, but, you know, I can tell you that this is reflective, in my view, of a significant lack of understanding of what constitutes the major expenses in a campaign.

I can tell you that even in a rural constituency like mine, that takes two and a half to three hours to drive across, my travel costs, my lunch costs, all of the things that fall into the basket of things that are exempted would constitute an extremely small percentage of my overall costs. So the fact that they're now exempted really makes very, very little difference, and the fact that they're exempted makes very little difference in terms of creating the level playing field that the member speaks of.

You know, the other thing about the level playing field: what matters is that all candidates within a given constituency are allowed to spend to the same limit. It doesn't have to be the same amount in each constituency around the province. In fact, it shouldn't be, because each constituency around the province is different and unique. This cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach that is applied in this bill is reflective of the whole sort of attitude of a lot of items in legislation that this government has brought forward, where it's demanding that everybody be treated exactly equivalently, in fact, when it doesn't make sense because representing a riding like Peace River or Lesser Slave Lake, with huge geography, is very different from representing a riding like Edmonton-Centre or Calgary-Buffer. There are massive differences in doing that.

You know, just as an example, at committee – and you were there – you heard some of the discussion about expenditures on signage. In rural areas you have to have four-by-eight signs. You don't have to, but it's certainly helpful to have four-by-eight-foot signs. These things are expensive. These things cost a lot of money, and in a typical campaign in a rural area you buy quite a few of these signs, that sometimes cost in excess of \$35 to \$40 each. And that's to say nothing of the wood that you have to mount it on or the signposts that you have to build and the lumber and all that. That costs an awful lot more, I can tell you from experience, than the tanks of gas or the lunches or the things that are exempted.

In point of fact, constituencies are different. Where the need for a level playing field is is that all of the candidates running within that specific constituency should have the same spending limit. I absolutely support that. That's an issue of fairness. If you're going to have spending limits, that same spending limit has to apply to all of the candidates running in that constituency. But to suggest that the same spending limit should be applied to Cypress-Medicine Hat as is applied to Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood simply makes no sense – it makes absolutely no sense – and to suggest that it does is a little bit, I think, naïve. I think it points out that there is a lack of

understanding of the fact that campaigns operate and run differently in different parts of the province.

Now, the closest thing that I could find that acknowledged and made a calculation for the differences in constituencies around the province was the matrix developed by Dr. McNeil for the calculation of the MSA. In fact, he was teased a little bit at the time of his retirement that only an engineer would develop a mathematical matrix and a mathematical calculation for determining an MSA. But, in point of fact, it was a formula that he developed in order to provide some fairness, not that every constituency be treated the same, because they're not all the same. But within that constituency should all candidates have the same limit applied to them? Of course they should.

When we talk about a level playing field, the playing field has to be level for everybody within the same contest. To suggest that the playing field has to be standardized for all 87 constituencies across our province I don't think is realistic, and I don't think that it's reflective of the diversity of the constituencies in our province. That's why I feel that a one-size-fits-all limit, a \$50,000 limit, albeit with the carve-outs and the exemptions that are put in this legislation that, personally, I don't have a large issue with: I don't have a big issue with those, especially some of the ones for things like child care and things like, you know, care if the person running is a caregiver for a disabled relative, that sort of thing. No issue with those. I think that's actually a good step forward.

But to suggest that this \$50,000 figure – and, again, some of this comes from: where did the \$50,000 number come from? It was \$40,000, then it was \$70,000, and now it's \$50,000. I mean, if we wait another few weeks, is it going to be \$60,000 and then \$35,000? It just strikes me as being exceedingly arbitrary. I think that our limits have to be based on something a little bit more based in and grounded in fact. The MSA calculation certainly is grounded very much in fact. It's formulaic. It's not hard to figure out. Well, it's maybe a little hard to figure out, but the beauty of it is that somebody's already done that for you. We know that the LAO does the calculation, and anyone who's thinking of running will have that number provided to them to say: "Okay. This is what the MSA calculation was for the previous fiscal year. You can spend up to one half of that." That's not that difficult, and I have absolute confidence that the LAO, working together with the Chief Electoral Officer, could provide that information to prospective candidates very, very easily. I've no question about that whatsoever.

What it does do is allow for the variation between constituencies that is a fact of life in Alberta. To suggest that every constituency should be treated the same and that that somehow is an issue of fairness when you have these kinds of diversity in population, in size, like you say, in population makeup, in background that we have within the 87 constituencies, or whatever the number the Electoral Boundaries Commission decides on once they are done their deliberations, I just think is an unreasonable and it's a naive expectation. That's why this amendment, I believe, addresses that. I think it addresses it in a very nonpartisan way and in a way that is acceptable to members once they are elected in terms of funding their constituency offices. So I would suggest that we apply that same rule of fairness to constituency spending limits for election purposes.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Acting Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A5?

Hearing none, are we ready for the question?

An Hon. Member: Question.

[Motion on amendment A5 lost]

The Acting Chair: We are back on the main bill. Are there any other members wishing to speak to Bill 35?

Mr. Cyr: Well, again, when we start talking about elections, I get heated up. I will say that I really think that we all need to be reconsidering where we're going. It's disappointing that we spent so much time in the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, and we actually debated this point. I worked with the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, and we were able to discuss this with the group, that not every riding is the same. So I'm very sad to see that the government has voted down that amendment.

The Acting Chair: The Member for Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I will present an amendment. I will hand this to the pages and wait for the table to receive it before I continue.

The Acting Chair: This will be amendment A6.

Please proceed, hon. member.

10:40

Mr. Clark: Thank you. My amendment reads as follows: Mr. Clark to move that Bill 35, Fair Elections Financing Act, be amended as follows.

- A. Section 17 is struck out and the following substituted:
17 Section 15.1 is amended by striking out "of a limit prescribed by 17(1) or 18(1)" and substituting "of the limit prescribed by section 17(1), 17(1.1) or 18(1)."
- B. Section 19 is amended, in the proposed section 17, as follows:
 - (a) in subsection (1) by adding "Subject to subsection (1.1)," before "contributions by";
 - (b) by adding the following after subsection (1):
(1.1) Contributions to a registered constituency association shall not exceed in any year \$1,000 in aggregate, as adjusted in accordance with section 41.5.

What that means, Mr. Chair, is that no constituency association may collect donations in total more than \$1,000. This solves the fundamental flaw of the bill, which was addressed and fixed by the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, of potentially only three people contributing enough funds over the course of a four-year period to finance an entire election campaign. As the bill is currently written, three individuals of some means could contribute \$4,000 each to a constituency association over four years; \$12,000 a year times four is \$48,000, almost the \$50,000 donation limit. Of course, the \$4,000 that they would donate is reduced substantially by the tax credit that is applicable to the donation.

This is one of the issues that the committee grappled with as it appeared that \$4,000 was going to be the limit as the government took away the buckets, const associations being isolated as a donation from the parties, and this bill does that as well. But this fixes a fundamental problem with the bill. It doesn't increase the \$4,000 limit. It's very important to note that the \$1,000 as proposed in this amendment is not additional, over and above the \$4,000 limit. It's still retained within the \$4,000 total aggregate cap. So we're not trying to get around the \$4,000 limit, which I support and agree with. What we're doing, though, is restricting a constituency association or any aggregate group of constituency associations from receiving more than \$1,000 from a single donor in a year.

Now, I think this is an important amendment, one that the committee dealt with, which was supported unanimously by members of the government side as well as all members of the committee and therefore representing all parties in the House. I think it's important. There have been some amendments that I, frankly, was not expecting the government to support but would

have made the bill much better had they done so, but this, I think, would make the bill fundamentally stronger, would make the legislation fundamentally stronger.

I would really encourage and would hope that the government would be willing to support this amendment. I know that it's something I've talked about with many members on this side as well as the government members. I think there's a general agreement that if one of the ideas of this bill, as I believe I've heard a couple of times, is that we're trying to get big money out of politics – I believe I've heard that. This amendment seeks to do precisely that, because as the bill stands, three wealthy individuals – three – could elect a single MLA, could ultimately support the entire campaign of a single MLA. In doing that, if you want to find influence, that would be the dictionary definition of influence, having an MLA beholden to three people who financed their entire campaign. It is also the exact inverse of grassroots democracy.

I would encourage all members of the Assembly to support this. In all sincerity, I would like to hear what the government side has to say and hope we find support for this, I think, reasonable and thoughtful amendment.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Loyola: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As always, it's a pleasure to get up in this House and speak to legislation that we are considering. I want to say that what we have proposed here in the fair elections act – I want to remind people that under the current legislation individuals could contribute \$15,000 to a registered party in any year, and that would actually double in an election year. In total over a four-year election cycle you could have a rich, wealthy individual give up to \$105,000 to a political party of their choice. I'll repeat that: \$105,000 to the political party of your choice.

When I go out and I talk to constituents, when I go out and I talk to people – never mind the \$105,000 – I would ask them first: how many of you could afford to give a political party \$15,000? You know, not one person told me, at least in my circle of friends and people that I was consulting with regarding this legislation, not one of them – not one of them, Mr. Chair – said that they could afford \$15,000. Not one of them.

You know, when we talk about getting big money out of politics, we're talking about exactly that. We're talking about lowering the contribution of one individual from \$15,000 to \$4,000. When we say we're getting big money out of politics, that's what we're talking about, reducing that contribution from \$15,000 in a year, which would double in an election year, to now \$4,000 with no double up in an election year. That, I would say, is a considerable difference. A considerable difference.

Now, the other thing that I want to say in terms of this particular amendment is that we felt that it was absolutely necessary to give the choice to the person making the contribution. We've lowered it now to \$4,000. That's not big money at all. Not big money at all. You know, that contribution of the maximum of \$4,000 per individual per calendar year: that applies to any combination of the party, the constituency association, the candidate once an election has been called. It also applied to leadership contestants and also nomination contestants.

Therefore, the constituent, the contributor, the donor now has to ask themselves: "Okay. My cap is \$4,000. Where am I going to put my \$4,000? I can put some of it in a constituency association. Oh, there's a leadership race coming up. I'd better think about how much I want to give to that leadership race. Oh, and don't forget, I want to participate in the actual nomination process of the person that I believe will be the best to represent my community from my

political party in this area. I may want to contribute to that person's nomination race if they were to have one."

So you see, Mr. Chair, although the contribution limit is \$4,000, we're providing constituents with a choice. Let me tell you that it is absolutely amazing to me that we have a political party on the other side of the House that normally gets up in this House and adamantly makes arguments for choice, yet on this issue they're not standing behind that. We want to provide the constituent, the contributor the freedom to make the choice of where they're going to put their \$4,000. You know what? That, to me, is how we get big money out of politics because now the individual has to think about all the other options that I just finished describing.

10:50

Mr. Cooper: But they can't choose one.

Loyola: Absolutely. They could choose one, and that would be their choice. That would be their choice if they wanted to. You know, I'm willing to bet that when constituents, when contributors to the political parties are told, "Hey – you know what? – you could give money to your constituency association, you could give it to your candidate, you could give it to a leadership contestant, your nomination contestant," when they're explained that they can do that and that they have the choice, well, then, we leave it up to them.

An Hon. Member: They don't have that choice now?

Loyola: They have the freedom to decide where they want to put their up to \$4,000. They could decide where they want to put that.

Mr. Chair, just to summarize and go back, the fact that we're proposing in this bill to move from \$15,000 a year down to \$4,000 – oh boy. Let me tell you that when I went to constituents in my riding of Edmonton-Ellerslie and I explained that we were lowering the amount from \$15,000 to \$4,000, they were saying: good job. They were impressed. They were, like: "Why didn't the previous party look into this? Why didn't they make that change?"

Let me remind everybody that's sitting in the House right now that when this government first came in, the first bill that we passed got rid of union and corporate donations. Why wasn't this proposed earlier by the other party? [interjections] Yeah. You know, that's a good point, Member. That's a good point, Member. I only know of one political party that wouldn't accept corporate donations in the past. So we found that it was absolutely necessary to follow through with this idea. Let's get corporate and union donations out of our electoral process.

Mr. Chair, I want to thank you for the opportunity to highlight these very important factors that I've discussed. For that reason I want to recommend to all of the members of this House that they not support this amendment. Give Albertans the freedom of choice.

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Chair, I have to say that the comments by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, if they weren't so ridiculous, would be funny.

But in terms of choice he says that with this \$4,000 limit now we've given people choice. Now, that would imply that currently that choice doesn't exist.

An Hon. Member: Does it?

Dr. Starke: Well, I think it does. That choice certainly exists, and in fact that choice is broader now than it will be under the proposed bill.

I want to be very clear. I said this yesterday, but perhaps some folks have short memories. We were in favour when it was moved last year to eliminate corporate and union donations, and we voted in favour of that. We are similarly in favour of a reduction in donations to political parties. We can debate here whether that number should be \$4,000 or \$5,000 or \$1,000, but \$4,000 is the number that's been landed on.

This notion, somehow, that the \$4,000 as an aggregate limit and that that is somehow superior to the choice that is available now is of course totally ridiculous. Currently you have the choice of giving up to \$15,000, as was stated, to a political party. Now, that number is too high, and that number should be reduced, and it will be. That's a good thing.

You also have the choice of giving up to \$1,000 to your constituency association. But now we have the choice of giving up to \$4,000 to that constituency association, which is interesting for a party that professes to want to get big money out of politics. I'm going to come back to the calculations that the Member for Calgary-Elbow referenced before.

The third thing you have the choice on is to support a nomination candidate. You have the choice to do it, and it is not included with any restriction. You have the choice of giving up to an unlimited amount to a leadership candidate because in fact there are no current limits to contributions to leadership candidates. Nomination contests are not even included under the electoral financing act. So, Mr. Chair, to suggest that somehow this \$4,000 limit enhances choice is ludicrous, totally, completely ludicrous.

What this \$4,000 limit does do – and this was pointed out in the course of the committee debate. I am surprised that the hon. member has completely forgotten about this aspect of debate, but it was pointed out that even at the \$70,000 spending limit, that was at one point the spot on the dartboard that the dart hit when they were trying to decide on a limit, when that was the number, we pointed out that over a four-year cycle it would only require five donors to completely bankroll a \$70,000 campaign. We pointed this out.

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

It was interesting because at that time the members of the committee said: "Oh my word, that's a flaw. That's something we didn't see. That's something we didn't realize. Oh my goodness, that's a problem." So within the next meeting all of a sudden, then, came this carve-out, this \$1,000 carve-out, actually very similar to what the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow's amendment is contemplating. That meant that even at the \$70,000 level and even over a four-year cycle you needed a lot more donors to come up with enough money to finance a campaign.

But let's be very clear. Under this piece of legislation somebody who wishes to run for office and have a \$50,000 campaign bankrolled can do it with the contributions from three people over the course of a four-year election cycle. Three people. If you're wanting to get rid of big money and the influence of wealth, I would suggest that this is exactly the opposite of doing that.

You know, to be honest, I think that the strategy of having constituency associations do fundraisers and solicit campaign donations and solicit donations on a year-to-year basis, something which, based on the filings of the various constituency associations of the New Democratic Party, doesn't happen on that side but certainly happens over here, that whole process can be eliminated. Well, that won't create too much of a ripple on that side of the House because it's not happening now, but it certainly happens on this side of the House. It is a way for us to engage with constituents. The idea is not so much to have a fundraiser. A lot of the time we

end up calling them friend-raisers because we don't raise that much money, but we just have a lot of fun doing it.

11:00

I was up in Grande Prairie earlier this year and for the first time in my life went to a skeet shooting fundraiser. It was sponsored by my colleague the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Cooper: Pull.

Dr. Starke: Pull. Exactly.

The only thing I accomplished that day was a big bruise on my shoulder. I did blast a few targets, though. But it was fun. I don't know what we raised. What did we raise? Not a lot of money. But we had a lot of fun. Certainly, I think . . . [interjections] We'll have to work on the aim part of things.

All joking aside, what we have now is a scenario with a \$50,000 limit. Basically when you're elected, you go to three people, three people who are well heeled. You know, \$4,000. I mean, it used to be \$15,000. Four thousand dollars. You can go to them and say: I want you and you and you to give our constituency association \$4,000 per year for the next four years. So they're making a commitment of \$16,000 over the course of the four-year period. Those three \$16,000 contributions will aggregate out to \$48,000 and will completely bankroll the campaign in that four-year election cycle.

You know, I guess I should be happy with that because it's going to make life in the constituency association a whole lot easier. All you really need to do is find three people who are reasonably wealthy and can afford to give \$4,000 a year.

Mr. Cooper: I've already found three.

Dr. Starke: Good for you. Perhaps they have friends and relatives in Vermilion-Lloydminster. That would be lovely. I'm not sure that they would bankroll me, but if they bankroll you, that's great.

The bottom line, Madam Chair, is that it's completely opposite to the goal of what this government is saying that it's trying to do. It's allowing a small group of relatively wealthy people to have undue influence over candidates.

An Hon. Member: Let's put big money back into politics.

Dr. Starke: Let's put big money back into politics. That's exactly what this does. It puts big money back into politics, so it completely defeats the purpose of the bill.

An Hon. Member: What was the old limit?

Dr. Starke: The old limit was \$1,000.

Mr. Clark: How many times is \$4,000? More than quadrupled.

Dr. Starke: Well, quadruple it seems to me. Yeah. Four hundred per cent.

Madam Chair, this amendment addresses that. This amendment is very similar to something that was discussed at committee and was approved at committee after considerable debate. I think most people will call it the bucket debate because we talked about different envelopes or buckets for donations to go into. And there is a rationale behind that. At least at the committee . . . [interjection] I see that my friend from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has found his voice once again. I'm delighted to hear that.

At least at committee the basic logic behind that was able to be understood by members of the committee. They saw the logic even when it was at the \$70,000 threshold and you needed five friends.

Now you only need three friends. Three friends will bankroll your entire campaign.

You know, I really think that when you look at this, it's completely counter. And to suggest that this is all in the name of choice and that somehow choice is now enhanced over what it was before is, of course, ridiculous. The idea that this \$4,000 limit, a quadrupling of the previous limit of contributions to constituency associations, is somehow getting big money out of politics, that that is somehow reducing the influence of a certain specific small number of wealthy individuals on elected officials is patently untrue. Completely untrue.

If in fact this bill passes, I will be on the lookout to find three well-heeled friends that will completely obviate the need for my constituency association to do any fundraising at all for the next election because it will simply . . . [interjection] Excellent. Excellent. All we need to do is find those three people that are prepared to bankroll the constituency. [interjections] I may be part of the way there already.

Madam Chair, it just points out the flaw here. My colleague the Member for Calgary-Elbow, who sat through the bucket debate, who was there as well and heard the arguments and saw members of the government see the basic flaw in the one-size-fits-all approach, has proposed a rational and reasonable amendment to correct this flaw. That's our job. As legislators we should be interested in crafting better legislation that doesn't create flaws, that doesn't create unintended consequences.

Clearly there's an unintended consequence here. Three people can bankroll a \$50,000 campaign. Now, if you're comfortable with that over there, if you're good with that, then vote this down – then absolutely vote this down – but we'll know that members of the NDP caucus are just fine with three individuals having that much sway over their elected official because of three individuals that the elected official, the MLA, is beholden to for having essentially bankrolled their entire election campaign. Unbelievable.

So, Madam Chair, I certainly concur with this. I am quite stunned, actually, that the government members can't see that this amendment solves the same flaw that was there when we discussed this in the dog days of summer, in August and September. Now we have a situation where the flaw is right back into the legislation, and that's unfortunate. I would encourage members to vote for this reasonable and rational amendment on behalf of the member.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A6? The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair. I just want to maybe make a few comments with respect to this. You know, the hon. members opposite have argued that a \$4,000 donation is big money. Well, you know, the previous legislation of the former government, of which the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster was a member, had in an election year a donation limit of \$30,000. Not only did they have \$30,000 as a donation, but they allowed, in fact they encouraged, in fact they absolutely depended upon donations of a very significant amount of money coming from their corporate friends.

Of course, we got rid of that, and they were shamed into voting for that bill because originally their leader was not going to support that bill. Eventually something happened inside their caucus, and they decided that they had to support it, so they did, and good for them. Better late than never. A deathbed conversion I think you might call it, Madam Chair.

You know, now they're claiming that a \$4,000 donation is big money. Well, I beg to differ. The fact that we've lowered the spending limits in individual constituencies to \$50,000 does not suddenly proportionally make \$4,000 become a really big money donation. They've made a great deal about, well, how a handful of people could hypothetically and theoretically fund a campaign if they gave the full amount, four people or three people over four consecutive years giving the amount, and then this is a huge, huge problem in their minds. In actual practice, Madam Chair, that is very, very likely to not occur or, if it does occur, to be a very rare event.

The fact of the matter is that the real issue is reducing the amount that can be donated from \$30,000 to \$4,000 and putting spending limits on campaigns, something that's never happened in this province before. Under 42 years of Conservative rule that's never, never happened. Well, it's happening now.

Now, I just want to suggest that, in fact, this amendment is attempting to tell donors, just to reiterate in case we missed it, that they're only allowed now in a year to donate a total of \$4,000 for everything. They can divide it up however they wish. It's a bit like – I don't know – if you've ever been in any of those meetings where you get to make decisions by putting little dots on things that they hang up on the wall. I'm sure we've all been subjected to that.

11:10

An Hon. Member: Dot-mocracy.

Mr. Mason: Dot-ocracy. It's going too far to call it a nightmare.

Anyway, this is a bit like that. They can put one dot here and another dot here and another dot there. It could be a leadership campaign, a nomination meeting, the actual election, to the central party, or to an individual candidate. They can put their dots wherever they want, and they can put all their dots on one thing if they want. As much as I don't like being subjected to a dot-ocracy procedure, the fact of the matter is that it maximizes the choice available, Madam Chair, to individuals.

What they want to do, for some reason of their own devising, is to limit the ability of individuals to decide how their relatively small \$4,000 will be allocated. They want to take away that choice from those people and say: you can only give \$1,000 to this constituency. I don't really understand why. The argument that they're making that, you know, three people could finance this is a bogus argument and makes no sense, Madam Chair.

Mr. Cooper: Point of order.

Mr. Mason: A point of order? Madam Chair, I can save you a lot of trouble. Saying "bogus" is not a problem.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, speak to the point of order first.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair. I know that it's late, but I am pretty certain that if I had my list of unparliamentary language in front of me, we would see on numerous occasions where the word "bogus" has been ruled to be unparliamentary. It would be easy – easy – if the member would just apologize and withdraw.

Mr. Mason: Madam Chair, that's very unlikely to happen. He's got no citations, and it's not unparliamentary.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, it is getting late. I know we are really engaged in this debate, but if we could please listen to the speaker, if we could just try to keep the decorum in the House so that we can move on.

The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Madam Chair, thank you very much. With that, I'll conclude my remarks, and I will move that the committee rise and report progress.

[Motion carried]

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

Mr. Rosendahl: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 35. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Do you concur with the report? Those in favour, say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed, say no. So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. In light of the hour and the enjoyable debate this evening I will move that we adjourn until 9 o'clock tomorrow morning.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:15 p.m.]

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