



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, May 3, 2017

Day 27

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature

Third Session

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van Dijken, Glenn, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock (W)
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Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (ND)
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New Democrat: 55

Wildrose: 22

Progressive Conservative: 8

Alberta Liberal: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 3, 2017

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

I would just remind the House that a year ago today some very tragic events happened in our province. I know that each and every one of you share and appreciate the strength that those good people have had and continue to have.

Thank you. Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Trade.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three state senators representing the Council of State Governments – West, or CSG – West, of which Alberta is an associate member. They are Montana Senator Sue Malek, Washington State Senator Sam Hunt, and Idaho Senator Bart Davis. They are accompanied by Martha Castañeda, program manager for CSG – West.

Mr. Speaker, CSG – West is a regional multilateral forum that brings together legislators and government leaders from 13 states as well as a number of U.S. protectorates. Alberta first became a member in 2000, and we appreciate the opportunity CSG – West offers to meet face to face with state lawmakers of our largest trading partner. The CSG – West region is an economic powerhouse, with a combined annual GDP of more than \$4 trillion. This economic activity drives job creation on both sides of the border. In fact, there are 172,000 jobs created in the CSG – West region as a result of U.S. merchandise and service exports to Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, we welcome the visit of senators Malek, Davis, and Hunt. It's a chance to build on our important trade relationship with the United States. I would ask all members of the Assembly to give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: Welcome, neighbours.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you several groups from River Valley school in my hometown of Sundre. I believe that there are three classrooms here today. With them are a lot of chaperones. I will try not to name them all, but there are two chaperones that I want to briefly mention. The first is His Worship Terry Leslie, who is no stranger to this Assembly. I have introduced him here before. He is the mayor of Sundre, but today I want to introduce him in his old capacity, which is as an educator in the community of Sundre. In fact, he was a teacher of the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills for a while, so if you're looking for some advice on how to keep the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills under control, His Worship may have some advice. With him, of course, is the deputy mayor of Sundre, Chris Vardas, and several chaperones from River Valley school.

I will also briefly mention that River Valley school is the school that all of my children are attending or have attended. I'm just happy to see that we have so many people from home here today,

and I'd ask that they all rise – stand on up – and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Welcome. There might be mixed opinion in this House as to how well you did at the teaching job.

Are there any other school groups today, hon. members?

Seeing and hearing none, the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose. I'd ask them to rise as I say their names: board of directors secretary, Michelle Pederson; Amateur Drag King 2014 Angelo Mercy; Miss Mary Christmas 2016 GiGi Gaynor; Imperial Crown Prince XLI Jack N. Ginger; Imperial Crown Princess XLI Morgen Fair; president of the board, Rob Browatzke; Majesty Emperor XLI Bull Dozr; and Majesty Empress XLI Ruby Hymen. I'd like to thank them for their dedication and support to our community and the fundraising they do to support charities and LGBTQ-plus organizations here in Edmonton and around the province. I'd ask them to now receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Welcome.

The hon. Minister of Indigenous Relations.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today to introduce to you three constituents who live in the wonderful riding of Edmonton-Rutherford. Not only do they call Edmonton-Rutherford their home, but they have also established two thriving businesses there. The Stone and Wheel Pizzeria and Square 1 Coffee have a notable presence in the riding, initially for serving, of course, the adjacent neighbourhoods delicious food and coffee, but they also have committed themselves to fostering community spirit and hosting a variety of events in the community and collaborating with the local community leagues in their area. I can truly testify that my staff and I enjoy attending at their businesses and meeting with them on a regular basis. I'd like to personally congratulate Jonathon, Brandy, and Sarah Brozny for having their successful businesses, and I'd ask them – they have already risen – to receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: Welcome.

Hon. members, are there any other guests today? Calgary-Hays.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Lindsey Marofke and her parents, Sandy and Don Van Tetering. Lindsey's daughter Greta is three years old and is currently fighting her second battle with liver cancer. In her three years Greta has endured many rounds of chemotherapy, multiple surgeries, and has had 70 per cent of her liver removed. She needs a liver transplant, which is not available in Alberta. Greta has to travel to Cincinnati to receive this life-saving operation, which is currently not funded. The brave little girl's family is here, and I would ask her mom and grandparents to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: Welcome.

Members' Statements

Oil Sands Advisory Group Co-chair

Mr. Barnes: This NDP government has spent two years claiming that they're doing what Albertans want. They say that young people who can't find work want a carbon tax, they say that business

owners in the red want to double their labour costs, they say that young families struggling to keep a roof over their heads want higher personal taxes, and they say that energy companies who are leaving in droves want ideological caps on production. They're wrong. The evidence is everywhere. Just go out and actually speak to the families and businesses who are suffering.

No part of this NDP government is more ideological or out of touch than the extremists on the Premier's oil sands advisory group, particularly Tzeporah Berman. Ms Berman is the Premier's top adviser on the oil sands or, as she calls them, the tar sands and even Mordor. She's been working around the clock to kill Kinder Morgan and Keystone XL, and she just officially endorsed the B.C. NDP's plan to cripple Alberta's economy. To make matters worse, today we learned that the taxpayers of this province have paid her \$23,000. This NDP government is actually subsidizing the killing of pipelines with taxpayers' money, paying Ms Berman while she works to elect the B.C. NDP, and our Premier is complicit. Shame on them.

I can think of only one positive to Ms Berman being here. The fact that she hasn't been fired tells Albertans everything they need to know about this government. From the Education minister, who chanted, "No new approvals," to the Environment minister, who helped pen a how-to guide on sabotaging pipelines, this government truly doesn't want pipelines to succeed and doesn't want our energy industry to thrive. If they did, they would have shown Ms Berman the door a long, long time ago. Fortunately, Albertans will soon get what they want, to fire this NDP government and restore the Alberta advantage.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs

1:40 Fort McMurray Wildfire Anniversary

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak about a difficult topic that is still fresh in the minds of Albertans and will be for many years to come. One year ago today the world watched as more than 90,000 residents of Fort McMurray, including my family and friends, were forced to flee their homes as a massive wildfire quickly descended on their community. In that moment we learned just what Albertans are made of, and I would like to extend my gratitude and the gratitude of this government and the entire province to those who assisted the community.

I would like to thank the first responders, who fought in the few short days leading up to the evacuation to contain the fire as it broke. Individuals like Dave Mulock and firefighter brothers Scott and Kent Jennings were in the thick of the fire from the beginning. Once it was clear that evacuation was necessary, first responders, many of whom were volunteers, ensured that residents were removed from danger and then remained in the city and forest to fight the fire and protect infrastructure and property. We owe them all a great deal of gratitude and appreciation for their incredible hard work.

I would also like to thank the numerous individuals like the social workers and other front-line service providers who continue to work with the community as Fort McMurray rebuilds. The work you do and have done so far is no small task. Know that the province and this government is here to support you all as you recover and rebuild.

I would also like to thank Albertans, who came out in support of their neighbours by making donations, taking evacuees in, and volunteering at evacuation centres. The generosity and selflessness displayed on May 3 and in the following weeks was nothing short of amazing.

Finally, I would like to thank our fellow Canadians, who donated almost \$200 million to the Red Cross to support residents, businesses, and community groups.

Mr. Speaker, we know there is still much to be done as Fort McMurray rebuilds, but I invite all members to reflect on all that there is to be grateful for and to offer thanks, especially to our first responders and front-line service workers who ensured that one year ago today an entire city was evacuated.

Thank you.

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

Industry Environmental Initiatives

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to share with you some of the innovative ways of how companies in my constituency of Grande Prairie-Wapiti are reducing their carbon footprint. The Weyerhaeuser pulp mill is one of the biggest electricity users in our region, but now they generate 140 megawatts of green energy, which is enough to power not just their own project but also to add 25 megawatts to Alberta's grid.

Canfor's green biomass cogeneration facility provides 18 megawatts of renewable electricity for their Grande Prairie sawmill and to the provincial grid. They not only use their own wood waste but also use wood waste from other forest producers in the region. Canfor strives for self-sufficiency of their mills by making smart investments to reduce their dependence on natural gas and using wood residues to dry lumber and heat their facilities.

Aquatera's bioreactor landfill gas-to-energy project is reducing greenhouse gas emissions by capturing methane gas from their decomposing landfill waste. This project alone is reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 63,000 tonnes per year, or the equivalent of taking 14,000 vehicles off the road. Aquatera is producing 15 million kilowatt hours, which is enough electricity to power 14,000 homes per year, and 33,000 gigajoules of heat annually, or enough to heat 200 homes.

Mr. Speaker, companies like Weyerhaeuser, Canfor, and Aquatera in my constituency have done way more on their own to reduce Alberta's carbon footprint than this government's carbon tax and light bulb handouts.

Thank you.

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

Bullying in the Workplace

Mr. Sucha: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a teenager I spent every Saturday morning watching Stampede Wrestling from the old Ogden Legion hall and hearing fabulous commentary from a young man named Mauro Ranallo. He was a big part of the appeal of this revitalized promotion, so I was more than excited when I heard this Canadian commentator make his debut on WWE SmackDown over a year ago. This great commentator, with ties to Calgary, added an extra flair to an already exciting product.

However, my thrill soon turned to disappointment because of his absence from WrestleMania this year. At first it was reported as a personal challenge, but the situation has now led to many media and online allegations around workplace bullying in the WWE. It appears now that Ranallo dealt with substantial hazing and abuse from co-workers in this promotion. More people have since come forward talking about the culture in the company and the fear of one losing their job should they come forward.

The WWE has been a leader in many things from substance abuse control to charitable work. Last year, when I was attending the Special Olympics awards lunch, the director of marketing and

communications for the Olympics told me that the WWE has been a tremendous partner and a huge support to their Olympians. They are also an employer to many Albertans, including Calgarians Natalya Neidhart, Tyson Kidd, and the number one contender for the WWE title, Jinder Mahal.

I have spoken to many people involved in the wrestling business like Alberta's Prairie Wrestling Alliance, and they have assured me that this conduct is unacceptable and that it should not occur and that they would not tolerate it in their organization. When events like these happen, it is an important reminder that we must stand up to workplace bullying and violence and harassment. Hazing is not okay.

Our government has demonstrated leadership on this front, and when the WWE comes to Edmonton on June 16, I would be happy to introduce them to some of the policy-makers who have shown leadership on this matter, including members like the Member for Calgary-Klein, who had a private member's bill on this issue. We should all work together to smack down bullying in the workplace, no matter where it happens.

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

National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week

Ms Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. April 23 to 29 was National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week, which is dedicated to encouraging conversations about organ donor practices. The discussion about donating organs and tissues can be a difficult conversation to have, but it is the only way to ensure that your wishes are known. The gift of life is the greatest thing we have been given, and to pass that along to someone is an amazing opportunity. Being an organ donor takes courage and empathy, but it's a small gesture that can make a huge impact in the lives of many others. A donor can save up to eight lives and enhance the lives of 80 others through tissue donation. Donation programs can save and improve the lives of others who otherwise wouldn't have a second chance.

Historically Canada has one of the worst organ donor rates, and Alberta has been the worst province, but awareness programs like ultimategiftalberta.ca are making a difference. Since its launch three years ago more than 350,000 Albertans have registered. This is a great step in the right direction, but I think we can build on this momentum. Let's continue to look at the possibilities that are created through organ donation, and let's recognize that it can be a great thing for a family or individual in need. As just one example, my husband will get a new cornea because of this initiative.

I implore my colleagues in this House and all Albertans to consider starting a discussion about donating organs and tissues in the hopes that more lives are saved in the future. We should all extend our warmest thanks to the families who have made the difficult decision to donate a loved one's organs and tissues in order to make someone else's life better.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Anniversary

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A year ago today the Premier called the Leader of the Official Opposition a fearmonger simply because he had asked a question about the cancellation of water bomber contracts during one of the driest springs on record. That very afternoon, while the leader was asking his questions, unknown to any of us, his neighbourhood, his home, and his city were on fire.

May 3, 2016, saw the beginning of the largest mass evacuation in Alberta's history. A city of over 80,000 was forced to flee at a moment's notice. Entire families, not even allowed to go home and grab essentials, headed down highway 63, some north but mostly to the south.

The rest of Alberta responded. In Lac La Biche, Boyle, Athabasca, and Grassland people immediately realized that those fleeing would not have had time to stop for fuel, water, and supplies. While four lanes of traffic headed south, a convoy of regular Albertans headed north, at their own expense, hauling gasoline, diesel, fresh water, and food to help those that were stranded along the highway and to supply the first responders and firefighters, who had stayed behind to battle the inferno.

Entire communities opened their doors and their hearts and set up evacuation centres for the thousands of individuals, families, and even their pets. Donations poured in from all over the province to the point of overabundance. Volunteer fire departments from communities all over Alberta headed north to assist fellow Albertans in their time of need. I'm very proud of the generosity shown, especially by the great people in the community of Lac La Biche, who saw the immediate need and dropped everything to help out.

1:50

To all the volunteers, firefighters, and first responders that put their own lives on hold and at risk: the community of Fort McMurray and our province owes you a great debt, and we thank you. One thing we have learned over the last year and something I have always known: Albertans are very generous and resilient. Alberta and Fort McMurray will survive this tragic event, and we will even survive another two years of NDP government.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Deaths of Children and Caregivers

Mr. Cooper: A government is often judged by how it treats the most vulnerable, and there are few as vulnerable as the children who are placed into the care of the province. When a child dies in care, it is a devastating tragedy, and we need to balance transparency with family privacy. It was shocking to hear that bureaucrats were pushing for publication bans to not be discussed at the child death review panel. Will the minister explain to Albertans how the refusal to discuss this very important topic is accountable to victims that have died in care?

The Speaker: The Associate Minister of Health.

Ms Payne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the very important question. Obviously, it is a great tragedy when any child dies, particularly the ones that are entrusted to the care of us as a province. We would like to thank all sides of the House for putting Alberta's vulnerable children first in doing this important work.

The first part of the work of the panel has wrapped up. Investigations and considerations around the publication ban, as highlighted by the member opposite, will be done in phase 2 of this panel's very important work.

Mr. Cooper: One little girl who was failed by the system was Serenity. The death of any child is an absolute tragedy, but when it is the result of violence, it's a crime. I can't help but compare the tragic death of Serenity to the little 19-month-old boy who was found outside of a church in Edmonton in April. Both of these

children were covered in bruises at the time of their death, but only one case has seen charges laid. Why is justice more available and moved upon more swiftly for children not in the care of this province?

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

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, both these cases were incredibly difficult for the public, for this government, and I think for all members of this House. Ultimately, these decisions are made by the investigating body, who is the RCMP. I do believe that they take their responsibility to all children and to all communities to keep them safe very, very seriously. You know, we will have to await the outcomes of their investigations.

Mr. Cooper: It seems like one case is going to be held accountable and the other is getting swept away.

Just as we need to be doing more for our most vulnerable, we also need to ensure that those who care for the most vulnerable have the tools that they need. That includes caregivers who put themselves in situations that can be dangerous. We've seen the most extreme examples of what can happen when a worker is alone, like the tragic death of Valerie Wolski and the traumatic attack of Heather Vanderzee. What concrete steps have been taken, not what have you talked about but have been taken, to ensure that what happened . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
The Associate Minister of Health.

Ms Payne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Obviously, these are very concerning cases. Every worker, wherever they work in our province, has the right to come home safely at the end of the day, and that is why our government has worked in collaboration with members across the way on the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention as well as the work that we're undertaking within the departments to ensure that people's safety comes first as well as to ensure that the rights of all Albertans are protected.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Chestermere-Rocky View.

Mathematics Curriculum and Assessment

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you. The Minister of Education has announced a large-scale curriculum review that is going to span up to six years and will reportedly offer more chances for consultation although the minister will not share who is involved in the working groups. A student in kindergarten now will be halfway to graduation by the time this review is complete if it's done on time. Parents just want common-sense solutions to common-sense problems. They're tired of wishy-washy methods, bad testing practices, and indecipherable report cards. The math section of the review is critically important. How long will Albertans have to wait till they see the results?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you so much for the question. Yes, we are undertaking a very comprehensive curriculum review because it was long past due. Some of our curricula were more than 30 years old. Certainly, during the six-year process of building curricula, it doesn't mean that the best practices that we find along the way will not be implemented immediately. For example, I have put in a no-calculator portion into the grade 9 PAT exams, and I've reinstated the written portion of the math 30 exam. So whatever best practices we have, we will use immediately to improve numeracy, basic math skills, and . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mrs. Aheer: While the NDP curriculum survey questions were with a bunch of sort of meaningless buzzwords, one message did manage to break through: Albertans are frustrated about math scores and outcomes for our students. The only reason that we can track performance is because of standardized testing. Without these tests parents are given less information on top of increasingly fuzzy standards for report cards, that are handed out each year. Premier, the student learning assessment model is failing students. Will the government reverse their decision and reinstate provincial achievement tests for grade 3 students?

Mr. Eggen: Well, certainly, Mr. Speaker, we have been working hard together with curriculum and assessment to build a stronger system and to make sure we have accountability every step of the way. You know, the best way by which to do that is to make sure that you fund education properly, which is something that our government has chosen to do. You can't do that by cutting. You can't have it both ways. We have chosen the way to make life better for Alberta's children.

Mrs. Aheer: Well, the mathematics review prepared for the Education minister and the Premier last fall recommended that there should be "an increased availability and access to high-quality professional development and training opportunities specific to the teaching of Mathematics." In December the NDP announced a math bursary program for teachers to support further postsecondary courses in math and that the details of the program were to be finalized. We asked about this program in estimates, and we found out that the funding fell into the large abyss line item 2.7 with no further details, so to the minister: what are the details, how many teachers are planning to participate, and how many teachers are enough?

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, we believe that ongoing training for teachers and for new emerging teachers is very important. That's why I've been working with postsecondary institutions to set up specific math training programs, especially for division 1 student teachers, because we believe that we must ensure the very best quality. We have a very high standard of education here in the province of Alberta, and as long as you have a strong New Democratic government here, it'll continue to grow and become stronger every step of the way.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Anniversary

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, a year ago today QP didn't start out very well. The Premier called the Leader of the Official Opposition a fearmonger when he questioned cancelling water bomber contracts during the driest spring on record. Luckily, Albertans did their best to respond to the fires that tore through Fort McMurray. To the firefighters, first responders, volunteers, and even this government: a heartfelt thank you to everyone that worked so hard to protect Fort McMurray. Can the Premier update this House and all Albertans on the progress of the rebuild and recovery in Fort McMurray?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today certainly is a day of remembrance for all of us in this province. We are making the most of a very difficult time in Alberta's most tragic natural disaster and indeed in Canadian history. We're marking the bravery and mourning the loss of two Albertans. Many homes were lost, and lives were changed forever. In tough times like this, people expect their government to stand with them, and that's exactly what is happening today in Fort McMurray and every day as the recovery continues.

Mr. Hanson: Mr. Speaker, a year ago today there was a massive, out-of-control fire within a stone's throw of a major community, yet no special efforts were being made to allocate additional resources to the fire in the days leading up to the evacuation. You would think we would have learned something from the disaster at Slave Lake. You would think that we would have implemented lessons learned from that fire. To the Premier: has the policy changed so that we have as a first priority the protection of our northern and remote communities?

2:00

Ms Hoffman: I am so proud of the work the firefighters, including those who were in the best position to make the lead decisions about recovery, were making on that day, a year ago today, and on the days leading up to it and on the days that followed as well, Mr. Speaker. I have to say that the support has been well received by the mayor of the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, who said:

We are pleased that the Government of Alberta has agreed to provide this much-needed support to [residents of the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo]. We appreciate the Province's continued assistance as we navigate the impacts of the 2016 wildfire and work towards long-term recovery.

The Speaker: Second supplemental.

Mr. Hanson: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's been a year. Fort McMurray is still struggling, yet later today, on the anniversary of the largest mass evacuation in Alberta's history, this government will be debating a bill that kicks Fort McMurray in the teeth again. Fortunately, Fort McMurray has shown that it is very resilient. Can anyone over there tell me what policies have changed so that next time a forest fire starts near a town or city, that community will be better protected?

Ms Hoffman: I have to say how disappointed I am by the disrespect that's coming from that side of the House towards both this government as well as those who worked diligently to make sure that families had the opportunities to be well received and supported through the evacuation, Mr. Speaker. [interjections]

The Speaker: Quiet, please.

Ms Hoffman: Even the Leader of the Official Opposition, that member's leader, has commended the Premier for her leadership and co-operation at a time of unifying us to stand up for Albertans in an unparalleled challenge for this community, Mr. Speaker. We continue to move forward in protecting Albertans in Fort McMurray and in all parts of the province, and I'm proud to do so.

The Speaker: I do this as a general oversight, hon. members. We've talked about this many times, but use of certain words which depict violence such as "kicking in the teeth" ought to be avoided in this House. There are clearly other words that are used, but I would ask that we avoid use of that kind of language.

The leader of the third party.

Out-of-country Health Care Funding

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last November I rose in the House to acknowledge and honour the brave fight that well over 160 Alberta families will wage annually when they hear the word that their child has cancer. Today I introduced you to Lindsey Marofke, whose three-year-old daughter, Greta, is fighting for her life. While she has been afforded the very best care we have in Alberta by oncologists at the Alberta Children's hospital, her parents now have to take that fight to Cincinnati to get the life-saving treatment and liver transplant that she needs to survive. To the Minister of Health: why has this government not done more to date to help pay for wee Greta to get this liver transplant?

Ms Hoffman: Our hearts and thoughts go out to Greta and her family during this incredibly difficult time. I want to thank my colleague the Member for Calgary-North West for meeting with the family and bringing their heartbreaking situation to my attention. My office has also reached out to the family, as has the department, to ensure that they are aware of options that are available to them. Of course, this is a very tragic situation, a very difficult one, and we continue to provide options, including information about other medical opinions that might be available to the family. We'll work with them to ensure they know what options are available to them. This is, of course, very difficult, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Greta needs an operation, unfortunately, not pamphlets.

Greta's doctor in Cincinnati believes she has a good chance of survival with this transplant, which is not available in Canada. On Friday she was placed on the transplant waiting list, but it will cost this family a million U.S. dollars in order to get the surgery done using a live donor and thereby pushing the surgical procedure and her treatment ahead of the slow pace of progress for children with hepatoblastoma. To the Minister of Health: do you think it's okay for her parents and grandparents to risk bankruptcy and rely on sympathetic Albertans to fund raise for Greta's transplant?

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.
The Deputy Premier.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker. Of course, as I've said previously and in other situations, it's incredibly important for health professionals to be making these decisions. That's why there is a committee of physicians, the Out-of-country Health Services Committee, which is comprised of physicians that review these specific circumstances. We've talked with the family about options that might continue to be available. I have to say that I understand the desire to do everything possible to try to create an opportunity to save a child's life – I would probably do the exact same thing the parents are doing – but we need to make sure that physicians are the ones driving these decisions, and we have the physicians in place that do that. Again, we'll work with the family to consider other options.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. McIver: Mr. Speaker, it takes the will for the government to do the right thing. There are rules. They don't have to be written in stone. The Health minister could give permission to fund the surgery and thereby give Greta a chance at life. Without the surgery there is little hope except for a miracle, and there is no time for miracles. We need the government to act. Let's get our priorities

straight. To the minister. You have the authority. Will you promise to meet with Greta's mum today, and will you make everybody's day by promising to fund this life-saving surgery?

The Speaker: The Deputy Premier.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a politician I respect that doctors must make treatment decisions that sometimes are very difficult based on effectiveness for specific patients on a case-by-case basis. The Out-of-country Health Services Committee is an arm's-length committee comprised, again, of physician experts. My office has been in contact, as has my MLA colleague. Of course I'd be willing to meet with the family. We will continue to provide support to them. Again, thank you to my colleague from Calgary-North West for her work to make sure that this family is supported.

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

Provincial Credit Rating and Fiscal Policies

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When Alberta borrows money, the amount we pay to borrow is based on our credit rating, which is determined by how risky it is to do business with Alberta. We used to have the best credit rating in the country, but thanks to decisions made by this government, our credit rating has dropped, and it costs Albertans more to borrow money. Debt-servicing costs are already forecast to be \$2.3 billion a year, and these interest payments will not go to front-line health care, to kids in the classroom, or to helping our most vulnerable neighbours. To the Minister of Finance: when Alberta suffers our next credit-rating downgrade, how much more will it cost Albertans?

Mr. Ceci: Well, thank you very much for asking about the meetings that took place on Monday down in Toronto. Those meetings were productive, Mr. Speaker. We're choosing to bring down the deficit thoughtfully and prudently. We had a choice with Budget 2017. We ensured that we invested in infrastructure, we protected services, and we ensured that teachers were in classrooms and that nurses were in hospitals. Our budget, TD Economics says, will be stimulative in nature, and we will grow the most of any province, by 2.6 per cent, in 2017. That is the message I took down to Toronto. That is the message credit agencies and investors heard from me.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mr. Clark: Mr. Speaker, Alberta has relied for far too long on the price of oil to save our budget bacon. What do credit-rating agencies have to say about the NDP's oil price forecasts? They say that they are wildly optimistic. They say that the government's oil forecasts are at the upper end of or above agency forecasts, so unless the NDP gets incredibly lucky, our deficit will be higher than planned yet again. To the Minister of Finance: what happens if your forecasts are wrong?

Mr. Ceci: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4 to adjust our budget, and we have done that in the past. It's important for us to go to Toronto to talk to people – investors, credit-rating agencies, economists – to ensure they know the full story of the plan we have, which is a plan to clearly balance in 2024 by bringing down our spending to the point of inflation plus growth. That's our commitment. That's what I shared with them.

Mr. Clark: The minister shared a plan with credit-rating agencies. I hope he shares it with the House.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Party has long argued that our province needs to get off the resource revenue roller coaster. The Alberta Party's pathway to prosperity plan would cap royalty revenues at \$3 billion a year for operations, with the rest going into debt repayment, infrastructure spending, and the heritage fund. If by some miracle oil exceeds expectations, I want to know what the government is going to do with the money. Again to the Minister of Finance: if you get lucky, what are your plans? Will spending skyrocket, or do you have any real plan to get Alberta off the resource revenue roller coaster?

Mr. Ceci: Thank you again for the question. I'd note that you probably have the only shadow budget available of all this group. Mr. Speaker, we have a plan. That plan is to diversify our economy. Our economy is showing green shoots already. We're showing that the petrochemical diversification program had great uptake. We will get investment. We will diversify our economy. Our Economic Development and Trade minister was in China, and that country will be able to support the exports that we want to send there. There will be diversification. That's our plan.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

2:10 Industrial Heartland Transportation Infrastructure

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The sweet area northeast of Edmonton known as the Industrial Heartland is a growing centre for industrial investment. It is home to 40 companies, several of them with international reach. Given that this region's growth has resulted in increased traffic volume, to the Minister of Transportation: what have you done to ensure improved road infrastructure in this area?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and of Transportation.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for her question. As part of our \$29.5 billion capital plan Transportation is investing more than \$5 billion in provincial highway networks to put Albertans back to work, connect communities, and improve safety and travel on our highways. That includes the twinning of the highway 15 bridge over the North Saskatchewan River into Fort Saskatchewan, and it will support economic development in the Industrial Heartland. We're also making significant intersection improvements at highways 15, 37, and 825 as well as at highways 28 and 37.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

First supplemental.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the entire Industrial Heartland area requires road infrastructure supports now and into the future, to the Minister of Transportation: how are you determining the best way to manage growth in this area?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much for the question, Mr. Speaker. To proactively address these concerns, we have three studies under way. These include a study of the northeast river crossing; a provincial high-load corridor study, which is critical to support the heavy industry in our province, including in the Industrial Heartland; and a study for the entire northeast sector. We're going to be developing long-term infrastructure and developing a plan for

the Industrial Heartland, with a focus on making life better and to build our economy and create jobs for Albertans.

The Speaker: Second supplemental.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that some proposed long-term projects could result in further loss of valuable agricultural land which produces some of the province's highest quality produce, to the Minister of Transportation: what steps are you taking to ensure this land is protected and will continue to thrive as it is an important resource?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for the question. We know that there is extremely valuable farmland northeast of Edmonton. It's a very special area with its own microclimate that produces all sorts of market garden products, so I had the study revised, the terms of reference, to require that there would be environmental sustainability and that protection of prime agricultural land will be included in the terms of reference of the study.

Provincial Credit Rating and Fiscal Policies

(continued)

Mr. Fildebrandt: Mr. Speaker, before we begin, I'd like to point out that I've sent you my questions written in advance.

I'd like to welcome the Minister of Finance back from Toronto, where he was meeting with credit-rating agencies, who are rightly concerned with the ability of the minister to competently do his job. But the minister must not have done his homework because they sent him away, asking for more information to determine if Alberta will face yet another credit downgrade. What information that wasn't in the budget did they ask for, and will the minister disclose it to Albertans?

The Speaker: Thank you to the member. For the record I just received a note from the hon. member, but I have not had an opportunity to read it.

To the Finance minister: please proceed.

Mr. Ceci: Thank you very much. You know, I said that those were productive meetings. I meant that. They were an opportunity to clarify what our plan is to ensure we have the backs of Albertans by the programs and services we are funding, to make sure they're strong. They wanted to know more about the diversification, they wanted to know more about oil pricing and our forecasts, and we were able to share that information back and forth. That's what these meetings are all about, and when they come out to Alberta, they'll do further clarification.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Mr. Speaker, given that when the minister met with credit-rating agencies last year, they had all of the information they needed to make a credit downgrade – just meeting the minister was seemingly enough for a downgrade that costs taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year, but to the minister's credit it's been 24 hours, and we haven't had another downgrade yet – and given that credit-rating agencies are saying that this government's reckless borrowing program puts downward pressure on our credit rating, can we expect another downgrade?

Mr. Ceci: You know, the difference between last year and this year is that we are in recovery in Alberta. We are going to be growing the most by GDP of any province in this country, 2.6 per cent. The Conference Board of Canada says 2.8 per cent. I like their numbers

better, Mr. Speaker, if we had a choice. TD Economics is also saying that our budget is stimulative whereas other budgets are austerity and they're not stimulating their economy. We are now leading the nation in terms of new full-time job growth in March, more than the rest of Canada. We have housing starts growing . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mr. Fildebrandt: I'll take that as a yes.

Given, Mr. Speaker, that under current projections Alberta's debt will reach a blistering \$71 billion by 2019 but that the government refuses to even provide an estimate of what our debt will be by 2024 and given that under questioning during the budgeting process the minister admitted that he does in fact have an estimate of what the debt will be by then but that he refuses to make that number public, my question is simple: will the minister tell Albertans how much debt they will owe by 2024? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Or we could focus on the things Albertans want, and those things are making sure that the classrooms their children go to aren't huge like this place. Those things are making sure that health care is delivered in a timely fashion. That's what Albertans tell us. [interjections] They want to make sure that their programs and services are strong, and we're keeping them strong.

The Speaker: Hon. members, you were doing so well.

Fort McMurray Wildfire Recovery

Dr. Starke: Mr. Speaker, today marks one year since the wildfires that devastated Fort McMurray. Now, the response to that crisis by thousands of Albertans was both heroic and heartwarming, but, as we know, the recovery will extend for many years. Now, earlier this week the Municipal Affairs minister made a welcome announcement regarding property tax relief, but other government ministries must also be involved in providing wraparound, co-ordinated support to the ongoing recovery effort. To the Associate Minister of Health: what ongoing mental health supports have been put in place for those requiring assistance in the aftermath of the Fort McMurray wildfires?

The Speaker: The Associate Minister of Health.

Ms Payne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. We know that anniversaries such as this can trigger additional mental health concerns for people, so I would encourage anyone living in the Fort McMurray area or throughout the province who's experiencing any concerns to please contact Health Link and ask to be connected with a mental health professional.

Additionally, our government has invested over \$24 million through the wildfire recovery task force in psychosocial health supports such as mental health supports, particularly for people within the Fort McMurray area.

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the environmental impact of the wildfires was profound and will last for many years and given that Alberta Environment has been extensively involved in monitoring the environmental impact and the condition of land, air, water, and wildlife in the region, my question to the environment minister: what is the status of ongoing assessment of the environmental impact of the wildfires, and when might Albertans expect to see a comprehensive report detailing those impacts?

The Speaker: The Minister of Environment and Parks and minister responsible for the climate change office.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, during the Fort McMurray wildfire Alberta Environment and Parks staff were no different from the rest of the Alberta public service in that they responded immediately. I know that I received many stories of staff that were redeployed, working hundreds of hours to assist in the response to that fire. During the fire Environment and Parks collaborated with monitoring partners. We enhanced our monitoring during the fire. From what I have been briefed, we have not detected any long-term, enduring negative environmental impacts beyond what happened during the fire.

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Speaker, I hope there's a more comprehensive report than that coming.

The wildfires also had profound impacts on education in Fort McMurray. Now, given that returning to school life and having to return to some sense of normalcy is not only necessary but very important to the recovery effort and given that students face additional challenges due to displacement from their homes, friends moving away, and attending, in some cases, different schools, to the Education minister: what additional supports are being provided to students and staff of Fort McMurray schools, and are provisions in place for supplemental mental health supports for Fort McMurray students?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the very insightful question. Yes. Certainly, we recognize that the impact of the fires on our education system in Fort McMurray was not insignificant. We have put in \$4.3 million of stabilization money this year to offset perhaps declining enrolment, which actually didn't go down that much. It's a good sign that families did move back to Fort McMurray. In addition to that, we have put in a \$1.7 million funding allocation for training for professional development for educators, specifically in regard to dealing with psychosocial supports.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

2:20 Emergency Medical Dispatch Services

Mr. Stier: Mr. Speaker, the problems in Alberta's centralized ambulance dispatch system continue to go from bad to worse. A major problem with this broken system is the new \$370 million radio network, that is creating vast communications dead zones across rural Alberta. Plus, paramedics are actually forbidden from using former backup radios. Province-wide EMS workers are speaking out, saying that this system causes frighteningly long wait times, puts the public at risk, and will cost lives. Can the minister explain what is being done to fix this faulty and failing system?

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much to the member for the question. Certainly, he has raised this topic with me, as have other members, including the Member for Banff-Cochrane. We are working to make sure that, no matter what, when you call, there is an ability to get that support that you need. Transition times can be challenging. I'm certainly aware of the AFRRCS requests, and we are considering ways that we can best support everyone in having the assurances that they need as we move forward, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Stier: Mr. Speaker, given that a recent meeting with the minister resulted in the Foothills Regional Emergency Services

Commission being refused in their request to dispatch directly to fix that while the Banff area, which is represented by an NDP MLA, was granted a request to leave this faulty system, can the minister explain why the good people of Banff were exempted from this broken dispatch system but not the great people of Okotoks, High River, Turner Valley, Black Diamond, or the MDs of Foothills and Willow Creek?

Ms Hoffman: The member should have a review of some of the facts. I'd encourage him to lean over to his dance partners sitting beside him and ask about dispatch and how important it is to make sure that we get it right, Mr. Speaker. We have definitely experienced a lot of change over the past seven or eight years when it comes to emergency dispatch. Our job on this side of the House is to make sure that those challenges and changes actually make life better for Albertans, and that's what we're doing. The two issues that the member is referring to are conflated. They're not at all tied together. I'm proud to continue to work to make life better for all Albertans and ensure their safety.

Mr. Stier: Mr. Speaker, given that I have fought this issue for five years now and seen that it hasn't improved and I've realized that central operators, who just don't understand southern Alberta's unique regional transportation landscape, are putting lives at risk and given that this is causing EMS workers to show up at local fire halls in search of proper directions after being sent on wild goose chases, can the minister stop this chaos, remove the entire Foothills region from this broken dispatch system today?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given how much time the members opposite are spending in the backrooms of the Federal building talking to each other, I'm surprised they're not ready to defend each other's records. They themselves and their new dance partners are the ones that pushed this process forward. We're making sure that we have the right safety and supports in place for Albertans. I encourage the members opposite to . . .

Mr. Cooper: Point of order.

The Speaker: Point of order noted.

Canadian Free Trade Agreement

Mr. MacIntyre: In Alberta's highly trade-exposed economy free trade agreements are of paramount importance. That's why I was shocked to find the makings of a trade war in the recently signed Canadian free trade agreement. Ontario has reserved the right to discriminate against any renewable energy project from Alberta in response to the Alberta NDP discriminating against all other provinces. To the Energy minister: why be so foolish as to risk making your estimated \$30 billion transition to renewables even more expensive?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Trade.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know what? I'm quite proud of the work that we did in negotiating a new Canadian free trade agreement that finally levels the playing field for Alberta companies to have the same access to other provinces as their companies have enjoyed for decades because of the poor negotiation that previous governments did. We reached an agreement. It took about two and a half years. It finally levels the

playing field, and I'm quite proud that Alberta businesses finally have the same access other provinces have enjoyed for decades.

Mr. MacIntyre: Anti free trade measures hurt more than just consumers and taxpayers; they put Alberta-headquartered companies at risk. Given that Alberta companies have made significant investments in run-of-the-river hydro and wind energy in Ontario and given that further investment of these types of renewable developments are now at risk because of anti free trade actions taken by this government, does the Energy minister understand the risk to Alberta-headquartered companies from her government demanding protectionist measures against renewable projects?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of economic development.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I mean, not only am I proud of this agreement; our government is working to diversify our economy through a number of ways. One of those is by phasing out coal, which the world is moving past, and investing in renewables. There's an incredible opportunity for Alberta companies to participate within our electricity system and within the renewable space. I'm quite proud of the work that we're doing through our trade agreements and look forward to the thousands of jobs that will be created right here in Alberta because of our action on climate.

Mr. MacIntyre: Fact: this NDP government put up more annexes to trade barriers than any other province in the entire free trade agreement. Given that Alberta is a province with an economy dependent on exports, meaning that we'd benefit greatly from the removal of trade barriers, and given that these anti free trade measures put Alberta businesses at risk of facing costly retaliatory measures, to the minister of trade: how does provoking a trade war with other provinces help Alberta's fledgling alternative energy industry?

Mr. Bilous: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll encourage the member opposite to look closely at the previous AIT and the Canadian free trade agreement. Unlike that party, that would continue to leave Alberta disadvantaged to the rest of the country, we've now levelled the playing field, where Alberta companies have the same access to other provinces that other provinces have enjoyed for decades. Quite frankly, it's quite frustrating that Alberta businesses have been shut out of other provinces because of previous trade agreements, that clearly this member and that party would continue to do. What we've done is that we've levelled the playing field and ensured that Alberta businesses have the same opportunities.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.
The Member for Calgary-South East.

Sexual Assault

Mr. Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As many of us are aware, May is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The need for that awareness is demonstrated by the fact that while rates of other violent crimes are decreasing, the incidence of sexual assault is on the rise. The statistics show that we are actually failing to address the issue of sexual assault and failing to protect Albertans from these crimes. While this government has made some progress in making civil prosecutions easier and abusive relationships easier to escape, more needs to be done to prevent these crimes from

occurring in the first place. To the Justice minister: what are your plans to address the rising incidence of sexual assault?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Our government is proud of our record in dealing with survivors of sexual assault. We passed Bill 2 quite recently, as the hon. member quite rightly noted, which helps survivors access the justice system. We also think that it's important that survivors know that in a criminal system when they come to court, they will be protected. That's why when a judge didn't do that for a survivor of sexual assault, we filed a complaint, and that complaint ultimately resulted in the removal of that judge. We think that all survivors deserve to be respected.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mr. Fraser: Given that an important aspect of preventing sexual assault is education and awareness and given that the government can assist by including a greater awareness of gender-based issues when making policy and given that during the recent Status of Women estimates the minister and I discussed the benefits of gender-based analysis plus, to the Deputy Premier: how is your ministry working toward increasing awareness to try to address the rising number of sexual assaults, and how many of your colleagues have you convinced to take the GBA plus training?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On this side of the House we do take gender-based violence very seriously and all women's health issues. That's why we're moving forward very carefully to make sure that we have integrated responses to a number of situations, including women's health options. We're proud to make sure that we're moving forward in that regard as well as working with health practitioners to ensure that they're well supported and in supporting those who have survived sexual assault as well.

2:30

Mr. Fraser: Given that as elected representatives we can be powerful voices for bringing attention to the issues when we have the right educational resources and given the Legislature's long tradition of inviting groups to the lower rotunda to share information with members and given that such a presentation would only be an introduction to this complex topic but it would still help all members better advocate for survivors of sexual assault, to the same minister: will you consider extending an invitation to some of the many organizations doing great work around educating about sexual assault to the Legislature?

Ms Hoffman: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. We are always interested in making sure that we have opportunities to support a variety of opportunities for education. Regularly we bring in colleges of professional associations to share information about the work they do. Perhaps we'll reach out to the College of Social Workers or others who are directly involved often in supporting survivors and making sure that they have the supports that they require.

There are also extensive supports online for anyone who's available so that they don't have to wait for that to be arranged. We'd be happy to e-mail that information to the offices of all MLAs so that they can continue to inform themselves about the supports that are available.

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

Electric Power Costs to Consumers

Ms Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I door-knocked in my constituency last week, the top concern I heard was utility bills. Albertans have traditionally been exposed to volatile electricity rates, and given that my constituents are concerned about their ability to pay their bills if those rates spike again, to the Minister of Energy: what is the government doing to protect Albertans and ensure that electricity is affordable?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Ms McCuaig-Boyd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, all of us, I think, on both sides of the house hear often in our constituency offices about utility bills. What we're doing is fixing the system that we inherited of volatility in the energy-only market. We're capping electricity rates because previously bills could fluctuate up to \$70 a month just on the electricity prices alone. In the long term Albertans deserve a system that is stable and predictable, and we're reforming that system.

The Speaker: Supplemental.

Ms Miller: Thank you. Given that my constituents are also concerned about other components of their bills such as delivery charges and rate riders, to the same minister: how is this government ensuring that these charges are fair and that consumers are not being overcharged for their utility services?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms McCuaig-Boyd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, Albertans are concerned about the whole bill. We're working to reform the electricity system, but we're also looking at the transmission costs and the transmission policies to see if there are some changes we can make. We have the AUC and the UCA, who work together to make life more affordable. What isn't affordable is if the opposition keeps making the promises of reversing everything done and returning our province to a volatile system. [interjections]

The Speaker: In case any of you forgot, when I stand up, please stop talking.

The Member for Red Deer-South.

Ms Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that utility bills can also be complex, can change without warning, and have various fee lines that may be hard to understand and seem unfair, to the Minister of Service Alberta: what options do my constituents have if they're concerned about their utility bills?

The Speaker: The Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to respond on behalf of the Minister of Service Alberta to my hon. friend's question. The Utilities Consumer Advocate can not only explain the various components of a gas or power bill but can also serve as the go-between if a consumer is in a dispute with a company over a bill. The UCA's website has detailed explanation of sample bills and a new feature that they added last year, a cost-comparison tool that allows consumers to comparison shop between companies for natural gas and electricity. We're very proud of the work that the UCA does, and Albertans can feel confident that if they have any uncertainty, discomfort, or any worry about their bills, help is only a phone call away.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

School Fees and Education Funding

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildrose applauded the government's intent of Bill 1 to ease the burden of school fees on parents. We understood that the government would increase funding to school divisions for this change. Since some school divisions had already begun reducing fees and others had not, how will you fairly distribute the funds to replace school fees across school divisions given the disparity in how different divisions handled school fees?

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you very much for the question. This is a central point to Bill 1, and the key here is that we are trying to clean up the school fees situation, which was basically like the Wild West over the last 20 years or so. The opportunity now to reduce school fees for instructional supplies and materials and for busing to a designated site really will put money into the pockets of parents when they need it most, certainly, and we certainly will over time look at the irregularity between school divisions so that we have a level playing field.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mr. Loewen: No answer on how they're going to do it fairly.

Given that school authorities have been contacting us with concerns that they will not be able to offer the kinds of courses students need because this government has decided to cap funding at 45 credits per student per year and given that school authorities do not want this reduction, how will this funding cap reducing education opportunities fulfill the government's mandate of meeting the best educational interests of students?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, to the point where we allow schools and school boards to make choices where they're best for students, the majority of high schools are now on the high school redesign programming so that the whole credit way of financing is not relevant in that regard. In other ways, I mean, certainly, this side always talks about looking for efficiencies and making choices, so that's what we did in Education. We made some choices and efficiencies so that we could reduce school fees here in the province of Alberta and make life better for Alberta families.

Mr. Loewen: Well, that sounds like a cut to Education to me.

The Speaker: Hon. member, try to remember to not preface your comments.

Mr. Loewen: Given that the dual credit, work experience, RAP, and green programs are programs that are helpful for students who are looking into trades or wanting to get a head start on their postsecondary education and given that this government has capped credit funding that is likely to affect these programs and given that school authorities say, contrary to what the minister said in estimates, that your department has cut the funding for the dual-credit program, why would you take away opportunities that have been helpful to give students a head start?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, we recognize the value of the dual-credit program, and we are taking steps to not just continue it but to strengthen it very substantially. So we're working with postsecondary institutions, working with our schools as well. They know that we are going to carry on with the dual-credit

program, and they're very excited about that. This is a good-news story for us to be moving forward to make life better for Alberta families and to improve education, as we have always been doing here on this side of the House.

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

Forest Industry Concerns

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The new 24 per cent tariff on Canadian softwood lumber exports to the U.S. hurts Alberta's forest producers. The ongoing dispute will hurt industry, hurt jobs, and harm Alberta's export growth. One of the biggest problems for Canada to negotiate the new agreement is achieving consensus amongst all provinces. To the minister of forestry: how are you working with other provinces and the federal government to resolve the softwood lumber dispute?

The Speaker: The Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.

Mr. Carlier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Our government is standing shoulder to shoulder with the forest industry and the communities that rely on lumber as we go through this dispute. We will defend ourselves vigorously and work closely with our industry and other Canadian governments to mount the most effective defence we can. The Alberta Forest Products Association has praised our government's attention to this file by saying: "We greatly appreciate the dedication of Premier Notley and her government to this very important file." We want to see a long-term solution, and we'll continue to work with my colleagues right across the country to do so.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The first supplemental.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the big uncertainty caused by having no softwood lumber agreement and given all the other uncertainties faced by the forest industry such as the caribou management plan, mountain pine beetle, cutblock retention, and the carbon tax, to the same minister: what can you do to work with the industry to help relieve some of these other uncertainties?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:40

Mr. Carlier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Together with the federal government we're exploring options about how we can support those important jobs in the forestry industry in Alberta, but there are also other things that can mitigate some of these issues like increasing our trade to Asia, for instance, which we continue to do. The Minister of Economic Development and Trade and the Premier just came back. We're promoting all our trade in Asia. We'll continue to do that, those trade missions. I take part in a federal-provincial task force, as do the deputy minister and the assistant deputy minister as well, to ensure that we get these programs the best we can to support our industries here in Alberta.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.
Second supplemental.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the forest industry needs to expand to markets around the globe to diversify Alberta's export market for forest industry products and given that the United States' tariff on Canadian softwood lumber enhances the urgency to find new markets, to the minister of forestry: what are

you doing to find other markets for Alberta forest producers so that we aren't so reliant on the U.S. market?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Carlier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. There's more we can do right here in Alberta to encourage more use. We've initiated a wood charter here in the province to encourage more use of wood within building projects here in Alberta. Trade missions to Asia: we continue to support Canada Wood, for example, in Asian markets to support our industry in those markets. We have increased our trade with Asia, and we can do more there. We fundamentally disagree with the United States' stand that we somehow subsidize our industry. This is the fifth time we've had this fight. We're going to be successful.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the chair of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices and in accordance with section 22 of the Auditor General Act I'm pleased to table five copies of the following report: the report of the Auditor General of Alberta for May 2017. Copies of this report will be provided to all members.

The Speaker: The Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a couple of tablings today. The first one is from the High River and District Chamber of Commerce. It's sent with concerns with regard to the review on the employment standards and Labour Relations Code. They believe that "the current time allocated to this discussion is seriously insufficient" and would like to see an enhanced and extended review.

I have five copies of a letter that I received from Karen Lisoway of Dynamysk with very similar concerns, that the Labour Relations Code review was needing more time and to be enhanced.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there was a point of order, but the point of order has been withdrawn.

Mr. Rodney: I stood up, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I'm sorry. I only heard one point of order.

Mr. Rodney: We rose at the same time.

The Speaker: At what point in the agenda did you raise a point of order?

Mr. Rodney: At exactly the same moment as the Opposition House Leader. We were raising it at the same time. It's very quick, sir.

The Speaker: Okay.

Point of Order Language Creating Disorder

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, earlier today – and I don't think we need the benefit of the Blues; we all heard it – there was a reference by the government side to conversations in a bathroom.

Some Hon. Members: Backroom.

The Speaker: Quiet, please.

Mr. Rodney: And that makes my point. Thank you. Under 23(h), (i), and (j)

a Member will be called to order by the Speaker if, in the Speaker's opinion, that Member . . .

(h) makes allegations against another Member;

(i) imputes false or unavowed motives to another Member;

and especially this:

(j) uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder.

We just saw disorder. The disorder occurred at that moment, and it's occurred, Mr. Speaker, with great respect, in the last number of weeks when references are made to "dance partner," "slow dancing," "BFFs." [interjections] Yeah, think about it, folks.

This side of the House must be accountable, Mr. Speaker, to you. The government side must be accountable as well. We have had from Albertans the point that this sort of language is immature at best. It's unprofessional, it's undignified, and it's unbecoming of an elected official. I'm going to guess that there will not be a point of order here, but what I would ask for you to do is to ask the government side to use words that do not contravene 23(h), (i), and (j).

Thank you.

Mr. Mason: Well, perhaps the hon. member, Mr. Speaker, would prefer it if we used the term "courtship," but there's no question – and I don't know why he's even trying to deny it – that there are talks . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, get to the point.

Mr. Mason: Well, the point is that it's a ridiculous suggestion that this violates any of those three clauses in the standing orders that the hon. member mentioned. This is entirely within the scope of parliamentary language and is not different – it's, in fact, much milder than many of the allegations, suggestions, and connotations that the opposition uses. I just would submit, Mr. Speaker, very humbly and with respect that it is an absurd point of order, and I don't know what they're trying to hide.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Hon. member, I have been provided, if I understand correctly – and I apologize if I didn't see the point of order initially. I thought it was withdrawn by the Opposition House Leader. I believe you might have thought that the comment was: the bathrooms of the Federal building. I do have a copy of the Blues, which say, "the backrooms of the Federal building." I would use that as a reminder that when there are fewer comments made, clarity of the actual fact is easier to hear. You're corrected. Be conscious of that so that all members can hear.

I think we are now at Orders of the Day.

2:50

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Ms Jabbour in the chair]

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

Bill 7

An Act to Enhance Post-secondary Academic Bargaining

The Chair: Are there any questions, comments, or amendments with respect to this bill? Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater.

Mr. Piquette: Yeah. I'm privileged to rise in the House today to speak in favour of Bill 7, an amendment to postsecondary labour relations legislation. I think it's very fortunate that I get to do this because, well, as one reason, I have a major university in my riding. I'm very happy that Athabasca is the home of Athabasca University. As well, I have experience teaching at Alberta postsecondary institutions. I used to be an instructor in Education at the University of Alberta, so I not only have that experience; I've had the opportunity to make a lot of friends that share similar experiences. So I'll, you know, maybe give a bit of insight into why this is, some elements in particular, so necessary.

What Bill 7 does is basically to put Alberta in accord with the law of the land and with every other province in Canada. It, you know, restores to instructors at postsecondary institutions their constitutionally protected right to strike. How it does that is actually pretty straightforward. What it does is to repeal sections of the existing PSLA and create a new postsecondary sector, a specific division within the labour organization.

It impacts bargaining in the following ways. Number one, mandatory binding arbitration provisions in the PSLA will be repealed. Going forward, academic staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral students, which is something I'm going to highlight a bit later, will be moved under the LRC. This extends the right to strike to employees but also restores lockout provisions for institutions as well as brings them at the same time under essential services legislation. The academic designation process will be updated to include more consultation with academic bargaining units and will also add the provision to take disputes to the Labour Relations Board. There will be a five-year minimum transition period provided for bargaining agents. As it stands now, all current bargaining agents will retain their membership, and no outside agents will be allowed for that five years. This can actually be extended at the discretion of cabinet.

Now, this bill has been, you know, sort of out for a bit now. I have to say that the reaction has been pretty positive from the feedback that I've been getting. Of course, there are some concerns. There's no legislation change that's going to be able to make everybody absolutely happy. This is really fundamental to the nature of change itself. The existing system: no matter how dysfunctional, no matter how much change is overdue, you're always going to be having some parties within it that benefit from the old way. The people that would benefit from changes haven't experienced those changes yet. That's why change tends to be very controversial.

Now, the fact that this isn't, I think, speaks very well to just how fulsome the consultative process has been. When you have a situation where stakeholders feel heard and respected and where the minister is, you know, fully engaged in ensuring that they take people along the way with them, that tends to cause a lot of concerns you would otherwise see to get diminished.

The minister is actually in the House right now, and I'd just like to extend . . . [interjection] Oh, is that unparliamentary? Okay. I would like to congratulate the minister on the very hard work that I know he has done in his consultation process and in reaching out to faculty and students across the province. I was actually at a recent meeting with university students from across the province, and one of the delegates from the University of Alberta made the comment:

you know, we've seen Minister Schmidt more often in the past year than we've seen the last two Advanced Education ministers. I think that speaks very well to just how hard-working our minister is, and I think that the results are being shown in how generally accepted this legislation is.

Now, I know that my colleagues are going to go into some of the other details of the proposed legislation. I'd just like to spotlight the provisions around postdoctoral students. I think this is a change that's long overdue and one that's desperately needed. Now, for those in the House, you know, who are unsure what postdoctoral fellows do – usually we call them postdocs – right now it's an occupation that was meant to be very temporary, where you might have someone who's finished their doctorate. It's very, very difficult in many fields to get to a tenure-track position. Sometimes even contract teaching positions might be hard to get.

As anyone who has taken an advanced degree is aware, if you're not working within that field and within academia, if you're not out at conferences presenting, if you're not being active in research, if you're not engaged with your faculty, your credentials age very quickly. You can find yourself where seven to 11 years of your life, tens of thousands of dollars basically make you overqualified for the jobs outside of your field. You're aging out. What that means is that without any protection, you are very vulnerable to being exploited, exploited in the sense where you can feel compelled to accept, you know, long working hours with inadequate pay, no benefits, and with not very clear means to deal with disrespect and harassment from supervisors.

This is sort of going back in time to where, you know, most workers were in that sort of marginal circumstance where they were at the mercy of their employers in huge part. Now, how did other workers get out of that? Well, they organized, right? They worked collectively, they developed unions, and, through that, they were able to negotiate some basic employment rights. They were able to ensure that they got benefits, that they'd be eligible for pensions, and so on. With the change, extending that provision to postdoctoral fellows, the general hope is that over time they'll be able to regularize this activity so they no longer face potential exploitation and these other issues.

Now, that being said, I don't want to paint all postdoctoral fellowships and supervisors with that type of brush. Of course, there are many, and I know them, right? I've known professors that had postdoctoral fellows, and I've worked with them myself. You know, it's just one of those bad apple type of situations. It just takes a few to ruin it for other people. For those that are caught in that precarious position, I think that this is something that is long overdue and very welcome, and I think it speaks very well to our government's ongoing commitment to make life better for people. I do hope that my colleagues feel that same way.

In conclusion, I'd like to commend our minister and his ministry for, I think, coming up with a good, balanced approach to respecting the collective bargaining rights of postsecondaries while taking other stakeholders' concerns into careful account. Because of that, I think we've come up with a good, balanced approach that respects academic traditions and culture, protects research but at the same time, you know, makes sure that workers in our postsecondary institutions receive the same constitutionally protected rights that other workers do.

I urge members to support this, and I hope that we can receive unanimous consent for this bill. Thank you, Madam Chair.

3:00

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Just a cautionary reminder to all members that we do not refer to the presence or absence of another member in the House, and as well we do not use proper names or surnames of members.

I'll recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 7, you know, because I'm proud to say that my constituency of Edmonton-Centre includes three of our city's postsecondary institutions, the first being Grant MacEwan University, of which I'm personally a proud graduate, who will be opening their new centre for the arts and communications in Edmonton-Centre in September. I'm very excited for that growth and for those new students that that's going to bring. Of course, that being sort of the program I came out of, having gone through the Grant MacEwan music program, I'm very happy to have that coming now to my doorstep.

We also have NorQuest College. NorQuest College, Madam Chair, is an institution I've had a real pleasure getting to know, particularly for the amazing programs and supports that they offer for new Canadians and for indigenous students. NorQuest College does a lot of work in the community helping people who are a lot of times struggling with different issues or are working on low income to be able to access new careers and to be able to work towards new economic opportunities. I truly appreciate the work that NorQuest does.

Then also in Edmonton-Centre, over at Enterprise Square, we do have some departments of the University of Alberta.

I also know, Madam Chair, from correspondence that I've received at my office and from doors that I've knocked on and indeed from some who have contacted me through social media that I represent a large number of staff and faculty from these institutions. These are hard-working Albertans that are dedicated to providing quality postsecondary education and conducting world-class research here in our province. So it's an honour to have the opportunity to rise and stand as cosponsor of Bill 7, legislation that I truly believe will make their lives better.

This bill represents our government's belief in a fair and balanced collective bargaining process that respects both the workers and the employers. Now, Madam Chair, of course, as you're aware and as we've discussed, in January 2015 the Supreme Court of Canada released a ruling that workers in all occupations, including essential services, must be allowed the right to strike. Of course, we brought forward our first piece of legislation last year to enact the necessary steps to comply with that Supreme Court ruling. At that time we did not have the opportunity – well, we chose not to include academic employees at postsecondary institutions. We recognized that that was an area that we wanted to do more consultation on, that that was something where we needed to speak with the stakeholders and get more input on how that legislation would work to best represent them. That was critical. That was very important because we wanted to be sure we really understood all of the unique details of labour relations in the postsecondary sector and the needs of all the stakeholders involved. Indeed, we have conducted some excellent consultation in that regard.

I think it's important just to stop after some of the discussion we've had today, concerns being raised about folks not being heard or not having opportunities to fully understand the steps that were being taken or the directions things were going – and I think the minister did a good job of outlining some of that, but I'd like to outline some of it again.

The Minister of Advanced Education built on the foundation of the initial consultations that were started in 2015. So we started with the initial conversations about essential services, which post-secondary was invited to be part of. Then we recognized that further

work needed to be done, so the hon. Minister of Advanced Education built on that initial foundation. There was a period of six months, from August to December of 2016, that included an online survey, face-to-face meetings with ministry staff, and round-table discussions that were facilitated by Mr. Andy Sims, an individual we've spoken of many times in House, a well-respected expert in labour law who's authored hundreds of reported decisions in both Canadian and Alberta Labour Relations Board reports and labour arbitration cases. Following that consultation and having had those conversations in person, through surveys, and having had many opportunities, the minister has brought forward now Bill 7, An Act to Enhance Post-secondary Academic Bargaining.

There had been some concerns raised by some members across the aisle this morning. I wanted to take a moment, Madam Chair, to address a few of those. First of all, there were some concerns that were raised by one of the members, I believe the Member for Highwood, and he commented on this several times and on his personal belief that this was an ideological bill. Now, ideology, of course, runs both ways, and we're certainly aware that there is, perhaps, some animosity amongst some members on the other side of this House towards unions. Certainly, words like "thuggery" have been tossed around this House recently.

Madam Chair, personally, I see that there are benefits on both sides of that equation. I think we need to have good, strong companies with the opportunity to look after their workers, with the freedom to make some good choices. At the same time, I think unions can serve a very useful purpose. I've had the opportunity to work in many occupations where there were unions, and you know, I was very thankful for the excellent benefits and the good pay I was able to enjoy there that enabled me to build the life and career that I now enjoy today. So I think it's important that we have fair balance on both sides, much like what we're looking to achieve with this bill.

In terms of this particular bill, of course, the accusations that were being flung were that this bill was created specifically for the reason of unionizing academic staff associations at our universities. But the fact is, Madam Chair, that the basic rules for academic staff associations do not change under Bill 7. They remain established as statutory associations under the Post-secondary Learning Act, and they have the same bylaw powers and rights with respect to the institutional governance that they do now. The only thing that changes is that the same basic labour rules that apply in every other part of the public and private sector would now apply in Alberta.

Now, again, Madam Chair, one of the things with this bill is that this generally just puts Alberta on the same playing field and brings us up to the same level as every other province in Canada. Of course, we've seen that there are some strains in this House, certainly, I think, amongst some members, of what I would call an Alberta exceptionalism, believing that Alberta has to be absolutely different on absolutely everything, being very proud of that fact in many respects. Indeed, there are times when one should be proud of being unique and standing alone and doing things differently, but there are some things on which you have to look and say: why is it that we do things differently from everywhere else? There are times that it is because previous governments have chosen not to deal with issues that should have been dealt with far longer ago. Other governments have instead taken the leadership on that, things like, say, perhaps, farm workers' rights, where those were covered in many other parts of Canada long before they were covered here in Alberta.

In this case, Madam Chair, we are simply bringing Alberta in line with other jurisdictions. We're meeting the requirements of the Supreme Court. This provision is simply now saying that these academic staff associations will fall under the same coverage as any

other organization that is being asked to fairly represent their members and is bringing in rules prohibiting unfair labour practices. So I just wanted to address that.

Now, in regard to the consultations, I did touch on and speak about, you know, how thorough the consultations were that the minister carried out. I'd like to just note indeed that in regard to that, in regard to folks that may feel they've not been heard, there was one stakeholder actually in an editorial – so it's publicly spoken. We've certainly heard members that have spoken of people they've spoken with, but, Madam Chair, so far I have not heard them actually identify any of the groups they've spoken with or even, in fact, how many different organizations they've spoken with. That might provide some helpful context.

But I will note that in a recent editorial one of the stakeholders stated:

This is legislation that is long overdue, and it is clear [that] the extra year of consultation and research . . .

Again, Madam Chair, an extra year of consultation and research.

. . . resulted in the government getting it almost exactly right. After 43 years of fake and contrived after-the-fact "consultations," it is refreshing to see a government consult genuinely with all stakeholders and actually integrate what they heard into legislation.

That is one of the stakeholders who participated in the consultation, Madam Chair. I will note that. [interjection] I am sorry that one of the members of the previous government feels that that's laughable. Perhaps he did not actually take part in their previous consultations. But that is the perspective of an actual stakeholder.

Moving on, Madam Chair, there were some concerns that this would take away some of the rights of folks during the bargaining process. Particularly, I think the concern being raised was that for those who are currently in the middle of negotiations, this might take away their right to binding arbitration. Now, the fact is that nobody will lose the right to use binding arbitration if Bill 7 is passed. In fact, it remains available on a voluntary basis, with agreement from both parties, under section 93 of the Labour Relations Code.

3:10

Certainly, Madam Chair, what we often hear from the other side is that they are in favour of choice and providing people as much choice as possible and allowing them to choose, you know, which organizations they choose to work with, where they choose to send their children to school, many other things. This simply provides those who are in these associations with further choice.

What Bill 7 does is that it ensures that associations and institutions are no longer compelled to use binding arbitration to resolve their disputes. I think that's a fair thing to do. Indeed, I think it's a fiscally responsible thing to do, and it's required in light of the Supreme Court decision and legislation. Again, Madam Chair, I think it's a fair provision and one that will not, in fact, unduly disadvantage anybody in this process or through these negotiations.

In terms, then, of clarifying a couple of the things, Madam Chair, that this bill will do and being clear, again, for those who raised some concerns about what the bill is in fact not doing, I'll just take a moment to recognize some of the other things that this bill will do. Basically, Bill 7 is proposing that some sections of the Post-secondary Learning Act would be repealed and then creating a new division in the Labour Relations Code for the postsecondary sector. If passed, as we've discussed, academic staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows – again, this is offering more opportunity to more members of the academic field to have better protection and to be able to better advocate for themselves in their positions and to have better choice in who they choose to have advocate on their behalf. It gives them the right to strike as required by the Supreme

Court's legislation, and they then become subject to essential services legislation.

Of course, as we've discussed here in the House today, we do recognize that postsecondary education is indeed an essential service. We've talked about the great value that it brings to students. We've talked about the importance that it has in building their careers and opportunities. Certainly, Madam Chair, we recognize that it has great importance, too, for the research which goes forward. So it's important that we have the essential services piece and that we consider it in that light so that essential research, things that are ongoing, so that if there does need to be a strike or something else, those things are still protected so that people are still able to look after necessary research and ensure that it can continue while they may not be able to actually be there at work. Again, this is the first time in Canada that postdoctoral fellows would fall under the legislation, and I think the Member for Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater certainly spoke well of that. I'm sure some others will as well.

Madam Chair, our government believes in the collective bargaining process and in a process that respects both workers and employers, as indeed we are demonstrating as we go forward with negotiations with public servants in many areas of government at the moment. That's why postsecondary institutions would be required to negotiate essential services agreements with their bargaining units, again, making sure that those things are in place to protect students, to protect research and other essential things which need to continue. This means that postsecondary institutions will also then be covered by the lockout provisions under the Labour Relations Code.

With these proposed changes, basically, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows associations would have the responsibility and the opportunity to bargain with the institutions for mutually beneficial collective agreements. By ending compulsive arbitration, by not making that mandatory, by making that now a choice for those who are negotiating and those who are bargaining, it will allow the faculty, the graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and the institutions to come to more prudent agreements that respect workers' constitutional rights. That will protect students. That will ensure affordability for taxpayers.

Over the next five years we're going to work closely with these institutions to help them transition. There have been some concerns that have been raised today, Madam Chair, regarding that transition period. Again, I think the minister was quite clear that he was very clear throughout the consultation process about the model that they're moving towards. Indeed, that model would be the model that we've brought forward here today, and the discussions were about how we could best implement that model. The stakeholders that were involved were aware this model was coming, but now we're giving an additional five years where we have the opportunity for us to work and to help transition the postsecondary staff in terms of the collective bargaining process to ensure it addresses their unique needs.

The faculty associations now, who are effectively serving as the bargaining units, are going to have the opportunity to indeed, if they wish, work with their members to develop a strike fund, to put together other things which may be needed, other things which may be necessary to prepare themselves, then, for the bargaining process over the next five years.

That's why it's important for us, I think, as government to continue to work with institutions to ensure that adequate plans are developed to address any potential strikes or lockouts and to make sure that impacts, in fact, would be minimal for students. As the minister noted earlier today, I think that's going to include making

some contingency plans, if necessary, to address student aid, grants, and bursaries. I think that's absolutely important, Madam Chair. Indeed, not only do I represent many staff from these institutions; I certainly also within Edmonton-Centre represent a large number of students. It's very important to me to ensure that, in fact, they are protected, to ensure that they are not put in a bad situation, that they're able to continue their education, and indeed that all necessary funding that they may be receiving from the government, funding which, I'm proud to say, we have continued and, in fact, in some respects increased, I believe, will continue to remain available to them so that they will be able to continue their schooling.

Madam Chair, in general I'm just proud that our government is taking, I believe, a very careful and measured approach to provide stability. It's yet another reason why I support this legislation, because I truly believe this is something that will make a positive difference in the lives of our postsecondary staff here in the province and indeed of students as well. Indeed, given our current economic climate I think it makes sense that we try to find labour negotiation models that are going to ensure that we use public dollars responsibly.

We know that compulsory arbitration in the past has at times tended to result in higher wage increases. That's something that's not sustainable, and we certainly recognize that it is not the direction to be going in for the province right now as we are just beginning to recover from the effects of the recession, which has generally, as some economists noted, concluded, and we're beginning to see some upturn. But we still have some time where our province is going to need to work towards recovery, so controlling our costs where we can through the negotiation process with the folks that work and are paid through government I think is a smart and prudent thing and something that is truly to be supported through this legislation. I think this bill truly demonstrates, again, our government's work to make life better for all Albertans and all people who are both involved in the postsecondary industry and, of course, all those who are simply paying taxes, who may have children in school, who may have relatives in school, or who may themselves even be considering going back for further postsecondary education, as, in fact, I did myself at a late stage in life.

With that, Madam Chair, I believe I'll conclude my remarks, but I'd like to thank the minister again for his thoroughness in working towards this legislation and consulting with the community and for bringing forward what I believe is a fairly and truly balanced piece of legislation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other hon. members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm very happy to get up and speak on Bill 7, An Act to Enhance Postsecondary Academic Bargaining. I really would like to thank the hon. Minister of Advanced Education for bringing this bill forward. I'd also like to thank my colleagues from Edmonton-Centre, who just spoke at length about the importance of this particular bill, as well as the Member for Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater, who also talked very passionately in support of this bill as well.

You know, our government is committed to fair legislation that makes life better for hard-working Albertans and complies with the recent Supreme Court ruling. Our government believes in a collective bargaining process that respects both workers and employers. As such, this bill considers the unique nature of the postsecondary sector. While our government extended these rights to the Alberta public services and the health care sector in 2016, we

gave postsecondary stakeholders additional time to transition and establish, through consultation, their issues in their particular field. Our government has taken a careful, measured approach to providing stability during the transition period.

3:20

Now, in my riding of Calgary-Currie, Madam Chair, Currie Barracks, which is the namesake of my riding, is actually just on the other side of the road from Mount Royal University, which actually has a long history with Currie Barracks and a long history in the riding as well. If you go back in time to the many boundary redraws that, you know, happen every two elections in this province, Mount Royal University is either in or out of my riding – it seems to be about once a decade – so I very much consider it a part of my riding, and considering that mine is by name one of the oldest ridings in Calgary, Mount Royal has been a part of the riding since the '70s. Even though Mount Royal is, like I said, just across the street from my riding, of course when I'm out and about knocking on doors and at events, I run into many of the students and faculty of Mount Royal University.

I've also been able to go to several events at Mount Royal University hosted by their student association, which I did a member's statement on recently, actually, talking about some of the great work they do for the students of Mount Royal University and some of the interesting and thought-provoking events that they do. They did one recently on Black History Month. Also, when there, I get to talk to the faculty, the staff.

They have a great communication and broadcast program there. I actually got to go to the graduation ceremony for that, where Marc Chikinda, who had been leading that program for many years and is now retired – I got to be there for one of his last convocations. If you've ever heard Marc Chikinda talk, he's got quite the boisterous voice, that I think would rival our singer who does the national anthem here in this House on Monday.

Also, you know, I got a book, actually, from a history professor who recently got his tenure that was about Mount Royal University and World War I and how Mount Royal University helped recruit and train students and helped promote and encourage men in 1914 to join up for World War I, with their proximity and historical connection to Currie Barracks, which is, of course, part of my riding. It was a very interesting essay about that, and it was well researched and speaks to the pleasure that the faculty of Mount Royal University take in teaching students. As it was described to me by this particular professor, he often gets his students to help him with research. He regaled me with stories of going through archives. I'm sure that is interesting, but as you know, I'm a mechanic, so the idea of spending hours upon hours in an archive is not necessarily my cup of tea.

I think it speaks to the importance of this piece of legislation to make sure that those faculty members, you know, have the ability to strike should they choose to.

I'm going to do one more example of the fine work that the Mount Royal University faculty does. Actually, there's a class at Mount Royal University called controversies in science, which I feel is often our debate in the House on a rather regular basis. Mandy Sobhanzadeh – I'm sorry for mispronouncing that, of course – every semester invites me and members from the opposition party to speak at her class as a guest lecturer, and she invites members of all the parties. I was there recently. The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks from the Wildrose opposition caucus has spoken at the same class, when I was there as well, as well as the representative from the Liberal Party in this House.

It makes for, I think, a very engaging class for the students each week to have a different perspective on the particular unit they do,

which is on climate change and the science around it and what the challenges are that we as elected officials face when addressing that problem. They get to see various perspectives about it, and it's one of the three units in that class, and it makes for a very engaging discussion. When I'm there, I always get some very good, hard-hitting questions, and it's a very lively discussion. Every time I'm there, I speak for an hour and a half with the students and take questions for the remainder of the class, and it's quite an engaging debate, actually. I encourage all members of the House, should they ever get invited to speak at that class, to do so. It's quite enlightening.

I'm going to circle back a bit to the legislation here. You know, why did the postsecondary labour model need to be updated? Well, as you know, the previous speakers mentioned at length that our government is committed to fair legislation that gives all workers the right to strike and also complies with the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on this particular matter. Previous provisions for academic staff and graduate students in Alberta in postsecondaries did not include the right to strike. These changes were introduced to take into consideration the unique nature of the postsecondary education sector while also extending the constitutionally protected rights to postsecondary faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows. Part of modernizing our labour model includes adding the right to strike in Alberta's postsecondary institutions, which brings us in line with all other provinces and, of course, complies with that Supreme Court ruling.

What is this bill changing? Well, this proposed legislation repeals a section of the Post-secondary Learning Act and creates a new postsecondary sector specific division in the Labour Relations Code. In general some of the changes include that academic staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral students will now fall under the Labour Relations Code, essentially giving them the right to strike and become subject to the essential services legislation. They will retain the right to arbitration as long as both parties request an arbitrated decision to a dispute.

As well, postsecondary institutions will be required to negotiate essential services agreements with their bargaining units and will have provisions for lockout under the Labour Relations Code.

As well, current associations will retain their current membership and will be protected from any changes to membership for a minimum of five years. This goes to the importance of having a transition as this legislation comes in, which was something that was spoken of at length by the Member for Edmonton-Centre as well as the Member for Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater, who spoke earlier this afternoon on this.

As you know, I've spoken at length about how I talk to the Mount Royal faculty and students on a regular basis. Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow is, I believe, technically still a student at Mount Royal University, I think an excellent example of the fine calibre of students and people that Mount Royal University attracts.

I actually had a chance to chat with some of the faculty. The Mount Royal Faculty Association sent me a couple of notes on what their thoughts were on the bill. You know, they mentioned that in general they were pleased to note that Bill 7 conforms to almost all of their recommendations that they went through during the government's consultation, that happened in the fall of 2016, and they have actually extended their thanks in a letter that they sent to the minister and to the members of his ministry as well for their work on this bill. They mentioned that they greatly appreciate the meaningful consultation undertaken in advance of drafting of Bill 7, and they also mentioned that they are very thankful for the high level of availability and responsiveness shown by the ministry staff.

I think that that quote that I'm taking from the letter that they sent to the minister is, you know, an example of the great consultation that the minister and his staff put forward and of the approach this government takes to consultation when it comes to pieces of legislation, Madam Chair. We always try, whenever we have a new piece of legislation coming in, to allow opportunities for all members of the public and relevant stakeholders to avail themselves of the ability to consult, to write letters to the minister and staff as well as phoning them, and that speaks to our commitment to transparency and to consulting on pieces of legislation.

They go on to note that they welcome the move to a more extensive and well-tested framework in the Labour Relations Code, with its many benefits such as the codification of prohibited labour practices and the duty of fair representation, a statement of employee and employer rights as well as recourse to Alberta's Labour Relations Board should they not be able to work it out themselves.

3:30

You know, they also go on to say that they acknowledge that this change respects the facility's constitutionally protected right to freedom of association by removing the employer's unilateral power to designate employees as academic staff without recourse and therefore to decide who is and who is not in the faculty association.

Last, they welcome the restoration of the right to strike and of the employer to lock out as a fundamental aspect of meaningful collective bargaining, as confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Now, they did note that there was strike/lockout language that existed in the collective bargaining agreement that they had at Mount Royal University, that was there until 2004; however, that's when provincial legislation was changed to impose compulsory binding arbitration as the final dispute resolution mechanism. I think they got rid of that particular provision.

They do note that during that time they never had an actual strike or lockout. The Mount Royal Faculty Association and Mount Royal University, from my discussions with them, have had thus far an amicable relationship, where they have not needed to go as far as to strike or for Mount Royal University to lock out their teaching faculty.

Of course, as I mentioned before, their passion for academic disciplines and professional work, and they talk about – you know, Mount Royal University has got over a century of putting students and the quality of their education first. I think it speaks to their dedication to teaching and their dedication to their students. As I mentioned in a member's statement previously, the student union carries on that spirit as well from the students' side, putting on great events, working for their students as well as putting on classes and other educational opportunities to allow students to discuss and share ideas. I think it speaks to the value of education that Mount Royal instills in its students as well as the value of citizenship and working with their neighbours and the spirit of enlightened and respectful debate.

We talked a lot about what this means for the faculty. We've talked about what this means for postsecondary institutions such as Mount Royal University, but what would this mean for Alberta's students? Is there any potential that they could lose credits if there's a strike or lockout, for example? Well, Madam Chair, you know, we recognize that there are some concerns regarding the ability for academic staff, faculty members, and professionals to stop work. All other jurisdictions in Canada have similar strike/lockout provisions in their labour legislation, and in order to ensure minimal impact to students, government will work with postsecondary

institutions to make sure that they develop contingency plans to address strikes and lockouts should they occur.

Government will also review and make contingency plans where necessary to address student aids, grants, and bursaries, and I believe that that work would of course be carried out and led by our Minister of Advanced Education.

In case there was a dispute, how will bargaining disputes be settled under this new legislation? Well, Madam Chair, the proposed legislation ensures that Alberta's postsecondary academic staff are extended their constitutionally protected right to strike and that institutions have provisions for lockouts, which will bring us, of course, in line with all other jurisdictions. If no agreement can be reached, the provisions for strikes or lockouts under the current Labour Relations Code do apply.

Another question that I haven't quite heard addressed here is: will our institutions be allowed to use replacement workers in the event of a strike? Well, essential services are those public services that, if interrupted, would endanger life, personal safety, or the health of the public, or the rule of law and public security. Postsecondary institutions are already required to work with their bargaining units to develop essential services agreements.

The proposed legislation will just add academic staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral students to this ongoing work. Similar to all other public sectors, postsecondary institutions that identify essential services will negotiate essential services agreements with their bargaining units, which will ensure that workers have the right to strike while essential services are maintained. Institutions with essential service agreements will not be able to hire replacement workers in the event of a strike. As well, institutions that apply and receive exemptions under the essential services legislation as having no essential services will be able to hire temporary workers in the event of a strike.

I understand that some postsecondary stakeholders do not want to move under the Labour Relations Code and want to retain mandatory arbitration provisions. The reason why we did this is that this is something that must be done. Our government is committed to fair legislation that gives all workers the right to strike and also to comply with the 2015 Supreme Court ruling. The easiest answer to, you know, that question, of course, is that the Supreme Court made us do it. As all members know, when the Supreme Court says so, that is a sign that there was a serious problem in the legislation that we need to fix.

Madam Chair, I think that with that, I will wrap up my comments here and encourage all members of the House to vote in support of this bill as well as in support of their local postsecondary institution, whether it be Mount Royal University, whether it be MacEwan, whether it be the University of Calgary or the University of Alberta or Bow Valley College or whatever the one may be that is local to your riding. I would encourage that after this debate we all take a moment to appreciate the hard-working faculty and teachers of our postsecondary institutions as well as, of course, the students, who are being taught and will be doing, I'm sure, great things in the future with the education that they learn from Alberta's excellent postsecondary institutions.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Bill 7, An Act to Enhance Post-secondary Academic Bargaining: with great respect, I wish the act did exactly what it purports to do.

Mr. Cooper: What does it do?

Mr. Rodney: Well, sadly, hon. members, in my experience, this bill demonstrates one more time that the government did not listen to Albertans in its so-called consultations. It seems the minister does not understand the needs or interests of the relevant stakeholders because, for one example, in a rare circumstance the presidents of Alberta's comprehensive academic and research institutions, faculty associations, graduate students' associations, and graduate students themselves disagree with the government's direction in Bill 7.

In brief, I can tell you that Bill 7 seeks to implement a Supreme Court ruling to enable Alberta's postsecondary educators to strike, which is a necessary change. No opposition whatsoever on that. The problem is that Bill 7 seeks to severely interfere with the way that our supposedly autonomous universities conduct their labour relations. Not only that, Madam Chair. This bill does nothing to address the actual concerns of university workers, including faculty promotion, job security, and tenure. It also completely and utterly fails to address the social concerns often raised by the government itself, including gender and other diversity, inclusion of indigenous peoples as leaders and students, improving work-life balance for families, or reliability of universities as partners in innovation and economic diversification. That shocks and surprises me.

Now, for decades governments have recognized that universities should be places of free thought, expression, and research and have refrained from dictating how publicly funded universities govern themselves. Governments have also recognized that universities are not just a usual cookie-cutter sort of industrial workplace that can be regulated under employment standards that would apply to most workplaces. They're different.

3:40

Now, universities' collegial governance models recognize merit and service and contributions in ways that are found almost nowhere else in labour management. Indeed, governments have been generally reluctant to regulate universities until requested by those universities themselves. Now, where most workplaces clearly draw lines to separate responsibilities among workers represented by different bargaining groups, the shared responsibility for teaching and learning at a university means that in many cases everyone shares in the work of everything. Having worked at a university, I have experienced this. That runs contrary to the usual idea that each union has exclusivity to bargain over their particular type of work at a shared workplace, but collegial governance in Alberta and abroad has ensured that negotiated agreements mean that usually no task is left without a taker.

Faculty associations of Alberta's comprehensive academic and research universities are not currently prohibited from striking. Now, currently the Post-secondary Learning Act mandates that disputes are resolved through compulsory binding arbitration. That decision to bargain away their ability to strike was made by faculty and management, recognizing that the practical ability to strike does not exist because of the unique collegial governance models at universities. Now, during consultations universities, faculty associations, and graduate students told the minister that they wanted to remain under the Post-secondary Learning Act, that would recognize the unique collegial governance models at Alberta universities. Almost every stakeholder advised against moving into the Labour Relations Code, which does not have the legislative authority or the expertise to protect academic freedoms, intellectual property, and rights of researchers, faculty, or students.

Now, even though most university staff are unionized into four or more groups on most campuses – namely, support staff, graduate students, faculty, and professional staff – the members of each group can routinely have responsibilities in teaching and research,

administration, and management. Consequently, an introductory course may be taught by a department head who is also a senior researcher and include labs prepared and overseen by graduate students and seminars organized by a postdoctoral fellow, just for one example. The summer version of that same course may be entirely run by just a single contracted instructor. Now, a research laboratory might have chemicals prepared by support staff, with business administrated by a postdoctoral fellow and experiments operated by honours undergraduate students alongside research associates holding PhDs. Maybe some members here have had that sort of experience.

Understandably, though, not necessarily everyone thinks about this. The group with the least bargaining power is the graduate students, and they often get tasked with the least professionally rewarding responsibilities such as invigilating and grading student work and preparing labs and filing paperwork. Within that group, responsibilities and compensation of master's students, who are present at an institution for, say, one or three years, are often worse than PhD students, whose positions are typically secure for four or more years. That's just the way it works.

If Bill 7 is passed, teaching, research, administration, and management will become the responsibility of one more bargaining group, and that's the postdoctoral students' associations. While there are thousands of faculty and graduate students can number in the hundreds at each institution, there are an estimated hundred or so postdoctoral fellows at any time in all of Alberta. A postdoctoral fellowship might only be for one year or less. Guess which of the three bargaining units will have the least bargaining power. Undesired work will be pushed to the weakest union, the postdocs, who have the fewest numbers and the least experience and resources to bargain effectively.

Let's face it. Most postdocs have more pressing research priorities in their six to 24 months at an Albertan university, so the postdoctoral fellows' associations may not be representative or have time to build knowledge or experience to be effective when the negotiations roll around every three or five years. It's not even clear that the actual postdoctoral fellows themselves wanted to form new associations to represent them. As a matter of fact, it's questionable that government even effectively consulted with postdoctoral fellows since there was no plan to reach out to the then nonexistent postdoctoral fellows' associations. Indeed, many postdoctoral fellows are satisfied with being represented by the graduate students' associations or faculty associations in the few areas where their work is directed and funded by an Albertan university.

Despite two rounds of consultation that unanimously advised against moving universities from the Post-secondary Learning Act to the Labour Relations Code, Bill 7 proposes to move labour disputes from a university's board of governors, academic senate, faculty association, and graduate students' association to the Labour Relations Board, which has minimal experience and capacity to learn, understand, and resolve university labour disputes. At any given time up to 50 per cent of a university's faculty and graduate students perform management functions, and this bill does little to make it clear how management functions are to be treated at the Labour Relations Board.

Additionally, this bill would invalidate agreements freely reached between management and faculty and graduate students' associations about binding arbitration. Now, let's face it. Disempowering a university's democratically elected bodies to resolve their own issues strikes at the heart of the autonomy of a university to self-govern and substitutes a government overseer to judge that which it simply cannot understand. As administrators, faculty, and graduate students have rightly pointed out, all that's

necessary to comply with the Supreme Court decision is to guarantee the right to strike for faculty and graduate students who are not performing essential services, full stop. Gutting a university's ability to determine its own labour relations is completely unnecessary to comply with the Supreme Court ruling, and it reeks of a government expanding its powers in an area where the government does not trust Albertans to act in their own interests. That's beyond unfortunate.

As all stakeholders other than the government agree, this bill needs to be curtailed to remove everything unrelated to complying to the Supreme Court ruling. If it did that, Minister, we'd be happy to vote for it, but it doesn't. Unfortunately, this government has chosen to use the Supreme Court ruling as an excuse to expand the scope of the LRB, making it the priority rather than putting university workers at the forefront of the bill, which I think all Albertans would have appreciated.

Madam Chair, the introduction of this bill and changes to collective bargaining come at a peculiar time. The postsecondary review will not be completed until later this year, obviously after the bill. Two major changes, not one but two major changes, to Alberta's universities doesn't lead to certainty for institutions or faculty or students. The prospect of disruptive strikes and denial of access to jointly owned research materials and equipment also does not strengthen universities' positions as potential research and collaboration partners with domestic and international businesses interested in innovation.

Madam Chair, for these reasons and others I implore all members from all parties to join me in voting against a heavy-handed bill that's fraught with a lack of consultation and obvious overreach. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I do have to respond to the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. I'm not sure whether he was giving a lecture in creative writing or perhaps a lecture in drama dedicated to comedic performance, but what the Member for Calgary-Lougheed did not do was state a single fact pertinent to the bill that is before us today.

3:50

He alleges that we are meddling with collegial governance. There is nothing in this bill that affects or changes collegial governance at the universities or colleges in Alberta. In fact, universities and colleges in every other province in the country that are under this same labour relations model have a collegial governance system that's in place and has been functioning for a long time, Madam Chair.

With respect to binding arbitration, there is nothing in this bill that prevents employers and employees from choosing to go to binding arbitration if both parties agree to do that, Madam Chair. We are pleased that binding arbitration will continue to be an option for faculty associations and grad student associations going forward as long as all of the parties at the table can agree to do that.

Now, the member incorrectly states that we are moving people out of the Post-secondary Learning Act and under the Labour Relations Code. Of course, if he would take the time to read the bill, he would find that that is not true whatsoever, Madam Chair. All of the faculty associations and the grad student associations remain established under the Post-secondary Learning Act, and in fact the postdoctoral associations will also be created as entities under the Post-secondary Learning Act.

The member also went on to suggest that by allowing the Labour Relations Board to rule on disputes related to labour relations, we're turning it over to an entity that knows nothing about university or college governance. Of course, had the member done his homework, Madam Chair, he would have known that we are creating a special division of the Labour Relations Board dedicated specifically to dealing only with issues in the postsecondary sector. So all of these issues that will be arbitrated will be arbitrated by people with expertise and experience in matters related to labour relations on campus. We're confident that the legislation that we're bringing forward will continue to recognize the uniqueness of labour relations on university and college campuses, just as has been done up until this point.

Where the Member for Calgary-Lougheed really drove into the ditch, Madam Chair, is with respect to postdoctoral fellows. He started off his statement by saying that at any given time in the province of Alberta there are only 100 postdoctoral fellows, which, of course, is wrong by a factor of 10. So, you know, I'm glad that they're not in charge of the budget with those kinds of order-of-magnitude errors. Of course, we know that at any given time there are at least 1,000 postdoctoral fellows at our comprehensive academic research institutes.

I wish that that was the only error that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed had in his speech with respect to postdoctoral fellows, but it's not, Madam Chair. He claims that by setting up postdoctoral fellows in associations and recognizing them as employees, we're going to somehow weaken their bargaining position. That's the complete opposite of what we're doing. We are giving postdoctoral fellows bargaining power that they've never had, that that government didn't give them for 44 years. We are the first jurisdiction under this government to proactively recognize postdoctoral fellows as employees, something that no other province has ever done without being taken to court to do so. I'm proud of the fact that we are recognizing postdoctoral fellows as employees proactively and giving them the right to bargain on behalf of their members for the first time in any Canadian province's history.

An Hon. Member: It's like you're not afraid of academia.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah.

Anyway, Madam Chair, I believe I have successfully rebutted every erroneous point that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed gave. If I were a faculty member, I would give him an F minus for his speech, and I would encourage the member to go home and do his homework before he continues to oppose this legislation.

Thank you.

Mr. Rodney: Congratulations. That's a new low for you. [interjections] Okay. I'll call a point of order. Shall we? Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Point of order. Go ahead.

Point of Order Intemperate Language

Mr. Rodney: Earlier today there was a point of order, and there was a reference to the fact that words such as "immature," "unprofessional," and "undignified" were unbecoming of an elected official. I know that the NDP is used to being in opposition. I know that being in government is new, but take it from us who are now on this side, to act entitled, to be personally insulting – I didn't do that in my speech, Madam Chair. There were many, many

references that were personal attacks, where we could rise under 23(j).

I would suggest that – and I think this would be true of these folks before they were elected – when they look to a government, they look to a government that is calm and confident, clearly communicates, and consults. I would hope they would learn from mistakes of the past, as I would trust we all would, and I would just suggest humbly to every minister of every Crown that when speaking to others, you do so with respect. I would hope that it would work both ways. Perhaps just a little encouragement to stick to the facts and not make personal attacks.

The Chair: The hon. Acting Deputy Government House Leader.

Ms Ganley: You'll forgive me, Madam Chair. I think this started as a point of order. I'm going to assume that we're under 23(h), (i), and (j). Obviously, there is a significant dispute between the members as to what the facts are. They both believe the other to be incorrect. I did listen with interest to what the hon. Minister of Advanced Education said, and what he critiqued was the argument. He was quite clear that he was talking about the argument. He didn't think the argument as regards postdoctoral students was correct. He didn't think the argument as regards the Labour Relations Board's lack of expertise to determine who is and isn't an employee was correct. He didn't think the argument with respect to the board of governors was correct. I think that this is quite clearly a dispute as to the facts.

I didn't hear anything that resembled a personal attack, Madam Chair. I certainly heard a very vigorous attack of the argument, which is, from what I understand, what we're all here to do today. With respect, I don't believe this is a point of order.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to the point of order?

There is certainly a difference of opinion in how things are interpreted. Certainly, personal attacks are not in order in this House, and I would admonish all members to be very, very careful in their use of language to avoid that kind of thing, but certainly there can be a difference of opinion as to how things are stated. I would, however, caution all members to watch when you are attempting to use humour. Sometimes that can be taken in a very personal way. Let's just be a little more careful in the language that we use.

I'll call on the hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Debate Continued

Mrs. Littlewood: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my privilege to stand and speak in support of Bill 7, An Act to Enhance Postsecondary Academic Bargaining. This is an act that is further commitment from the government to ensure that there is fair legislation that makes life better for hard-working Albertans. It's a bill that would modernize Alberta's labour relations model for our postsecondary sector, and in 2016 it's something that would extend the essential services legislation that was introduced last year and passed in the House. It would be extending the bargaining rights of what that bill does.

What this does in part is that it is recognition of postdoctoral fellow associations' feedback. There was feedback that was received from Alberta's three existing postdoctoral fellow associations during the consultation process. That is what I am hoping to speak to today. For anyone that would like to look at the executive summary of the 108 pages that were provided to the government and to the public, because they were sought out for advice and for feedback during this consultation process, I have five

copies that I will table. It is titled Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation Report for Alberta Advanced Education, January 2017. It is written in part by the University of Lethbridge Postdoctoral Fellows Association, the University of Alberta Postdoctoral Fellows Association, the Postdoctoral Association of the University of Calgary, and the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars. I will not try to pronounce what it translates to in French.

4:00

There are some very important things that are in amongst this. The time right now that we're at is that there was time that was needed for the postsecondary institutions to discuss more what the impacts of the Supreme Court ruling would be on this in guaranteeing these rights of collective bargaining to Canadians and by extension, of course, to Albertans.

I'm happy to stand and support these changes that are from the hon. Minister of Advanced Education. What this does is that it extends the constitutionally protected rights to postsecondary faculty, graduate students, and, for the first time in Canada, to postdoctoral fellows, who will be formally recognized as employees. Also, what it will do is to repeal and create a new division in the Labour Relations Code for the postsecondary sector. It means that for the first time in Canada we will be formally recognizing the status of postdoctoral fellows as employees so that they can have improved rights and protected rights and have fair and respectful workplaces.

Also, with the proposed changes, these graduate students' and postdoctoral fellows' associations would be responsible for bargaining with institutions for mutually beneficial collective agreements. These postdoctoral fellows would be able to come to prudent agreements that respect workers' constitutional rights. It's something that, going forward, is in the interest of the public dollars.

The introduction of this bill last week – we have heard from many stakeholders about the proposed changes. I have been reached out to by a constituent of mine from Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville. I will share that person's thoughts about this with the Member for Calgary-Lougheed because apparently he did not hear positive feedback from any postdoctoral fellows or ones that are part of that agreement right now with the postsecondary institutions.

I was contacted by a Dr. Miranda Brun. She serves in the department of agricultural, food, and nutritional science at the Li Ka Shing Centre for Health Research Innovation at the University of Alberta. She was someone that actually had reached out to me about a year ago because she was concerned that when we are looking at making sure that rights of women and opportunities for women and parents in general are being addressed by this new government in Alberta, we are ensuring that we're giving those opportunities to everyone. While she has started her family and won't be able to enjoy these rights, to finally be able to bargain for and ensure these maternity and parental rights, she wanted to make sure that this was something that I had been made aware of and that I advocated for because she wanted to make sure that it was something that was available for people after her, that would finally be able to have families while pursuing these fellowships at universities.

Some of the numbers that are in this very long submission to government. These people are of family age. I think the average age is 34. They're in these very long career tracks, trying to attain tenure at a university. We don't want these people to feel as though they have to put their entire lives on hold in the interests of having children.

Some of the points that are also in this submission. There's a group called the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars, which I will refer to from here on out as CAPS. In the CAPS 2016 survey data there were some very interesting and alarming statistics for those that are working as postdocs in Alberta: 16 per cent lack dental insurance, 29 per cent lack drug plan coverage, 34 per cent lack health insurance for their family, 35 per cent lack extended health coverage, 60 per cent lack vision and eye care, 76 per cent lack life insurance, and 84 per cent lack long-term disability. One of the other statistics is that only 31 per cent of these postdoctoral fellows have access to benefits from other sources such as a spouse, so the lack of standard employee benefits represents an additional financial burden for postdocs and their families.

I just want to pull out some very relevant information from their submission. I'll quote a bit from it. The presidents of the Postdoctoral Association of the University of Calgary, the University of Alberta Postdoctoral Fellows Association, and the University of Lethbridge Postdoctoral Fellows Association were bringing forward these concerns and aspirations on behalf of approximately 1,000 postdoctoral fellows and scholars who work in Alberta.

These postdocs do incredibly important work. They are highly skilled scientists and educators who hold a PhD, an MD, or equivalent, are members of the academic research community, and are critical drivers for our innovation-based economy. Due to their extensive training, postdocs are positioned to tackle complex research and innovation challenges in our province. Of course, Madam Chair, this is something that is incredibly important when we want to make sure that we have a strong, diversified economy, that we are making sure that Alberta is a valued place to come and do work. Due to this, it gives them the ability to tackle these complex issues in our province.

The typical duration of a postdoctoral fellowship has evolved from a temporary, one- to two-year position to a two- to five-year plus period.

Alberta universities attract many world-class postdocs.

The designation of the Alberta postdocs as trainees has resulted – in their opinion, they have ended up as a very ill-defined mixture between student and employee. The majority of Alberta's postdocs are precluded from contributing to EI and CPP. Their trainee status also makes them ineligible for many of the resources that are afforded to staff and students such as assistance with immigration issues, access to career services, and on-campus health and mental health programs.

It's noted that the challenges faced by postdocs at Alberta universities are not unique, that the labour relations boards in other provinces have also faced similar issues. In January 2012 the Ontario Labour Relations Board ruled that the University of Toronto postdocs were employees, and that enabled their group to unionize. In its decision the board rejected the university's argument that postdocs are academic trainees more similar to students than to faculty members. A similar ruling was also reached in Quebec in 2011, where the labour relations board ruled that postdoctoral fellows were employees.

Postdoctoral fellowship individuals across Canada and around the world continue to face these challenges. What this will do is that it will make Alberta a leader, and that is how we will continue to attract exceptional postdocs to Alberta and strengthen our economy through high-quality research and development in academia, industry, and the private sector.

4:10

You might ask what a postdoc is. Postdocs are highly trained and skilled individuals with a PhD, an MD, or an equivalent.

The postdocs help to drive the research and innovation and advanced education agenda of Alberta, and their work directly benefits their faculty supervisors and the institutions where they work, thus indirectly benefiting all Albertans.

Postdocs primarily work to gain experience and recognition in their field and in order to be competitive for highly coveted tenure-track faculty positions at postsecondary institutions. It makes it hard for it to be a career goal without enough faculty positions that can accommodate them, which is why they see these changes, being able to have CPP and EI, to have employment benefits, as being incredibly important.

According to the data collected in the CAPS 2016 survey, the average postdoc working in Alberta in 2016 was 34, married or living in a common-law relationship. A third of them, Madam Chair, were parents, and of those that were parents, a third had more than one child.

Of the postdocs surveyed, 35 per cent were Canadian citizens, 20 per cent permanent residents or landed immigrants, and 45 per cent were international postdocs holding work permits.

To give a bit of a snapshot of what an average postdoc makes – it's fairly humble – the gross annual income for postdocs working in Alberta was \$49,530 on average, with a median income of \$47,500.

It's worth noting that postdocs in Alberta pay full provincial and federal income tax, yet the vast majority of them are not classified as employees and are therefore denied access to social support programs, including employment insurance and the Canada pension plan. Based on tax forms collected, they saw that only 16 per cent of those working at the U of A, the U of C, and Lethbridge were classified as employees. Of course, in the absence of employee status some of Alberta's postdocs are also denied access to standard benefits such as dental insurance, drug plans, vision and eye care, and employee retirement plans.

They talk about the age of the postdoctoral fellows, postdocs, and it's saying that, you know, it's an age where people are saving for retirement. They're settling down, they're trying to buy a home, and they're trying to start a family. Of course, I'll just remind the House that this is why I received a phone call, because we are talking about maternity and paternal benefits for average, hard-working Albertans that are just trying to make a life for themselves.

There are a few notes here, in particular about postdocs that would be pregnant, and it's making mention of the fact that there is no guaranteed paid maternity leave and that expectant new mothers are typically reluctant to come forward and raise this issue publicly. As postdocs they generally lack any representation, support, or power to negotiate with their host institutions.

Also, part of it was a question on what these postdocs believe was the most important, and among those surveyed, the top three ended up being employment insurance, Canada pension plan, and parental leave, and then at the end was vision and eye care and a retirement plan.

There are just a few more notes that I would like to share with the House: 80 per cent of the 231 postdoc respondents working in Alberta in early 2016 indicated that asking for these statutory employment benefits should be an essential or high priority for those that are representing them right now, and it's for this reason that they provide this chart. It actually has some fairly alarming things to look at when we're talking about labour code amendments and Employment Standards Code amendments because it really gives quite a jarring picture of the things that some of us take very for granted.

Looking at the guidelines and policies for postdocs at Alberta's postsecondary research institutions, you'll see that what they have in common is that as their primary employment status they are

mostly considered trainees; there is either very little or nonexistent access to EI and CPP; it's very difficult to get paid maternity leave unless you can get an external award for that and the same with paternal leave; there is either very little or no paid bereavement leave if a loved one dies; there is no paid sick leave, no job-loss coverage, no compassionate care leave; and there is no access to employer pension plan programs.

There are some arguments that they make in their submission if the Member for Calgary-Lougheed would like to look at it for his own information. It's talking about that Alberta postdocs believe they meet the requirements to be considered employees, and some of those reasons are that they have set hours of work, that they use the tools and equipment that are there, that they are part of the workplace, that they receive this training, and that they are included in most of the things that under normal circumstances make an Albertan an employee.

Some of the other numbers that they talk about are that postdocs spend the majority of their time engaged in research and academic work, which means that 92 per cent of their time is focused on research and academic work and that only 8 per cent of their time is focused on career development. What concerns them as a group is that if they fulfill their fellowship and they don't attain a tenure track in the university, not being an employee means that they are not able to take care of themselves and their family when they are unemployed.

The other key pieces here are that many postdocs working in other provinces are classified as employees, but that's only because the groups in Ontario and Quebec fought this in the courts. So I'm very proud and pleased that Alberta is going to be a leader in including these groups as part of the legislation and that we are being proactive, addressing these constitutional rights in a proactive way.

A couple of the other things that I found very important were . . . [Mrs. Littlewood's speaking time expired] Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any other hon. members wishing to speak to the bill? Seeing none, are you ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 7 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? That's carried.

Bill 8

An Act to Strengthen Municipal Government

The Chair: Are there any questions, comments, or amendments with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Stony Plain-St. Albert.

Mr. Horne: Spruce Grove-St. Albert. Crossboundary road, totally different community, but they do get along very well, so I suppose it's on topic.

As I was just commenting, I have these two cities in my riding, Spruce Grove and St. Albert. The two of them don't really interact too much, which creates a lot of challenges, but where they do interact a lot is with the counties and communities that are more direct neighbours to them. Spruce Grove has a rather well-known

relationship with the town of Stony Plain, right next door, as well as the county of Parkland, that surrounds both of those communities.

4:20

These three communities, of course, have come together on various occasions in support of the community and to further various projects, most notably the tri leisure centre, which was supported by all three communities coming together with some assistance from other places, most notably TransAlta in the construction of the tri leisure centre. The centre, of course, includes a gym, and it hosts several events. Just last month there was the tri-community expo, which hosted a lot of small businesses, and they put on a bit of a trade show. Both myself and the Member for Stony Plain were present, and it was very well attended. This is just indicative of the type of events that happen in the community and that are supported by all three municipalities.

Now, Madam Chair, another great example is St. Albert. I don't know how many members in this House know, but historically St. Albert and Sturgeon county and at some points in history even St. Albert and Edmonton didn't get along that well, in part because Edmonton kept trying to annex it, but that's another story. After the last municipal election the county councillors began hosting some minglers for all of the elected officials. These communities have really improved relationships, especially at the administrative level, and there have been some discussions on how they can better support each other. These conversations, of course, include places like the towns of Morinville, Redwater, various other communities in Sturgeon county. I think that these two are models of municipal collaboration and co-operation, and I think they're great examples of the sorts of things that Albertans hope to see from their elected officials.

Now, on a bit of a larger level and kind of related to Edmonton trying to annex St. Albert are boards like the Capital Region Board, and much co-operation has grown out of that. You know, Madam Chair, there was a recent report on how the Edmonton region can become a global competitor, and there was a lot of discussion amongst several of the mayors. They commissioned a report, and it indicated a lot of very interesting things like collaboration on transportation and on economic development. I'm really glad to see that this is a growing trend here in Alberta and, as far as I can tell, across the country, and I think that there's a lot of reason for optimism there. You know, this is a great trend to see, this collaboration and move towards supporting all of our citizens in a co-operative manner.

Ms McKittrick: Why wouldn't you use the word "collaborative"?

Mr. Horne: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park is commenting on my use of the word "collaborative," but I think that's about the sixth time I've used it in this speech.

I think that's just a great, great suggestion or a great comment on the direction that we're starting to see in the area. We are by no means perfect, neither in the tri region nor in a relationship between Sturgeon county and St. Albert nor within the capital region. Indeed, I don't think any of the relationships across the province are perfect, but that, I suppose, is more of an indication that I don't believe there is such a thing as a perfect relationship. There's always room for improvement. There's always something that we could be working better on. Perhaps it's communication between, in this case, administrations, or perhaps it's trying to find a common project that both communities want and that we can work together on.

Another example of such a project is what is now Servus Place in St. Albert. This project, when it was first proposed, was originally proposed as a collaboration between St. Albert, Sturgeon county, and Morinville, but as these projects are quite expensive, these recreation centres, they really wanted to try to spread the cost out a bit. Now, there's a lot of insider baseball that happened. It went from being located just outside of St. Albert in Sturgeon county to being located in Riel Business Park inside of St. Albert. Very quickly the county and the town expressed their unease with this move, and both communities backed out. Now the citizens of St. Albert are left as the sole tax base for that facility.

This comes up a lot in my community. There are a lot of people who, you know, go to Servus Place and they see people from Morinville, from the county, and indeed sometimes they'll see people from Redwater or other communities drive in. There's nothing wrong with that; they're certainly entitled to. It's a great facility. If you haven't had a chance, Madam Chair, I would highly recommend checking out either the tri leisure or Servus Place. You know, when you have such an expensive project, it makes it a lot more challenging for citizens to stomach that when we're stuck with the entirety of the bill. Of course, there are user fees, but the actual construction of that we're still paying off.

We're starting to outgrow Servus Place as well. Across the capital region we're still seeing a lot of population growth. Spruce Grove had a 5 per cent growth rate last year, which is one of its slowest years in recent years. The population of Spruce Grove has doubled in the past 10 years.

Mr. S. Anderson: That would be Beaumont.

Mr. Horne: The minister is commenting on Beaumont, which, unfortunately, took the place of Spruce Grove as the fastest growing community, but that might be because they had a smaller population, I would suggest.

Mr. S. Anderson: It's because I live there.

Mr. Horne: I'm not so sure it's because the minister lives there, but indeed all three – Beaumont, Spruce Grove, and St. Albert – are among the best communities in the country to raise a family in. There are multiple lists that those three communities have made it to in terms of raising a family, starting a business. I highly recommend looking into those communities as examples of what we can do across the province.

Just as an aside, I think I would be remiss if I didn't comment that the mayor of Spruce Grove, at every opportunity he gets, tries to convince everybody to move to Spruce Grove. He has even tried to convince the mayor of Calgary to move to Spruce Grove. I don't think he's winning that, but he's very passionate about his community.

You know, I think that this bill really supports that co-operation between communities. It furthers it from last session's Bill 21. One thing I was really happy to see is the opportunity to include our indigenous communities in those collaborative frameworks.

4:30

You know, I represent the Alexander First Nation as well as those two cities, and I think that there are a lot of opportunities for us to include communities like the Alexander First Nation in conversations with Sturgeon county. Indeed, in the tri-community – they're outside of my riding; they're in the Member for Stony Plain's riding – you have the Paul band and the Enoch band. Just outside, a bit further north – I'm trying to remember the name of the county – in the minister of agriculture's riding, you have the Alexis First Nation. Those three communities work very closely

with their cities already, and I think that there are probably a lot of opportunities there to support both the bands and the cities in their infrastructure.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. Horne: Whitecourt-St. Anne. Thank you.

I think that this is a great move. I think it's in keeping with the commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, and I really congratulate the minister on his work on that.

You know, we're starting to see that co-operation between those communities more and more. Just recently Spruce Grove had their first city-sponsored truth and reconciliation event. Some of the students out of the high school had done some artwork on the theme of truth and reconciliation, really focusing on the intergenerational trauma that the residential schools has caused. It was a really interesting event. It was hosted at the library.

The city brought out an elder from – I forget. I don't recall at the moment what band he was from, what nation he was from, but he came out, you know, understanding his audience and how new of an experience this was for a lot of the people there. He took the time to walk through what a smudging represents and how to do a proper smudging in his culture, and I think that was very well received. Certainly, it was one of the first times that somebody had walked through the symbolism behind all of it for me. It wasn't, of course, my first smudging, but it was one of the first times that somebody had walked through it. So that was good.

Then there were some speeches from the students on what their artwork represented, followed by a statement from myself and the mayor. The school board also participated in that as well, which is great, especially as it was the students' artwork that brought us there that day.

I think that events like that are starting to open up those connections between the cities and indeed between school boards and their First Nations, really trying to strengthen those relationships and come together not just in the interest of truth and reconciliation but also in supporting their communities. You know, there are a lot of First Nations people who make a lot of use of the local rec centres. I think cities and First Nations will really like to make use of that dialogue on that.

Now, moving a bit forward, we have a lot of opportunities here. I'm just really happy to see that we're moving towards co-operation between all of the different facets that make up the Alberta municipal world. You know, we're seeing groups like the Capital Region Board. I can never remember the name of the board in Calgary, but there's a similar organization that's starting to form. I think that's a great step forward.

You know, as I commented on the other day, Madam Chair, almost half of the working residents of St. Albert commute into Edmonton every day, and a large portion of the population of Spruce Grove commutes into Edmonton every day, but they haven't always historically been included in the discussion on how Edmonton has to look at its transportation flow. I think having this co-operative framework, this collaborative framework, really opens the door to those conversations so that we can support the citizens of Edmonton as they plan and move forward with their planning but also so that we can support people in the surrounding communities.

A prime example is actually just kind of off to the east here, I believe it is. At the transit centre there is a St. Albert bus stop, and that was the bus that I used to take almost every day both when I lived a bit closer to the transit station in St. Albert and as a student. There's a direct line that runs from the St. Albert Centre station just outside of my riding, but I digress on that. That line runs straight

from there, well, it used to run – the next stop was MacEwan University, so that was very convenient for me. After that there are, I think, two or three stops, and then it arrives here at Government Centre. I think that that's a good indication of just how much of the St. Albert population commutes into not just the downtown core but indeed to the government buildings.

Now, of course, Spruce Grove also has a lot of working, commuting population. I don't recall the exact percentage off the top of my head, but it is quite sizable. But it's also shifting, Madam Chair. Historically Spruce Grove was a farming community, but as it has been growing and as it has been – you know, it's one of the cheaper communities in the area in terms of residential housing prices, so there's a lot of growth in Spruce Grove. What we're seeing is a shift from a lot of retiring farmers and professionals that are supporting the farming community, and we're moving more towards people choosing to live there as a bit of a step between the big city and the small town, as they're moving to the Edmonton region, whether it's for work or to be closer to family. In some cases there are also students who are graduating, people just beginning to start their family, start their life, and they're choosing Spruce Grove.

That's driven a lot of the growth in Spruce Grove, I believe. This growth has meant that Spruce Grove is really kind of on the cusp of reflecting on their identity, on what it means to be Spruce Grove. Ten years ago, even, it was a lot older of a city in terms of its average age, you know, a lot of the people had an agriculture background, and you can still see that a lot today.

Thank you.

4:40

The Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the next member to speak, I'd just like to remind everyone that the purpose of bill debate in Committee of the Whole is to actually look at the clauses of the bill, discuss portions of it, submit amendments, and that sort of thing rather than giving speeches that are sort of just generalities, that are perhaps more appropriate for a response to the Speech from the Throne or something like that. It's helpful, so we can get on with the business, if we do it in a more proper way.

I'd like to recognize the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. S. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I wholeheartedly agree that the MGA is fantastic and exciting and quite interesting. There's a lot in there and a lot we can talk about. As you know, we have consulted extensively on this, and we've heard from thousands of people and organizations.

What I'd like to do now is actually bring forward an amendment if I could.

The Chair: This will be known as amendment A1.

Go ahead, hon. member.

Mr. S. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair. We heard recently that we shouldn't miss the opportunity to make this change while the act is open, so we prepared an amendment regarding business improvement areas. Currently the status quo is that business owners pay the levy for the business improvement area. Municipalities and BIAs are asking for this change to improve community collaboration. The proposed change is to update the MGA so that business improvement area levies may be applied to property owners so that both business owners and property owners may be members of a business improvement area. This amendment is widely supported throughout the BIA community as well as by the cities of Edmonton and Calgary, where most of the Alberta BIAs are located.

We heard from the business improvement area council of Edmonton recently that while this is a small change around wording, it is critical to BIA success. We heard from the business improvement area in Calgary that this amendment will support BIAs in their work to improve a business area and increase property values. We heard from the city of Calgary and the city of Edmonton that they strongly support this amendment and that their local consultation revealed widespread support for it as well.

This is a consensus item among stakeholders, and I am happy to bring forward this amendment in response to their request. We've always said that this act is all about collaboration, and this amendment is in keeping with this spirit and will ensure that both business owners and property owners collaborate as members of BIAs. I would encourage all members to support this. I'm happy to explain or take questions where there are some.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the amendment, to provide some additional time for us to consider the amendment. What I will do is speak to the clauses of the bill and, in particular, the clauses of this very important amendment that was moved by my colleague from across the way the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

You know, one of the things that from time to time can be a little concerning about the lack of use of the committee process here in the Chamber – and I know, Madam Chair, you will be familiar with me rising from time to time to speak to pieces of legislation where I make a recommendation that we send that particular piece of legislation to committee. One of the great strengths of that and one of the great strengths of the Westminster parliamentary system – most jurisdictions, in fact, use a much more robust committee system – is that it would have allowed an opportunity for all members of the Chamber to speak directly to the very stakeholders that my colleague from across the way the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Member for Leduc-Beaumont mentioned and those supporters of this particular amendment. It would have allowed them to speak to all members of the Chamber and, in fact, would have allowed the Official Opposition the opportunity to peruse and have a much better understanding of why they would be recommending an amendment like this.

Unfortunately, what we have before us is an amendment that is of significant length, and I know that my colleague from across the way, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Member for Leduc-Beaumont, did have the opportunity to reach out to my colleague from Livingstone-MacLeod very briefly yesterday and speak for just a couple of moments about some of the intention of the amendment. However, it was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a full briefing on this particular amendment but was, as I understand it, much more what we heard from the minister today.

It does present a bit of a challenge for the opposition when it comes to making decisions on the fly about supporting an amendment or not. I think many folks will be familiar with this quote: "Trust, but verify." While I appreciate the comments from my colleague on the other side of the House, the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Member for Leduc-Beaumont, and would like to take him at his word around his opportunity to reach out to the stakeholders of these different districts, I and, I would expect, members on this side of the House haven't had that same opportunity. So we're going to very briefly make a decision on this amendment based upon the comments from the minister and our ability, and I see my colleague from Livingstone-MacLeod very

quickly reading through the rest of the amendment. It would be helpful if we could do these things in a much different setting.

The other thing that I might just point out is that while I am a big fan of getting legislation right the first time it comes through the Chamber, I from time to time do find it curious that we see the introduction of a piece of government legislation that they assure all members of the Assembly they had consulted on widely. In fact, they'd released the Continuing the Conversation document during the last legislative session and, to their credit, did continue that conversation with a number of the associations and the rural districts and with business and industry. I know that we'll talk at some length about the need to balance those stakeholders, particularly around taxation ratios. While, you know, it's very important that we create certainty for municipalities, it's also important that we create certainty for industry, and I know that Bill 8 doesn't quite do that. To their credit, they have done a significant amount of continuing that conversation.

But I am a little surprised that this particular amendment was unable to be included in the original legislation. I'm wondering if the minister might just provide a little bit of context for us as to what exactly transpired between the introduction of the bill and whatever stakeholder consultation took place that would change the government's mind enough that they would then go ahead and decide to make a fairly significant change to the legislation only a few days after it was introduced. I wondered if he might provide a little bit more context as to how and why that happened.

4:50

Perhaps he could go into a little bit more detail as I understand that some of this particular amendment changes the way that a municipality may be able to tax – as you know, Madam Chair, I received it less than 30 seconds prior to standing – changing some of the structure around the way a municipality could tax a business inside a larger strip mall or mall, changing some structure around that. If he could provide some context, I know that members on this side of the House certainly would appreciate that.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. S. Anderson: Sure. Thank you very much to the member across for mentioning my riding multiple times. It is a fantastic riding.

This is not a massive, significant piece of legislation or amendment that we're bringing through. To be honest, it is simply that right now the status quo is that municipalities tax the business owners. All the BIAs and the cities and the municipalities have come forward and said that they would like the opportunity to do either business or property. It's simply an enabling tool for them so that they can come together around the table. For some of the property owners, if they aren't taxed, if they don't have that ability where people can get them, say, a vacant piece of land or what have you, it's really hard to track them down and find out who they are. This is one of the things the BIAs talked about with the property owners and things like that and said: "Well, this is a way that we could have you at the table. You want to be at the table. Municipalities want it; cities want it." To be honest, it is very straightforward. You know, you don't have to take me at my word. I know that. You want to get verification. But it's a pretty straightforward amendment that we're doing here.

We have heard from and I've had letters from the Alberta BIA council, Edmonton and Calgary. We do have a lot of feedback on this. It had come up, you know, before I was Minister of Municipal Affairs, way back in the day, not that long ago, I guess. It was something that I met with the BIAs on about two weeks ago. To be

honest, I think it was just something where, with all the other things that were going on, the regulations and the legislation, somehow we just hadn't worked it in there. They came back to us and said: "Hey, you know what? This is a consensus issue. We're not really understanding why it wasn't added into it." We said: "You know what? You're right. This is a pretty straightforward amendment. Let's have a discussion."

So we got letters from some of the different BIAs just to confirm that that was what they wanted still, and they did, and we got approval from them. That's why we brought it forward. It's pretty simple. It is straightforward. You know, I talked to the member opposite yesterday about it, and we were waiting on some approvals and some of these letters to come in just for confirmation. We got those, and now here we are.

The Chair: Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair. To my colleague from across the way, the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and Member for Leduc-Beaumont: I appreciate your remarks. I appreciate the fact that you've gotten some feedback from the BIAs and the municipality. If you can help me to understand, I would appreciate it. Does this change the way that a municipality is able to tax an individual business? Have you heard from industry, not just the BIAs? Have you heard from small-business owners that this change may or may not impact? I appreciate that while it might be a simple amendment, I don't necessarily have the full grasp of exactly how the change affects the end-user. Have you heard back from small businesses that may be impacted, or are they unlikely to be impacted? Or is it just feedback from the BIAs?

Mr. S. Anderson: It's actually a levy that the municipalities already have in place. It's not something we're introducing brand new. It's something where the municipalities have a levy on business owners in business improvement areas. So, yes, it's small business. It's all the businesses that are involved in these municipalities that would be involved in the BIAs. That's where it comes from. All it is is that instead of only pointing out particular businesses, you also have the opportunity to have that levy on a property; for example, if you have a vacant or destitute building, something like that. That's all it is.

It's just making it so that it can be either/or rather than only making it on business. That's how this works. Municipalities and small businesses who are part of these BIAs: these are the ones who asked us for this. It is quite straightforward in that respect. That's kind of why I say that. These small businesses are all involved in this, and these are the ones that are asking for it. That's really all it is. It's really quite straightforward, to be honest with you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1?

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Chair: Are there any further questions, comments, or amendments with respect to Bill 8? The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. Good afternoon, everyone, once again. I would like to first of all let the pages know that I am going to be introducing an amendment in a couple of moments.

Firstly, I'd like to talk a little bit about the area of concern I have. My topic this afternoon once again is going to be the 5 to 1 tax ratio which is part of Bill 8. We spoke about this at great length yesterday

afternoon. With the results of those conversations, Madam Chair, I would like to therefore get back to that topic after all the other topics we've had today. I may be speaking a little bit at length here after we distribute this amendment. Basically, this is an amendment about the uncertainty of time and the lack of a specified time frame in the clauses referring to the 5 to 1 tax ratio. That's what this amendment is about.

I'll hand that over right now. I'll provide some time for the distribution, and then I'll be back up again.

Thank you.

The Chair: This will be known as amendment A2.

Go ahead, hon. member.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Madam Chair. I guess I'll proceed. I know some members haven't received it as yet, but I think I can go ahead because some have. Basically, just to refresh everyone's memory, the 5 to 1 ratio, once again, is a change in the mill rate that a lot of municipalities have been used to in the past couple of decades, really, in most respects. Those 19 to 22 communities, and I'm not sure which is the correct number right now, where the communities have a tax ratio that's more than – I see 20 from the minister right now. [interjections] Okay.

Anyway, I'll just read it out loud if that's okay, Madam Chair. I move that Bill 8, An Act to Strengthen Municipal Government, be amended in section 1(31)

- (a) by striking out clause (b) and substituting the following:
 - (b) by adding the following after subsection (3):
 - (3.1) If in any year after 2016 a non-conforming municipality has a tax ratio that is greater than 5:1, the non-conforming municipality shall reduce its tax ratio to 5:1 on or before May 1, 2029.
- (b) by striking out clause (d).

5:00

Just to give you an understanding of what that really means, we had said yesterday – and we are fairly firm on this – that we believe that the clauses in Bill 8 should have included, instead of an unspecified time, some sort of a time that municipalities know they can plan for in the future where these changes have to be made. We recognize that in terms of industry needs and all other kinds of things for the economy of Alberta, there needs to be some time when these tax ratios are in some regard remedied from where they are now, but we don't think it's fair to not specify a time because we don't think that municipalities and residents and Albertans can plan without knowing when the deadline is going to occur.

I would like, in that regard, to support this with a message. This might seem a little bit unconventional in some respects for today, but as you know, today is the one-year anniversary of the wildfire that devastated the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo. My colleague and friend the hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition is there today, actually, as are others, the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo as well, to participate in the festivities honouring all those who were displaced by the wildfire. Since my colleagues are unable to participate here today, they asked if I would read a letter into the record on their behalf, which I will do now, Madam Chair.

Good Afternoon fellow colleagues,

I am sorry that I am unable to be there in person with all of you today to participate in debate on Bill 8, An Act to Strengthen Municipal Government and more importantly to speak in support of the amendment my colleague has just moved.

The residents of RMWB are facing the prospect of our seeing our taxes being raised [by almost as much as] 300%. If the proposed amendment is defeated and Bill 8 is passed unamended, it would result in the residential property taxes in RMWB and 21

other municipalities being raised significantly, potentially without warning, on the whim of the Minister.

An Act to Strengthen Municipal Government, strength. I think if I was to describe the community of Fort McMurray and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in a word that word would be strength.

Strength – Is what you call loading up 60 frightened kids, whose parents were unreachable and evacuating out of Fort McMurray, not knowing where it was in fact you were going. Think about that. Fire is literally biting at your ankles and you've got 60 of your community's most vulnerable citizens packed on a bus, none of whom have been able to connect with their parents, you don't know what's happening, or even where you are going. Hours later you finally end up in Edmonton, 450 kms from where you began. Tired and hungry. Scared. But alive. That's strength.

Strength – Is hearing about the hundreds of people who fled their homes only to become stranded on the highway because they've run out of gas; and loading up your pickup truck with 500 liters of diesel and gasoline and driving towards the inferno. Think about that for a moment. Your first response to one of the largest natural disasters in our nation's history is to fill your vehicle up to the brim with gasoline and diesel and drive as close to the fire as possible and then spend the next 40 hours saving hundreds of your fellow citizens. That's strength.

Strength – Is fighting desperately for more than 24 hours without sleep, to save a stranger's house while your own home burns to the ground in front of you. When you finally get a moment to breathe you spend it calling your wife and telling her the house where you've made your lives together. The home in which your children were born into. The home you lived in. Laughed in. Cried in. Loved in was gone. That's strength.

A year has passed since my community was tested by "the beast". I am proud of the resilience of my community and the outpouring of support we have received from every corner of this magnificent province. Fort McMurray and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo will rebuild, better, and stronger than before. But just as we needed your help and support during the devastating wildfire of one year ago, we need your help and support again today [here in this House].

It was signed:

Sincerely,

Hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

In closing, without the proposed amendment, the minister would be the sole decision-maker for when and how a municipality that currently exceeds a nonresidential-to-residential property tax ratio of 5 to 1 must comply. For any community that is unprecedented. For a community in the early stages of recovering from one of the world's natural disasters, the worst one in our nation's history, it is totally unacceptable.

This amendment balances the need for municipalities in the province to become a competitive and attractive place to do business with the needs of everyday Albertans to live in safe and viable communities. Unfortunately, the issues that are caused with this nonresidential property tax increasing beyond the 5 to 1 ratio are not easily fixed in one, two, three, or even five years. The process of lowering the property tax ratio will take time. Municipalities need certainty. Business and industry need certainty. The best way for the government to provide municipalities with certainty is to pass this amendment, setting a definite timeline, setting in some predictability, setting in some sort of balancing idea that will strike a balance between taxing and encouraging business to thrive and grow and prosper.

I would ask the House to seriously look at this amendment for setting a prescribed timeline so that it won't impact some of the speculative real estate market and all of that as badly as it likely will if it's not amended in this way. It is a 12-year timeline that we're

asking for, and I hope that all of you can give it serious consideration and, hopefully, your approval.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. S. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the chance to stand and speak to this amendment, and I appreciate the member bringing this forward. I understand why he's brought this forward. One of the things I'd like to know is: why 2029? Why 12 years? I don't know where that number came from.

We committed to work with RMWB and industry on time frames, and we committed to wait until they were done working with industry on what would work for them. That's what I'm going to do. That was my commitment. I've committed that to other municipalities as well. I understand when we talk about certainty and things like that, you know, out there for these guys, industry and municipalities.

I do want to say that, you know, the point about residential taxes rising 300 per cent is patently untrue, Madam Chair. I'm not sure why that keeps getting said. It was said on the radio today, too, and it's unfortunate to spread misinformation. I don't like doing that. I don't agree with it.

You know, I'm going to work with the RMWB, and we will make sure that we find something that works for them. Maybe it's 10 years. Maybe it's 14 years. Maybe it's 15 years. I don't know yet until we've heard from them exactly what they think they can do, what time frame they think they can do this in and what would work for them.

I've been in Wood Buffalo a few times now. I've spoken with the council. I've spoken to industry. I've spoken with the chamber of commerce about this. You know, something that I want to make sure that I do is to hear from the people that are being affected by this. I was there on Sunday night and on Monday, and I talked to residents that were there. I talked to people that were affected by the wildfire, and it is a really tough day for a lot of them. A lot of them want to get over it, and they want to try to move forward in a positive way.

You know, I met with a fellow when I was there in February named Steve Menard, who's building his own house. He lost everything, and he's building his own house. I got to have lunch with him again when I was there on Monday. I'll tell you that I think everybody in this province needs to meet Steve Menard and hear the way he looks at things. He lost everything, but he remembers when he was young that he had a hockey coach that said: you're an ACE, Steve; you need to run your life like you're an ACE. That's attitude, character, and enthusiasm. That's the way he works. So when he meets people on the street that are having hard times or they've lost everything, he brings them up, he lifts them up, and he talks to them about the positive things that we can do.

For me, working with the RMWB and all the municipalities out there on these ratios is a hugely positive thing. Communication is key. That's part of who I am and what I do. I've always been that way. That's how I was brought up. You know, I look a person in the face, and I shake their hand. That's the way I am. So when I told these guys in RMWB that my commitment was to wait until they came forward with their recommendations, I was telling them the truth, and I will stand by that.

5:10

I appreciate where the member is coming from. I do. I understand what he's trying to say. But I have been there and have spoken with these people numerous times. My staff, my administration: it's a constant communication. I want to make sure that everybody knows

that. I don't do things just on a whim. It's not who I am. I make sure I have facts. I don't speculate. I don't use assumptions. I don't get fears out there for people when they don't need that right now. They know that we have their back. They know that my Municipal Affairs ministry has their back, and I've told them I have their back. I'm not going to go out there and talk about apocalyptic things that are out there that possibly could happen in the future when I haven't heard back from them. Speculation isn't going to do any of us any good. Once we have information from the RMWB and industry, then we can make the decisions.

Until that point in time – I appreciate what the member across has brought forward, and like I said, I understand it, but I will not be voting for this amendment.

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

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Madam Chair. First of all, I'd like to thank the Minister of Municipal Affairs for his comments and his clarification. I would especially like to thank the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod for putting this forward.

What I just heard has made me more than ever want to be in support of a clause like this. I don't doubt for a second that the hon. minister is totally honourable to his word and will consult with the RM of Wood Buffalo and everyone else, any other municipalities that are in a similar situation, but in the five years that I've been here, he may be the eighth or 10th Minister of Municipal Affairs. To me, that makes it all the more important why we have to have something in writing, so the certainty is there for industry, so the certainty is there for the good people of Wood Buffalo and Fort McMurray, as both hon. speakers talked so strongly about. It's absolutely not questionable.

The way I read this amendment, it's 12 years at the most. If the hon. minister and the people of Wood Buffalo decide to do it over 11 years or nine years or six, they can. You know, whatever it works out to.

So often when you try to compare things to the Legislature and law, I look back to what you do in your family, what you do in your household, or I look back to what you do in your business. When I've had the opportunity to be sitting with a colleague or a supplier or a contractor that I wanted to do business with in the future, the more you get in writing, the better. It's so easy to think: what was meant by that; was that what was really said?

Well, this is such a great, succinct clause. The minister and the municipality have tons of local decision-making, tons of authority and oversight on this until May 1, 2029. For these very reasons, Madam Chair and colleagues, it's always better to get it in writing. There have been several different ministers in Municipal Affairs. This doesn't remove any opportunity that the minister has to work it out directly other than by May 1, 2029.

I again will thank my hon. colleague for this great amendment, and I will be supporting it.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to my colleague from Cypress-Medicine Hat. Also, thank you to the minister for his remarks. I'd just like to take an opportunity to address some of the remarks he did make and add a little bit of context to the situation.

I think it's important to realize that no one can predict how a municipality will make such a large adjustment, as in the case of Wood Buffalo, from 18 to 1 down to 5 to 1, over the period of time that we arrive at. One can only conclude that if we're going to be adjusting from that high of a ratio down, somewhere along the way the residents will be impacted by a fairly significant increase in their

taxes. Certainly, we know that McMurray has been going through an awful lot of difficulties this past year. There's no question about that.

I would also like to remind the minister, with all due respect, and his predecessor that earlier last fall during the debates on Bill 21 this subject was raised as a concern. This subject was addressed in Bill 21, was something that we felt was relatively palatable, and that was the grandfather clause that was in Bill 21 that allowed for those municipalities that were beyond the 5 to 1 ratio to be declared as nonconforming municipalities. Therefore, they would not be required to commit to this change. That was also supported by a letter that was written by the minister at the time. His predecessor again, by the way, I'm referring to: I think her constituency is Lesser Slave Lake if I recall. She said in the local newspaper that there was going to be a commitment to sticking with this, that they should not worry, that this was not going to change, and that they looked forward to working with the municipality, as the current minister has talked about as well. That grandfather clause was there.

This new bill that has been brought out has caused, in my view, a flip-flop on that particular circumstance, and that's the way the people are reading it. It may not be written in stone somewhere that it is a flip-flop, but that's the way people are viewing it, that's the way the residents are viewing it, and that's the way the municipality views it. Frankly, Minister, I understand that that may be contradicting what you understand, and I respect you for your position.

But it was from conversations one-on-one with some of the representatives from the municipality that we are here today discussing this to this length. It was they, in fact, who suggested to us that the 12-year window that is in this amendment today would be something that they thought they could work towards and perhaps work with.

Once again I ask for consideration of this. I ask for this timeline of 12 years to be a solid consideration, and hopefully some other members may wish to speak in support of this amendment.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the amendment brought forward by my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod. I just want to very briefly echo some of the comments that have been made by my colleagues because I appreciate the fact that the government is looking to create some certainty broadly across the province. I appreciate that taxation rates in some parts of the province have, particularly for nonresidents – as such, for businesses and our largest providers or our largest employers and all sorts of other great benefits that they provide, taxes have been passed along to them at a ratio that does create some competitive disadvantages perhaps to some of our neighbours. So there is an element of trying to create uniformity all across the province and provide industry a very, very competitive environment. Obviously, people on this side of the House have at length spoken about the need for us to do that.

But something that's equally as important as the taxation rate is certainty in business. I'm certain that if industry had a very clear path forward, they would be willing to accept a longer timeline because what this legislation is going to do is to triple the taxes of residents in Fort McMurray in quite possibly as little as three years. This is, you know, at a time when residents are rebuilding, at a time when many of them are still out of their homes. This does not create the long-term stability. Even in the discussion document that the government will sometimes reference, around a timeline of five years, it's all based in the regulations.

5:20

We spoke earlier today about: trust, but verify. As it turns out, we've heard the minister say similar sorts of things: "Don't worry. We're not going to have a negative impact. We're going to make sure we work closely with the municipality." But the easiest way to create certainty for both the municipality – and the municipality is the first to recognize that there is a need to work together. Create that stability and predictability for the municipality over a long period of time or a longer period of time and the same for industry.

This, I think, is a very reasonable compromise. It is going to allow certainty for the municipality to plan for what that will look like when they get down to a 5 to 1 ratio and certainty for business, where they have an end target of exactly what that will look like. We've seen regulations go sideways on numerous occasions, and this would prevent that from happening. I think it's reasonable. I encourage all members to support it, particularly in light of the fact that even though the government says, "Don't worry; municipal taxes aren't going to increase in Fort McMurray," there is no other path forward for them to get to 5 to 1 and still be able to operate the municipality in a manner that they're used to.

The other thing that's, I think, important to note is that it's not just the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo. There are others that are impacted by this, and it would provide the same certainty for those that it would for the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo.

So I encourage the hon. member. If, in fact, we can trust him, that they're going to do it over a long period of time, there should be no problem, then, to put some dates to exactly what that looks like.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would certainly second what previous speakers have said, but I'd also like to point out a couple of other nuances to the realities of Bill 8 with regard to the 5 to 1 ratio and the amendment that's before us.

Let me first of all begin by saying that the tax divergence, which is what we're talking about, incurs almost entirely in rural communities. Those are communities with large industry-caused expenses. Those large industries require certain amounts of infrastructure in order for them to function: heavy roads, which are much more expensive to build than just local roads. They require infrastructure in terms of health facilities, in terms of policing. Those are some of the obvious ones. There are others as well, though.

Yet while they cause this expense to the municipality, the reality is that the majority of their workers in many cases are what I'm going to call drive-in or fly-in employees. They don't actually live in the municipality that they are working in and in which this industry causes the expense to occur. This is part of the reason why we have this problem of extreme tax ratio. The tax base actually is fly-in or drive-in. Many of the people who work there, who cause the expenses, the industry itself that causes the expenses: in many cases those employees don't actually work there. They're camp workers, and they don't pay tax. These rural municipalities, on top of having this large industry-caused expense, also have, actually, minimal local populations, relatively speaking, in many cases.

Now what we're doing by not taking a very careful approach to how we re-equalize this tax issue is that we're going to be throwing the costs of industry onto the backs of the ordinary, local people. That's exactly what's going to happen. In many ways it's unjust.

The ordinary people who actually live in these regions and don't fly home to somewhere else – even in Lacombe-Ponoka, for

instance, it happens because the large Joffre gas plant, which is in Lacombe county, actually receives most of its employees from the city of Red Deer. All of those employees do not pay taxes in that county. So in a very real way the local farm community around the plant, that, really, in many respects doesn't want it there in the first place, that doesn't particularly benefit from it, is the one that is actually going to see their taxes raised, that is going to see significant tax rises, and, with that, especially in some of the farther out rural areas, a potential loss of property value, declines in population. Really, this is going to be on the backs of the local people in the end.

Bill 21 did have the grandfather clause in it, protected the timeline with which this would happen. Bill 8 now calls these communities nonconforming, and there's no certainty, no guarantee for them on how quickly this will happen, how the transition is going to take place, what's going to happen.

Another part of this that concerns me, which is a little bit different but still important to the broader picture, is that in some respects what's happening here is that the provincial government or, in this case, the minister is taking the decision-making authority away from the local authorities and giving it to the minister. This is in some respects, in some areas viewed as a power grab. It's the continuing principle of the centralization of everything. It's a discrimination, and it's a bias. It's an inequity against the authority of the rural areas. It really is taking the decision-making from the local municipal governments to the provincial government.

The solution is not some sudden decree by the minister, which is potential in the way it currently stands, but a reasonable horizon, the security of a reasonable horizon. Let the municipalities figure it out in a reasonable horizon. Respect the local decision-making of those authorities, and don't drive the cost of industry back onto the backs of the local landowners and the local residents.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise and request that we rise and report progress.

The Chair: Is that motion to rise and report progress on Bill 8 . . .

Mr. Cooper: Correct on Bill 8.

The Chair: . . . and to rise and report Bill 7?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, yeah. Bill 7 is fine.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ms Sweet: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 7. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 8. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

5:30

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 10 Appropriation Act, 2017

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

Dr. Starke: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a great privilege to speak to third reading of Bill 10, the government's Appropriation Act, 2017, and this indeed is the discussion of the government's budget and their plans for spending for the upcoming fiscal year.

As has been my habit in the past when looking at budgets, I like to try to say at least a couple of things that I see in the budget that I think are positives and that I think are good things that I support. For example, one of them – and this was covered in our estimates with the Health minister – is that I certainly support the effort of the minister to try to get a handle on, specifically, physician compensation. I give her as well as the Alberta Medical Association a great deal of credit in this regard because certainly physician costs, hospital costs, and pharmaceutical costs are the three principal drivers that have increased the health care budget consistently greater than the rate of inflation plus population growth.

It's a difficult curve to bend. It is, in fact, interesting to see how other provinces are finding the same sorts of struggles. I have been seeing some of the advertising coming across from the British Columbia election, and it's interesting to see that despite the fact that B.C. has one of the highest performing health care systems in our nation, there are still significant issues in the B.C. health care system. The Ontario health care system also has issues, so this is something that is not unique to Alberta, but I do applaud the minister in her efforts to try to bend the curve specifically on physician compensation and specifically in the area where we're trying to move more doctors to an alternate compensation model as opposed to strictly being fee for service.

The province of Alberta has for years had the highest percentage of physicians who are primarily compensated on a fee-for-service basis, and it is one of the principal cost drivers. As we found when we conducted the rural health review, it is also one of the things that creates distortions in our health care system that are not helpful to the delivery of health care services in our province.

The second area that I'm going to commend the government on – and this is sort of across a number of ministries – is their ongoing commitment to infrastructure construction, not just to new construction but also to infrastructure maintenance. This is a positive thing, and I will tell you that this is something that, in my assessment, in my candid assessment of our past government – although we hear a lot from the other side about the many and various failings of our 12 consecutive Conservative majority governments, I do believe that this is something that history will show was a shortcoming of our government. I think it's important that if we're going to have a candid assessment, we acknowledge things that we fell short on. I think that this is one of them. I do think that it is extremely important that not only do we build new infrastructure but that we also maintain it. This government's commitment to increasing infrastructure maintenance budgets is an important part of that.

Now, I do have to say that I found some of the changes in the capital plan section a little bit interesting. The fact that it went from a five-year capital plan to a four-year capital plan was interesting, and I asked three different ministers why that change had been made, and I got three different answers. I found that somewhat curious. I would have expected a more consistent answer between

ministers as to why the capital plan horizon had changed from a five-year horizon to a four-year horizon and why there were significant shifts in how certain projects had been costed out.

Specifically, in the Department of Education I note that this year there is an announcement for the construction in the out-years of the budget of an additional 36 schools. Certainly, last year's capital budget did not have any provision for new schools beyond the completion of the capital plan and the school build that was initiated by the previous government. We know that these schools are now being opened and are coming on stream. Certainly, some of them were delayed by a variety of factors, some of which were not within the control of the government, some of which were local matters, but I know that, for example, I attended a school opening in our constituency last November, and this was a school that from announcement to opening of the doors was a two-year time frame. So schools can be built very quickly, and schools can be built very efficiently, and there are a lot of factors that contribute to that.

But I do have a number of concerns, and I think it would be remiss if I didn't at least discuss what my concerns are. Perhaps principal amongst them are the deficit and the debt that this budget takes on. Now, we can have a lot of discussions – and some of them will be philosophically driven – as to what level of deficit and debt is appropriate. Now, the Finance minister is very comfortable with a high level of deficit, and he seems very comfortable with a high level of debt. In order to ease his comfort in terms of these ever-increasing levels of debt, he has created a situation where there is an ever-increasing debt-to-GDP ratio, which is found to be acceptable. You know, that concerns me because a lot of other jurisdictions in Canada, a lot of other provinces are in fact moving to balanced budgets and are in fact curving the debt-to-GDP ratio in their provinces. Even the province of Quebec has a balanced budget this year and is contributing some \$2 billion within their \$100 billion budget towards debt repayment. You know, I hope that we can get to a point in Alberta where we're doing that sooner rather than later. It certainly concerns me that the Finance minister seems to show no commitment to a specific plan for paying down the debt.

In fact, I suppose the cynic could say that the 2016 budgeted deficit was \$10.4 billion and this year's budgeted deficit is \$10.3 billion and that at the current rate of progress it will take this government 102 more years to come to a balanced budget. It's perhaps a simplistic analysis, but it is every bit as valid as the one that the Finance minister has offered this House because he has just given a series of pie-in-the-sky and wishful-thinking dates that we will return to a balanced budget. You know, I am hopeful, certainly, that that is something that we will move towards.

The second area of concern is our much-vaunted tax advantage. Now, at the time that this government took office in 2015, that tax advantage over the next lowest taxed jurisdiction in our nation was some \$11 billion. One third of that advantage has already been frittered away by this administration. They've gone from an \$11 billion advantage to a \$7.5 billion advantage, which will increase – I'm sure the Finance minister is about to heckle me – to \$8.7 billion this year through no action of his. That increase is purely because other jurisdictions are moving and you have decided not to. So don't take credit for things that you can't take credit for.

But I point out again that that advantage used to be \$11 billion, and I worry that that is an advantage that we should actually be working towards trying to maintain rather than treating it as if that's the room we have to play with before we're no longer the lowest taxed jurisdiction in the nation. I don't think that there's any indication that this minister thinks that that is still an important advantage to have. I don't think that we are seeing a commitment on behalf of this minister or this government to maintain Alberta as

the lowest taxed jurisdiction. In fact, I hear a lot from some members of this government that indicates that being the lowest taxed jurisdiction is something we shouldn't be proud of, and I think that's a concern.

A third area is a major concern of mine that came up during the course of estimates – and it's very specific to one ministry, but I have to raise it because it is an area that I'm particularly concerned with – and that is in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The Culture and Tourism minister told us at estimates that they would no longer be doing specific calculations as to the economic impact of tourism to our economy. That's a stunning revelation.

5:40

The tourism industry is driven by numbers, Madam Speaker. The tourism industry always had a very clear picture of how many businesses, how many jobs, what the economic impact was, and what the contribution to the provincial coffers was each and every year, yet we were told in estimates that that was something that was felt to be no longer useful. I find it interesting that in every press release that comes from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, they are still quoting numbers to indicate how great the economic impact of the tourism industry is to our province, yet they are quoting the last set of numbers that they have, and those, in fact, are numbers from 2014.

Unless the minister can demonstrate to this House a clear commitment to provide the kinds of measurements and statistics and numbers that allow the tourism industry to mark its progress as it grows and changes and develops and supposedly acts as a diversification driver, which I'm sure it could do, my question is: if you're not measuring it, how do you know? You have no clue as to whether tourism is in fact acting as a diversifier of our economy.

You know, the other end of things that has been kind of interesting has been some of the myths. I don't have time to go through all of the myths that have been perpetuated during the course of this debate by members of the government, but I do want to go after one, and that is the myth that they're doing a serious attempt at restraint of expenditure. Whenever we bring up the restraint of expenditure point, the only thing that they're able to bring forward is their recent review of CEO salaries and compensation packages for the ABCs.

Now, I support that review, and I support the idea that we have to bring these salaries more into line, and, no, I'm not advocating on behalf of golf course memberships, but I do want to say: let's keep this in perspective. That review will save the government \$16 million. Sixteen million dollars is a good saving, but \$16 million represents 0.03 per cent of the budget. If you're going to even get to a balanced budget, Minister, you have to do that 643 more times. So far we've seen no evidence that you're even prepared to do it one more time, never mind 643.

You know, we hear other things in relation to the budget. We hear the Minister of Economic Development and Trade saying how the world is moving past coal as a source of generation for electricity. That seems odd given that there are 2,400 coal-fired electricity generation plants either under construction or being planned worldwide. If the world is moving past coal, it seems odd that they would be building all of these plants. I think we are actually missing a huge opportunity, Madam Speaker, in terms of providing Alberta technology that could provide the world, those 2,400 coal plants, with some of the technology to reduce the emissions, to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions, to reduce the carbon footprint.

I mean, I will give you an example. If there was technology developed in Alberta to reduce the emissions from those 2,400 plants by 5 per cent, that would be the equivalent of taking 120 coal plants out of commission, yet this government trumpets that it's

taking 19 coal plants out of commission. Wouldn't it be better for Alberta technology, our ingenuity, to develop a process that could be marketed, that could be sold, that could be exported world-wide and applied? Even if it's applied to only half of those 2,400 plants, that's still 60 coal plants that you're essentially taking out of commission.

The last one that I actually have real enjoyment about is green shoots. Green shoots. Now, I will confess, Madam Speaker – and you can ask my wife – I am not skilled at horticulture. If there are houseplants in our house that she leaves to my care, I can basically guarantee they will be dead within a week. Green shoots. The minister consistently talks about how we're going to have green shoots and that we're seeing these signs – don't get me wrong; I applaud every sign that our economy is recovering. I think it's very positive.

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. member, but pursuant to Standing Order 64(5) I now must put the question on the appropriation bill for third reading.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for third reading of Bill 10 carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:45 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson, S.	Horne	Miranda
Babcock	Jansen	Nielsen
Bilous	Kazim	Phillips
Carlier	Kleinsteuber	Renaud
Ceci	Littlewood	Rosendahl
Coolahan	Luff	Sabir
Cortes-Vargas	Malkinson	Schreiner
Dang	Mason	Shepherd
Drever	McCuaig-Boyd	Sucha
Fitzpatrick	McKitrick	Sweet
Ganley	McPherson	Westhead
Gray	Miller	Woollard
Hinkley		

Against the motion:

Aheer	Gill	Schneider
Cooper	Loewen	Starke
Cyr	McIver	Stier
Drysdale	Orr	Taylor
Ellis	Pitt	van Dijken
Fraser	Rodney	

Totals: For – 37 Against – 17

[Motion carried; Bill 10 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 4(2) the Assembly now stands adjourned until 9 a.m. tomorrow.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:03 p.m.]

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