Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, May 6, 2025

Day 107

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session

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Pitt, Angela D., Airdrie-East (UC), Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees
van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC), Deputy Chair of Committees

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Armstrong-Homeniuk, Hon. Jackie, ECA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
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Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
Brar, Gurinder, Calgary-North East (NDP)
Calahoo Stonehouse, Jodi, Edmonton-Rutherford (NDP)
Ceci, Hon. Joe, ECA, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP)
Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP), Official Opposition Deputy Assistant Whip
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
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de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)
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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
Gray, Hon. Christina, ECA, Edmonton-Mill Woods (NDP), Leader of the Official Opposition, Official Opposition House Leader
Guthrie, Hon. Peter F., ECA, Airdrie-Cochrane (Ind)
Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)
Hayter, Julia K.U., Calgary-Edgemont (NDP)
Hoffman, Hon. Sarah, ECA, Edmonton-Glenora (NDP)
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Vacant, Edmonton-Strathcona

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 6, 2025

Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Good evening, members. Hon. members, I will call the committee back to order.

Bill 47
Automobile Insurance Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any members wishing to present comment, question, or amendment? The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: I do not wish to present comment. Instead, I wish to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 52
Energy and Utilities Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

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

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to bring an amendment to Bill 52.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Member.

This amendment will be introduced as amendment A1.

The member can proceed. Read the amendment into the record if you can.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As the Member for Edmonton-Decore I move that Bill 52, Energy and Utilities Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, be amended in section 1 as I have circulated the written amendment to the members of the Assembly.

Mr. Chair, affordability remains one of the most pressing concerns facing Albertans. We hear this every day from the constituents, families trying to stretch each dollar, seniors on fixed income, newcomers working to establish their lives here. In that context, any measure that increases financial strain deserves scrutiny, and that is why I am bringing this amendment to address utility affordability concerns among those populations that I have highlighted. That's why I believe we must take a closer look at the current surcharge being applied to those who remain on the rate of last resort. While the intent behind encouraging people to explore other electricity providers may be understandable, the way this policy has been implemented has raised real concerns about fairness. If you can see it, it has raised concerns about the impact on those who are least able to adapt.

Mr. Chair, the rate of last resort was introduced as a consumer protection mechanism, a safety net under Bill 52. As presented, it risks becoming precisely a penalty for those who, for various legitimate reasons, are unable to switch to other providers. The rate is 30 per cent higher than the market rates, and these are often individuals with limited credit history. The policy impacts those who are low income in Alberta, the policy impacts seniors on fixed income, and the policy impacts new Canadians who have not established their credit ratings here in the province, these Albertans who experience navigating a complex, difficult utility marketplace. Many of these residents remain on the rate of last resort not by choice but by necessity.

That concerns me, the decision to impose a surcharge on the same Albertans who are challenged by affordability to fund the public education that the government is trying to undertake. It's fair to ask: if the campaign is not working, why should vulnerable Albertans be asked to pay for it, and why should those who are least able to make a switch be made responsible for the communication initiatives that do not reflect their lived realities? This is about good governance, making sure that government policy is effective, that it's evidence based, and that it is equitable to all Albertans regardless of their challenges on a daily basis, regardless of their economic disadvantage, and regardless of when they came to our province. Making those Albertans who are already struggling pay utilities that are higher than the market rate is a key example of why we need to come up with policies that will address those low-income Albertans when it comes to utilities during these affordability challenges.

The Minister of Affordability and Utilities has spoken about taking action to bring down utility costs. I believe the intent is genuine, but these actions are required to be borne with fairness for those who are impacted by the rate of last resort policy. The program is designed to help consumers and should not be inadvertently causing harm for those who the program was supposed to support. Let us also not forget that the rate of last resort was initially set at a 12 cents per kilowatt hour rate. As I said before, that is way higher than the market rate. Now, rather than adjusting that rate to make it more affordable, the policy is introducing to make it that surcharges are being made through this policy so that the cost doesn't even go down. Albertans are being asked to foot this bill of the campaign. That tells them what they already know, which is that their bill is quite high.

Mr. Chair, we can do better. This amendment would put an end to the practice of funding the education campaign through an additional surcharge on those who can afford it the least. It would also send a strong message that public policy should be guided by compassion. Public policy should be guided not just by cost-benefit analysis but also understanding the challenges that Albertans are facing. If the government believes strongly in the value of public education around the energy options, then I think it would be fair for the government to step in transparently, fund it equitably. Let us not place that burden on those who cannot afford it. Let us not place that burden on those who are already navigating enough affordability challenges.

What I am presenting here, Mr. Chair, is that this amendment is not about scoring political points. It's about protecting the dignity and the well-being of Albertans, who are simply doing their best in very difficult times. Removing the surcharge would offer immediate relief to those who are not only financially vulnerable but also who are increasingly feeling unheard in the halls of power, those who cannot understand how to navigate through this even through advocacy. Let us take this opportunity to recalibrate. I'm asking the government members to consider policies that will serve Albertans fairly and responsibly.

I urge all members of this House to support this amendment and ensure that the spirit of the rate of last resort that is a safety net for them when other options are unavailable is truly honoured here. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The Member from Edmonton-Decore has moved amendment A1. Are there any members wishing to provide comment? I see the Minister of Affordability and Utilities has arisen.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Chair. While I appreciate the heart and intent in which the member opposite has brought this amendment forward, it's unfortunate that it shows a little bit of a lack of understanding on why we have a default rate. We have a default rate to make sure that those who move to the province or don't have a credit rating yet can still get electricity. It is not meant to be the permanent rate; it's just meant to fill the gap. That rate is not set by government; it is negotiated by industry with the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

7:40

There are many other retail choices for all of those in Alberta, even those with poor credit ratings. The price of this surcharge is one-tenth of one penny. It is extremely small. In fact, you can hardly get smaller without many more decimal points. This is a cost borne by those who will most likely use the service of the Utilities Consumer Advocate to find a better rate for them.

I don't think it helps changing it at this point in time. While I understand the intent, it breaks down the entire system that we have. This default rate has been part of our system for many, many years. It was a volatile rate that fluctuated with the price of electricity. This is a stable rate for two years, providing a service for Albertans who are on it to help them find better choices. I would ask members not to support this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any other members wishing to provide comment on amendment A1? I will recognize the Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Haji: Well, I want to remind members of the House, Mr. Chair, that Alberta is one of the very few provinces that does not have utility rates for low-income Albertans. The other provinces do; Alberta doesn't. It's the only province that does not even do an income-tested utility rate that the government can support. In fact, for those who are low income, those who do not have a credit rating, those who are struggling, Alberta is the only province that, vice versa, actually charges more to those individuals instead of subsidizing. Therefore, I am taking one more minute to ask members of the House to reconsider and to not ask low-income Albertans to pay 30 per cent more for their utilities to heat their homes, for their utilities to support themselves. Therefore, I ask members to reconsider and support the amendment.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Any other members wishing to provide comment?

I am prepared to call the question on amendment A1.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are back on to the main bill, Bill 52, Energy and Utilities Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. Any members wishing to provide comment? The Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to move a second amendment. I still have some hope there.

The Deputy Chair: This amendment will be referred to as amendment A2.

The Member for Edmonton-Decore may proceed.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As the Member for Edmonton-Decore I move that Bill 52, Energy and Utilities Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, be amended as I circulated the amendment to the members.

The Deputy Chair: You can proceed and read the amendment into the record.

Mr. Haji: Yeah, I did. Shall I do it again?

The Deputy Chair: The member can read the entire amendment into the record.

Mr. Haji: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Well, I, the Member for Edmonton-Decore, move that Bill 52, Energy and Utilities Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, be amended in section 1(10) in the proposed section 20.01 as follows: in subsection (2) by striking out clauses (d) and (e); by striking out subsection (3) and substituting the following:

> (3) On establishing an REM ISO rule under subsection (1), sections 20.2 and 20.21 apply to the Minister and the Commission, with all necessary modifications, in respect of filing and approving the REM ISO rule.

Thank you for the opportunity again, Mr. Chair, this evening on this important amendment to Bill 52. This amendment focuses on a matter that is fundamental for responsible governance, the need for transparency, the need for accountability, the need for public confidence in how we manage Alberta's electricity system. As members of this Chamber we have responsibilities to ensure that decisions made today do not compromise the long-term interests of Albertans. The proposed amendment addresses one very specific but critical issue, the process by which rules are developed and approved for a better restructured electricity market, specifically the REM ISO rules.

Mr. Chair, the government's current proposal will exempt these rules from sections 25 and 26 of the Electric Utilities Act. These sections exist for a reason. They ensure that all new rules affecting our electricity market are subject to public consultation, are subject to stakeholder input, and are subject to oversight by the Alberta Utilities Commission, or known as AUC, an independent regulator. This process may not always be fast, but this process exists to serve the public interest. It provides the necessary checks and balances to make sure that technical decisions are not made behind closed doors or without proper expertise. It ensures that consumers, industry, municipalities, and Indigenous communities all have a voice in decisions that directly affect their energy costs and their energy reliabilities.

By allowing the REM ISO rules to bypass these safeguards, the bill will essentially give the minister unilateral authority to impose rules with immediate effect without public review, without independent analysis, and without input from those who will directly be impacted. That's the concern this amendment is seeking to address. This is not about challenging the minister's intention. I believe we all want to see a more efficient, competitive, and reliable electricity system in our province. The goal is shared on both sides of this House, but how we get there matters just as much as the destination.

Energy policy is highly technical. Rule changes can impact power prices, grid stability, and investment decisions for years to come, so decisions made without due process can have unintended consequences that will hurt consumers and erode the trust in our institutions, Mr. Chair. Alberta's power market is already one of the most complex in North America. It has seen significant volatility, and families and businesses alike are feeling the pressure of rising electricity bills. In that context, introducing sweeping changes to market rules without the scrutiny of the AUC would introduce even more instability into the system.

Mr. Chair, the AUC has the expertise. The AUC has the mandate and the public credibility to oversee these kinds of changes. It is an independent body, and its role is to ensure that market rules are

technically sound, are fair, and are also in the public interest. We should not be seeking to weaken these roles, especially not in a time when Albertans are increasingly concerned about the energy market, its fairness, its affordability, and its volatility and reliability. Instead, we should be strengthening these mechanisms of accountability, ensuring that they evolve with the system but never at the expense of transparency and accountability.

7:50

Mr. Chair, this amendment does just that. It will ensure that REM and ISO rules are subject to the same level of review, consultation, and regulatory oversight as all other ISO rules under the Electric Utilities Act. That consistency is important not only from a legal perspective but also to provide certainty to industry, to investors, and, most importantly, to Albertans. Confidence in the electricity market depends not only on the competitive pricing but also on the regulatory stability. If the rules of the game can be changed so quickly and without notice, without public consultation, and without an oversight, that creates uncertainty in the market.

Uncertainty is bad for everyone, and we have all learned that through Trump's on-and-off tariffs. Uncertainty is bad for everyone. It discourages investment. It limits innovation. It ultimately contributes to higher costs for ratepayers. In contrast, a predictable, consultative, and transparent process allows us to build a system that is both dynamic and resilient. That is the kind of system Albertans are looking for.

I want to reiterate that this amendment is not trying to slow down things. It is not about opposing change or slowing progress. It is about ensuring that when change comes, it's done responsibly without compromising the public oversight, without compromising transparency, and without compromising accountability. The amendment would not stop the government from modernizing the market or introducing new rules. What it will do is make sure that those rules are subject to the same oversight and engagement processes that have governed our system for decades.

Mr. Chair, electricity is not a luxury. It's actually becoming a necessity in our daily lives in everything that we do. The rules that govern our electricity market affect every household, every farm, every business in Alberta in every minute. It is therefore imperative that we preserve the principles of good governance; that is, transparency, accountability, and public oversight.

This amendment strikes a reasonable balance. It protects the public interest without impeding necessary progress that we intend to do here. It restores a degree of independence to the rule-making process, which will help ensure that Alberta's electricity system is shaped by expertise, guided by consultation, and grounded in transparency and accountability.

For all these reasons, I respectfully urge all members to consider supporting this amendment. Let us make sure that Alberta's electricity market is subject to public oversight. Let's make sure Alberta's electricity market is subject to transparency, subject to consultation, and subject to public confidence. Therefore, I ask all members to support this amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: On amendment A2? The Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just very quickly, I would like to make sure the House knows that the AESO, the Alberta Electric System Operator, has spent hundreds of hours on engagement with more than 5,500 attendees. We have spent time on that, and this is a quote from Aaron Engen, the executive director of the AESO, directly on this portion: stakeholders will be able to take their concerns to the AUC after the interim period ends, and when they do, discussion and debate will be based on actual data and evidence, not forecasts and assumptions. We have seen a tremendous range of assumptions from industry prior to the final decisions being made that are wildly errant and inaccurate, all over the map.

We are doing it right, keeping all the regulations and rules in place, full transparency. Stakeholders will have their day in court, but it will be based on evidence and fact.

I would ask members to not support this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Any other members wishing to provide comment?

I'm prepared to call the question on amendment A2 as proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Decore.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Deputy Chair: We are back on the main bill, Bill 52. Any other members wishing to provide comment, questions?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 52 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Any opposed? That is carried.

Bill 39
Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

The Deputy Chair: Are there any members wishing to provide comment? The Member for Red Deer-South has risen.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I stand in support of Bill 39. I will say that this is one of the very, very best bills not only in this session but since I became an MLA. In particular, on page 5 of the bill there is an amendment. Section 6.1(1)(a)(i) is repealed, and in its place it puts in the 8 per cent tax rate up to the first $60,000. I can say that certainly since becoming an MLA in 2019, I've wanted to see a reduction in our income taxes.

I'll read from an e-mail that I had sent on Wednesday, March 8, 2023. Just to provide some context to this, this is when we were getting ready for the 2023 election. We were invited to propose ideas for the platform, and this is one of the suggestions that I had made. I'll just read it. "1. Cut the Personal Income Tax Rate from 10% to 8% (or lower) with a new lowest income tax bracket! Create a new low . . . tax bracket, for incomes around $60,000 or less."

These are some of the reasons why this is such a great tax cut. At the time our current lowest tax bracket of 10 per cent applied from $1 to $142,000. Of course, you can see on page 5, in (i.1), that this new tax bracket of 10 – or the 8 per cent rate applies to $60,000, and then the 10 per cent rate, which previously applied up to $151,000, now kind of goes from $60,000. There's a huge difference, I think all of us in the Legislature can appreciate, between a family or an individual who makes $150,000 and someone who makes, say, $50,000 or $60,000. You know, the ability to pay is much different, and their financial position, even as a family, is far different. So this is a very good change in the right direction.

The wonderful thing as well about this tax cut is that it applies for all Albertans. You know, all Albertans benefit. Having said that,

though, those who are in the lower tax bracket, those who, say, have $60,000 of income or less: all of their income, 100 per cent of their income, benefits from a 20 per cent tax reduction, which is really significant. And, of course, we've quantified the value of this tax reduction. It's an annual savings of about $750 a year per Albertan who makes up to $60,000, or if you have a household where both spouses work and make over $60,000, that's $1,500 a year. This tax cut is really the best kind of affordability program one could look for. It doesn't require any programs or spending; it just puts more money in Albertans' pockets.

8:00

But I think there is still more opportunity for improvement. We always want to be better, so how does this 8 per cent bracket, you know, compare to some other jurisdictions? We are better than Saskatchewan and Quebec with this in terms of the first $60,000, but B.C. and Ontario have a lower tax bracket on the first $60,000, so there's maybe some opportunity there. Now, you have to compare apples and apples a little bit. We don't have a sales tax in Alberta, and that's pretty significant. But I thought about: this is a very good start, a very good thing in the right direction, but what other opportunities are there that we could reduce taxes even more?

I think everyone in this House, especially at this time and affordability: how can we support more affordability for Albertans? Income tax reduction is a great way, so how can we do that? Well, one way is to of course reduce some of our expenses, live within our means. I appreciate the efforts of government to move in that direction, but I thought about another area that I just want to share in terms of how we can reduce taxes even more.

I went into ChatGPT, and I asked: how much does Alberta contribute to federal revenues in terms of net transfers? This is what ChatGPT shared – and I'm going to kind of compare that to our personal income tax revenue. It's very interesting. This is what ChatGPT said: Alberta pays significantly more to the federal government than it receives in federal spending. That's ChatGPT; that's not me. This is often referred to as a net fiscal transfer. A commonly cited number is $20 billion to $25 billion per year in net contributions to the federal government. And then ChatGPT provides a source: Parliamentary Budget Officer and other economic studies. This includes equalization as well as other areas where Alberta receives less federal spending; example, employment insurance, public service employment, capital projects. And then ChatGPT finishes: let's assume $20 billion per year as a conservative estimate of Alberta's net fiscal contribution. So every year Alberta pays $20 billion more in terms of Alberta businesses and workers to Ottawa than Ottawa gives back to Alberta for the services that it provides.

Then I asked ChatGPT: well, let's say we didn't have to have a net transfer. You know, some provinces are net transferees. We're not saying to give us extra money, but let's just say that Alberta didn't have to give that $20 billion. What would that mean from a personal income tax perspective? And this is again ChatGPT's response – this is really cool – if Alberta got back the $20 billion or so it contributes in net fiscal transfers annually and used it all for income tax cuts, it could eliminate provincial personal income taxes completely. That is just an amazing statistic.

When you look at our budget in terms of our contemplated budgeted revenues for this year, taking into account, you know, the tax reduction, which costs the treasury – it's not a cost to the treasury; it's a reduction in our revenues of about $1.2 billion. But with taking that into account, our personal income tax revenues are about $16.1 billion. That's the budgeted number, and that exceeds what we transfer, again, $20 billion. So just theoretically, if we didn't have to have these net transfers, and we were able to keep it in Alberta, you know, everything – if we still send money to Ottawa but basically we get back from Ottawa the same amount or didn't have to fund or subsidize other provinces and we got to keep it in Alberta, we could have zero personal income taxes.

Now, I just want you to think about that. That's a pretty amazing number. Like, that would be a very amazing result. Can you imagine if we didn't have personal income taxes in Alberta?

An Hon. Member: That's very good.

Mr. Stephan: That is very good. I'll tell you what. That is a super-duper tax cut. That is a very, very, super-duper tax cut.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were just able to not have to subsidize almost every single other province, certainly Quebec a whole bunch, a super-duper amount in Quebec, if we didn't have to fund them or subsidize them every year. But if those net transfers didn't apply to Alberta and we were able to apply that $20 billion, we could eliminate personal income tax.

Let me tell you, we talk about affordability, supporting Albertans, and this is a very good tax cut that we're providing. It does save on an annual basis $750 per person, and that's not insignificant. It's an annual savings. Of course, as for families, couples who are working, it's $1,500 per year, but, boy, if we were able to have zero provincial personal income taxes, that would just – I mean, our economy would be at a different level, frankly, because there would be all these collateral impacts from having a personal income tax rate of zero. I'm not suggesting that, but we could actually do that.

We would certainly attract business activity in Alberta. We would certainly be – we're already the most attractive place to start and grow a business, you know, and we already lead Canada in economic growth, but we would just be this superbeacon.

But you kind of think: "Well, that's impossible. How could you have zero personal income tax?" And, again, that's just one thing we could do if we were able to have that $20 billion stay in Alberta, but there are actually nine U.S. states that don't have a personal income tax: Alaska, Texas, South Dakota, Wyoming, and kind of an interesting thing about those states is that they do bear some similarities to Alberta in that they are blessed with abundant natural resources, just like Alberta.

I think this is a super great tax cut. Certainly, I know when I was meeting Albertans at the doors, they were very excited about this. This is a great way to support affordability, but for me, I hope that we just, you know, are always trying to think of even more ways. This is a great start in the right direction. How do we reduce taxes even more? Well, I'll tell you one thing. If we were able to keep more money in Alberta, wow. That's pretty amazing to me.

With that, Mr. Chair, super happy about this bill. Great to see that tax cut support Albertans. We want to see that. We want to see more money in their pockets.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There are things in the bill, like the one the Member for Red Deer-South mentioned, a tax break, a cut to an 8 per cent bracket for $60,000 income. We can debate the merit of the policy, but I will give government this much, that they did make that commitment to Albertans during the campaign to bring in that tax break on January 1, 2024. Better late than never, but that's there.

The second thing is that there are many Albertans who don't have that $60,000 income. If they really are serious about supporting affordability for Albertans, they could also not claw back the $200

that the federal disability benefit is providing Albertans with disabilities. But the member didn't mention that.

8:10

Also, I'm not too much of a ChatGPT person, but I do know this much. When the last federal equalization formula was negotiated, Premier Jason Kenney was part of the federal cabinet, and the Prime Minister was Stephen Harper. What they did in that formula that they did not take into account was resource revenues. So when Alberta revenues would fluctuate, like every other province, resource revenues were excluded from that fluctuation. That's precisely the reason that we are not getting anything back in equalization. Had they negotiated that formula in the interest of Albertans, I think we would be having a different debate here today.

Then there are certain elements of the bill that we do not like, that Albertans do not like, that stakeholders do not like, that these sections are impacting the most, and I intend to move an amendment to amend this bill to make this a bit better.

The Deputy Chair: We'll refer to it as amendment A1.

If the member could read it into the record for the benefit of everybody.

Mr. Sabir: The Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall to move that Bill 39, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, be amended by striking out section 7.

Should I continue, Mr. Chair?

The Deputy Chair: Yes, you may continue.

Mr. Sabir: Section 7, that's on page 16 of the bill, does a couple of things. One, without any consultation whatsoever with the Alberta Law Foundation, it increases their contribution to the Law Society from 25 to 50 per cent. The second thing that this provision does is that it also reaches further into the Alberta Law Foundation's account and states that any funding commitment or grant agreement that exceeds $25,000, the minister knows best; he will approve that. The third thing it says is that this section comes into force as soon as the bill is introduced in first reading. Another section says that after the first reading, if there is any agreement that's entered into, that will be null and void.

I think this provision is very heavy handed. The government has no right to raid the bank account of an independent arm's-length organization. That's not public money. That's Albertans' money that they give to lawyers in trust for legal services. That's after-tax money. It has nothing to do with government. The government has no right to raid the Alberta Law Foundation's bank accounts.

The second thing is that the government is increasing the Alberta Law Foundation's statutory share so that they can reduce their own share to Legal Aid Alberta. At a time when Albertans are already struggling, I think this is an attack on Albertans' right to counsel, Albertans' right to access justice.

The Alberta Law Foundation provides support to 65-plus initiatives across this province, be that legal clinics, community legal clinics, sexual assault centres, Calgary Legal Guidance, Indigenous initiatives, initiatives designed to promote reconciliation. That's a cut to all those organizations as well.

The Alberta Law Foundation, many community-based organizations, and many Albertans in legal professions and otherwise have come out strongly against this heavy-handed and draconian measure. I urge all members of this House: it's not government money. Stand up for what's right and support this amendment so we can strike out this section and support the bill otherwise.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Any others wishing to make comment on amendment A1?

I'm prepared to call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:16 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

For the motion:

Brar	Elmeligi	Ip
Ceci	Goehring	Kasawski
Chapman	Haji	Miyashiro
Dach	Hoffman	Sabir
Eggen		

Against the motion:

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

Totals:	For – 13	Against – 44

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: Members, we are back on the main bill, Bill 39, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Deputy Chair: I recognize the Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: I think that some of the government members are in a hurry to get a hand on the ALF funds, and that's why they want to call the question really quick.

Ms Hoffman: Take that money real fast.

Mr. Sabir: Take that money real fast. That's wrong. That's unacceptable. That's unconscionable.

ALF, Alberta Law Foundation, is an arm's-length organization. It is governed by an independent board, a board that consists of government members, respected members of the legal profession, and many qualified Albertans. They do know what they are doing. They have been doing it for more than 50 years – yeah, more than 50 years – and never ever did this government or any prior government raise any concern with respect to their granting practices. In fact, there is documented evidence that they have done a good job, and they have helped ensure access to justice in this province.

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

They fund many worthy organizations, community clinics, student legal clinics, and an organization called Calgary Legal Guidance as well. That's the organization I used to volunteer with when I first became a lawyer. They were also supporting many initiatives supporting reconciliation and supporting Indigenous communities.

Here we have a government that wants to control everything all the time. They stipulated in this section that any grant funding or agreement over $250,000 will be decided by the minister, and they added a provision in this section that this section comes into force upon the first reading of the bill so that they can get the money really fast.

Since then Alberta Law Foundation presented 14 or 15 applications to the government, and out of that, only one of them was approved. There were four or five amended, and there were nine or 10 applications that were denied. So the government already denied millions of dollars to grassroots organizations helping Albertans access justice. They did that so that they can have their hands in Alberta Law Foundation's bank account and increase their statutory contribution to Legal Aid Alberta from 25 to 50 per cent because they do not want to fund access to justice in this province.

Legal Aid Alberta is an important program, but it's income tested. If you are making minimum wage in this province, you will still not qualify for Legal Aid Alberta. The income threshold is that low: $26,000. The government has cut legal aid every budget in the last six years. They ripped up the government's previous agreement with Legal Aid Alberta, the governance agreement that would have increased legal aid funding by $75 million over four years, and now they're reducing their legal aid contribution to $88 million and taking money from the Alberta Law Foundation so that they can backfill their cuts to legal aid.

If that was necessary, we will leave that. But there are other provisions that are completely unacceptable, so I will move another amendment to section 7 of this legislation.

The Chair: Hon. members, this will be known as amendment A2.

Hon. member, you may proceed.

Mr. Sabir: The MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall to move that Bill 39, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, be amended in section 7 by striking out subsections (2), (4), and (5).

This amendment will leave the section dealing with the statutory contribution of the Alberta Law Foundation to Legal Aid Alberta. What this amendment intends to achieve is that the government has no right – legal, moral, or otherwise – to steal money from any independent arm's-length organization. It's not the government's money. Also, Alberta Law Foundation has a board that can make funding decisions, funding agreements. They don't need government help. They said that on record.

8:40

Government has no business in deciding priorities for an arm's-length organization, how they choose to spend their money, so this amendment will strike out subsection (2), which gives the government power to approve any funding commitment or agreement in excess of $250,000. Simple rationale: it's not government money; government should not be able to make decisions. For instance, Madam Speaker, if I have a corporation and I have money sitting in that corporation, the government should not be able to steal from my corporate account because it's not government money. So we are amending that section.

Then it's also amending another section, subsection (4), which is giving the government power to null and void Alberta Law Foundation's funding commitments if they were entered after the introduction of this bill. Again, this is wrong, heavy handed, and draconian.

Section (5) will not be needed if government members vote for the previous two changes because we are not touching the provision dealing with Legal Aid Alberta's contribution.

This will correct a wrong. This will help undo a precedent that government is going to set with this kind of legislation that allows them to get into arm's-length entities' bank accounts. I urge all members of this Legislature to vote for this amendment and vote against taking arm's-length organizations' money, taking powers away from them. That's wrong, that's undemocratic, that's not allowed in a healthy democracy, so please vote in favour of this amendment.

The Chair: Any other members to speak to amendment A2?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A2 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:43 p.m.]

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

For the motion:

Brar	Elmeligi	Ip
Ceci	Goehring	Kasawski
Chapman	Haji	Miyashiro
Dach	Hoffman	Sabir
Eggen		

Against the motion:

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

Totals:	For – 13	Against – 41

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Chair: Is there anyone else who would like to speak to Bill 39? The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to move an amendment to Bill 39.

The Chair: Do you have the original? I need the original.

All right. This will be known as amendment A3.

Hon. minister, you may proceed.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Madam Chair. The bill is amended as follows: (a) subsection 7(5) is amended by striking out "Subsection (2)(a)" and substituting "This section."

A housekeeping amendment from the drafter's, Madam Chair. I hope the whole House supports it.

The Chair: It does what it says it's going to do.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

8:50

Mr. Sabir: Madam Chair, this is not housekeeping. This amendment lets the government sweep ALF's bank as soon as this amendment passes this House. What it's doing is that it's giving government access to ALF's fund, their granting decision right away. It's not housekeeping. Again, the minister was not forthright about the intent of this provision. I'm sure the minister won't ever mislead the House, but this provision is doing way more than what the minister describes it as housekeeping.

It takes out the subsection (2)(a) reference and makes the entire section come into force right away at first reading. What that means is that the minister and the government will have access to the Alberta Law Foundation's account right away on first reading. They can't even wait until this bill passes.

Again, we will oppose this because the Alberta Law Foundation opposes it. Every reasonable Albertan will oppose government having access to the bank account of an independent arm's-length organization. This is wrong. This is highway robbery. I urge everyone to oppose this.

The Chair: Any other members to amendment A3?

Seeing none, I will call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A3 carried]

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

[One minute having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

For the motion:

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

Against the motion:

Ceci	Elmeligi	Ip
Chapman	Goehring	Kasawski
Dach	Haji	Miyashiro
Eggen	Hoffman	Sabir

Totals: For – 44 Against – 12

[Motion on amendment A3 carried]

The Chair: Any other members to Bill 39? The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: No, I changed my mind.

The Chair: Any other members on the bill?

I will call the question on Bill 39, Financial Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

[The remaining clauses of Bill 39 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

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

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Madam Chair, I move that the committee rise and report progress on bills 47 and 53 and report bills 37, 38, 39, and 52.

The Chair: Can you say: Bill 39 with amendments?

Mr. Williams: Bill 39 with amendments.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

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

Mr. van Dijken: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bills: Bill 37, Bill 38, and Bill 52. The committee reports the following bill with some amendments: Bill 39. The committee reports progress on the following bills: Bill 53 and Bill 47. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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

Hon. Members: Aye.

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

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 54
Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to move second reading of Bill 54, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

If passed, this bill would provide amendments to the Election Act, the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, the Referendum Act, the Alberta Senate Election Act, the Recall Act, the Citizen Initiative Act, and the Local Authorities Election Act. Reviewing elections-related legislation to strengthen public trust and the integrity of our elections is one of my mandate items from the Premier. This is to ensure all democratic processes across the province are aligned and conducted in a consistent, efficient, accessible, and fair manner. This bill is meant to strengthen the confidence of Albertans in our democratic process, and the proposed amendments result from a review of our democratic process legislation.

9:00

Madam Speaker, democracy thrives when people trust the process. People need to know that they can take part in a voting process that is simple and easily accessible. They need to trust the methods and the result of their elections. The results of an election need to be available promptly, and there needs to be transparency around financial support for candidates and political parties. We believe that all of this is essential to maintaining the integrity of provincial elections and public trust. That is why we have proposed amendments that ban the use of electronic vote tabulators, requiring all ballots to be counted by hand to protect election integrity. Under Bill 54 we are requiring the unofficial vote to be completed within 12 hours of polls closing for provincial elections. The general public and candidates deserve to know the results of an election as quickly as possible.

Madam Speaker, these amendments, if passed, would also improve the investigation and enforcement of provincial election rules before and during an election period. This includes strengthening the role of scrutineers so they can observe every single aspect of the electoral process. Political parties will be able to begin and participate in judicial recounts, and we will prevent a single official agent from acting on behalf of more than one independent candidate. Municipal councillors and school board trustees will also be required to take a leave of absence when running for provincial office.

Amendments would also eliminate the use of vouching in the Election Act. Our government has made a commitment to restore public confidence in identification and voter eligibility verification processes through the elimination of vouching. We believe that providing more ways for voters to prove their eligibility while preventing voter fraud is the best path forward to achieving free and fair elections.

We're also proposing to make voting even easier for Albertans, and that's why we would expand the availability and the integrity of special ballots and we'll add more types of identification that can be used to prove residence, all things that will lead to increased fairness during provincial elections.

To make sure Albertans can stay informed of government programs and services, particularly during emergencies, amendments would clarify that this government may advertise during political elections to provide safety, security, or emergency management information.

Madam Speaker, Bill 54 would also allow Alberta corporate and union contributions to parties and candidates in provincial elections as well as to organizations and people focused on third-party advertising. Existing legislative reporting requirements would apply to those contributions to ensure that candidates are fully transparent about where their campaign dollars are coming from. I'm confident that this would allow more voices to be heard while ensuring accountability.

Amendments would also recognize the increased costs of campaigning by adjusting party and candidate expense limits for provincial elections. We know that the price of many, many things continues to increase, so we're making changes to reflect that reality.

Madam Speaker, as part of the bill we're also proposing amendments to rules for third-party advertising for provincial elections which would also enable greater balance between the various voices and help make sure Albertans can hear on a wide variety of issues.

Now, some of our proposed changes respond to recommendations in the Chief Electoral Officer's report on the 2021 Senate election and referendum vote. For example, to ensure consistent and equal access to voting in Senate elections and referendums for First Nations and Métis settlements, the amendments would allow the Chief Electoral Officer to conduct votes in conjunction with a municipal election.

Additionally, to create consistency and protect public safety, proposed amendments would apply existing rules for emergencies in the Election Act and the Local Authorities Election Act to the Alberta Senate Election Act. Madam Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer would also be able to recommend to the Lieutenant Governor in Council that voting in a Senate election may be discontinued and recommenced on another day during emergencies. The Lieutenant Governor in Council would also be empowered to discontinue voting and recommend it on another day, either at their own discretion or in response to a recommendation from the Chief Electoral Officer.

If we have learned anything over the years, it's that we need to have flexibility when dealing with emergencies, and these amendments would strike the right balance. A similar change would be made in the Referendum Act so that a referendum vote can also be discontinued and recommenced during emergencies.

As I said earlier, we believe that the proposed changes I've just described for the various pieces of legislation would increase Albertans' belief in this province's elections and its referendum processes.

Other amendments within this omnibus bill would affect the citizen initiatives and MLA recall processes. We have confidence that the proposed recall legislation changes will create a fairer and more accessible, achievable, consistent, and efficient process to ensuring MLAs are fully accountable to the public. These changes would extend the recall signature collection time from 60 to 90 days. It would lower the signature threshold to be 60 per cent of the total number of electors who voted in the electoral district in the most recent election as opposed to 40 per cent of the total number of electors in the riding, which is the existing status quo. We view these changes as important as they would help increase public trust in the recall process by making it easier for Albertans to navigate should they want to hold their MLAs accountable between elections.

Madam Speaker, we're also proposing amendments that would streamline the citizen initiative process. We believe that the proposed changes to the citizen initiative legislation would increase Albertans' ability to have their voices heard. It would make it easier for the public to play a more direct role in the democratic process by initiating citizen initiatives on issues that affect them. The signature collection time for these initiatives will be extended from 90 to 120 days, and we're also improving the process by setting the threshold to 10 per cent of the number of eligible voters who participated in the last general election as opposed to either being 10 or 20 per cent of the total registered voters.

Reforming and strengthening these democratic processes would empower more Albertans to participate in the democratic system, which is something that I'm sure every member of this Assembly wants.

Madam Speaker, as I've said, Albertans deserve transparency in their local elections. They have a right to know who is backing their candidates, local political parties, and third-party advertisers before they head to the polls. That's why we're proposing amendments, through Bill 54, to the Local Authorities Election Act and the regulatory changes, if the Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, is passed, to require all candidates, local political parties, and third-party advertisers to disclose campaign finance information prior to the election. These proposed amendments will ensure that voters have the information they need to make informed

decisions on election day that are in the best interests of themselves, their families, and their own priorities.

Madam Speaker, democracy must be protected, strengthened, and defended at all costs. That's exactly what this bill intends to do, and that's why I encourage everyone in this House to support this bill that will continue to keep Alberta strong and free.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there members that wish to speak to Bill 54 in second reading? The hon. Member for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to speak to this bill that amends a number of bills. The minister claimed, quite incorrectly, that it will strengthen public trust and integrity of our elections. The minister claimed that democracy must be strengthened, protected, and defended at all times and that that's what this bill is doing. The minister also claimed that this will empower more people to participate in the election. Nothing can be further from the truth.

This bill is an attack on the institution of democracy. A brazen attack, I must add. It's making a number of changes that will erode public trust and confidence in our democratic system, that will limit participation in our democratic system, and that will help the government to stoke separatism. There's a lot to unpack in this piece of legislation. I'm sure my colleagues will participate in that debate, but I might just focus on a few things that I can in the time that I have.

9:10

Changes that this government is making to the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act are deeply, deeply concerning. They are bringing dark money back into politics. In 2015, when Rachel Notley was elected as the Premier of this province, the first order of business was to ban corporate and union donations. That was the first piece of legislation that we brought forward in this House because we believed in democracy. We believed in strengthening democracy. That's the promise of this province. That's the promise of this land.

In a democratic system ideas matter. The strength of those ideas matters. These societies are not shaped by wealth and privilege. These societies were shaped on ideas for which many Albertans sacrificed. The movements for justice, equality, democratic rights, the right to vote: those were not handed down to people. People fought for those things, and democracy is about those ideas. It's not about how deep your pockets are, how deep the pockets of your donors are. With this change that's exactly what this government is doing. They're bringing back corporate and union donations. That will not strengthen our democracy in any way, shape, or manner. That will just increase the influence of the wealthy, powerful, and privileged in our system.

When corporations and, I might add, unions donate, they are not giving money to political parties out of some civic obligation; they're investing in those political parties. And when those political parties get into power, they dictate their agenda. That's what we have seen with successive Conservative governments. That's what we have seen in politics down in the States. Instead of bringing forward policies that will limit the influence of money in our politics and empower citizens, government is bringing that dark money back into politics.

They are claiming that they are improving transparency for third-party advertisers. Currently they can spend 180-some thousand dollars. They're raising their limit to $500,000, half a million, before and during the writ period. That's again shovelling money and bad influence into our politics. That will weaken our democracy. Democracy should not be for sale. It belongs to people, and we should make sure that only people get to say and choose what their democracy looks like, not the corporations, not the unions. This change undermines the very foundation of our democracy. The government needs to think about it; they are not strengthening our democracy.

The second thing, the minister also claimed that it will empower more Albertans to participate in the election. Again, nothing can be further from the truth. This bill has provisions, vote suppression provisions that will get rid of vouching provisions, that will require U.S.-style ID requirements, and that will limit the participation of those on the edges, those who may not have a government-issued ID, those who may not have a place to call home, those who may not have that kind of stability to have their documents and everything in order. And not just that; it could impact any one of us, too.

[The Speaker in the chair]

In all elections I have heard many stories from our neighbours, friends who may not have ID but they are over 18, who may not have an address. Their family members have received voter cards, but not them, and they would be able to vouch for them so that they can participate in democracy.

Democracies are built on and thrive on the idea that every citizen is able to participate, that every voice matters, and such strict voter ID laws, and purging voter rolls, and limiting people's ability to participate in elections certainly doesn't strengthen our democracy. It disproportionately affects marginalized groups thus diluting their power, thus diluting their voice in the system that's already not serving their needs. This leads to unequal representation where the policies enacted do not reflect the will and needs of the entire population, again, weakening the legitimacy of the system. It erodes public trust in democratic institutions.

Then we hear arguments that elections are rigged and manipulated through voter suppression. They lose faith in the fairness and transparency of the democratic process. That can result in lower voter turnout, civic disengagement, and increased political polarization thus destabilizing the democratic system.

It stifles social and political progress. Historically depressed communities such as racial minorities, the poor, the young voters are often those who are pushing for reforms. Blocking their participation, making it difficult for those to vote, only makes things worse. It may help the government to maintain power and status quo, but that doesn't favour democracy.

The minister also mentioned that people deserve to have results soon after the election. He's doing completely the opposite because some fringe extreme groups believe that election tabulators are somehow rigging the elections. That's who this government is listening to.

9:20

Another thing that the minister also highlighted is that the government is facilitating more referendums, more citizen-led initiatives. A lot of people have a lot of things to say about it. Governing with referendums can be seen as democratic, but it also carries several harmful effects, especially when they are used frequently and without safeguards. They tend to oversimplify the complex policy decisions to simply a yes or no vote. That's what we saw happening during the Brexit vote, whether you want to stay in Europe or whether you want to leave. That was a complex, complex decision that needed thoughtful debate, that needed thoughtful consideration, that needed facts and figures for proper consideration rather than driven by emotions.

It also undermines the representative democracy, its overuse. Certainly, there is evidence that it weakens trust in elected representatives and legislative institutions, shifting responsibility from experts, lawmakers, and fact-based decision-making to decisions that are driven mostly by emotions and not always with all the facts. These provisions are politically motivated, and they are lowering the threshold for citizen initiatives so that the UCP can stoke plans of separatists.

While many people have said many things about this piece of legislation, the government and the minister missed the press conference that was held in our city, in Edmonton, by First Nation chiefs. They said many things about the bill, but they summed it up by calling it garbage. That's what First Nation chiefs are saying, and I wholeheartedly agree with it. No one was consulted on this bill. First Nation chiefs were not consulted on this, and the argument that they are making is that their treaties are with the Crown and the government of Alberta cannot unilaterally do things, hold separatist referendums, because the Constitution requires the provincial government to honour those treaties. The government did not consult with any First Nation. They used to consult Billy Morin, and he got elected to the federal Conservatives, so now they won't be even able to consult him.

Again, all these changes are designed to further this government's political agenda. They are designed to weaken our democracy. They are designed to weaken public trust in democracy and weaken the integrity of our elections. Allowing big money back into politics, adding vote suppression, and facilitating separatism don't help this province in any way, shape, or manner.

Government priorities are completely misplaced. They could be focusing on the affordability crisis facing this province. They could be focusing on access to health care. They could be focusing on access to justice. They could be focusing on making sure that every child has access to quality education in schools in their communities. But none of that is a priority for this government. In fact, they are dismantling our democracy. They are dismantling our health care system, and they are dismantling the RCMP. They are dismantling CPP, all of the things that lead to the conclusion that this government is openly flirting with separatism. And this bill confirms it, it further facilitates those initiatives to come forward with a lower threshold of Albertans. That's a disservice to the province.

The government needs to go to the drawing board, take this bill back, and focus on things that matter to Albertans, focus on priorities that Albertans share with us and the government every day: affordability, health care, education, strong social services.

With that, I would really urge all members of this House to think about it. This bill shouldn't be partisan. It should concern every person who believes in democracy, who believes in empowering people to participate. This bill does nothing. It's a brazen attack on our institution of democracy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is second reading of Bill 54, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. Is there anyone wishing to join in the debate? It looks like the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West is on his feet.

Member Miyashiro: Bear with me for a second, Mr. Speaker. My tablet fell over, and so has my water. I'm just a mess tonight.

Mr. Speaker, Dr. Jared Wesley, a noted political scientist and expert on polarization, had this to say about Bill 54.

> Viewed individually, each measure may appear modest. Taken together – and considered alongside their political timing – they mark another step in the Americanization of Alberta's democratic institutions. And the latest in a long list of democratic transgressions in this province.

This bill reinstates the ability of unions and corporations to make donations to parties, parties' candidates, leadership contestants, and political action committees during the election period. The reintroduction establishes a uniform annual contribution limit, which is fine, except now we're adding corporations and unions. But it also creates a new prospective candidate association category allowing precandidacy fundraising outside campaign period constraints. This also increases election expense limits significantly to $5 million for parties, previously capped at approximately $2.1 million, and $75,000 for candidates, up from $50,000.

Before the 2015 ban approximately 65 to 70 per cent of the largest donations to the Progressive Conservative Party came from corporations, with energy firms being among the largest corporate donors. Both the NDP and the Wildrose received around 40 per cent of their largest donations from corporate or union sources before the ban. The introduction of corporate donations would likely benefit parties that historically attracted more corporate support. Hmm. Imagine that.

9:30

The bill removes all provisions related to nomination contestants, eliminating financial transparency for this category altogether. About this Dr. Wesley states:

> In Alberta, the reintroduction of big money into elections risks further skewing the political process toward the interests of the wealthy, while ordinary citizens struggle to be heard. For these reasons, Albertans are overwhelmingly opposed to such measures.

Under the Election Act proposed, the legislation explicitly prohibits electronic vote counting, requiring all ballots to be counted manually. It eliminates a vouching process for voters without proper ID, potentially making it harder for people to vote. The bill establishes a 12-hour deadline for completing the unofficial vote count after polls close, which, when you're not using tabulators, means you're going to have a whole bunch more people doing this and it's going to cost a lot more money. The legislation creates new provisions for handling elections during emergencies or unusual circumstances. It establishes formal leave of absence rules for municipal councillors and school board trustees who run for provincial office.

As I said before, this bill bans the use of vote tabulators. The only reason this is in the bill is due to the influence of Trumpian politics on the UCP. There is zero evidence that vote tabulators have been linked to election fraud. Tabulators count votes marked on paper ballots, and they're not voting machines. Ballots are secured within the tabulator and are available if a hand count is required. Tabulators increase efficiency and accuracy. The banning of their use decreases efficiency and increases risk of mistakes, oh, and tampering.

The prohibition of electronic vote counting in section 111 fundamentally restructures how Alberta conducts elections. All ballots must be counted manually with at least one election officer responsible for counting and at least one other officer responsible for entering the count on tally sheets. Imagine that. You're counting; you're putting it on paper. The change directly reflects conspiracy narratives about electronic voting common in right-wing media despite all independent reviews confirming Alberta's tabulator systems were secure. The bill contains no provision for enhanced scrutiny or security protocols during the extended manual counting period, creating potential vulnerabilities.

The Chief Electoral Officer must complete unofficial counts within 12 hours of polls closing. The UCP's own internal analysis reportedly

acknowledges potential for increased human error in manual counts compared to electronic tabulation. For 2023 tabulators in the advance voting places were being utilized for several reasons: eliminated the need to package and transport the ballots for count to Edmonton, provided transparency for electors in how ballots were being counted, allowed Elections Alberta to offer voter assist terminals at voting places, and allowed the full reporting of results on election night. Fat chance that's going to happen now.

The bill removes the ability of people to vote anywhere and places restrictions on special ballots and requires additional identification for voters at polling stations. Dr. Wesley has this to say.

> All three measures make voting more difficult, reversing decades of progress across Canada to improve voter equality.
>
> As research . . . has shown, voter ID laws disproportionately affect younger and older, Indigenous, disabled, rural, and low-income voters. These groups are less likely to have government-issued photo ID, and new requirements can create barriers that depress turnout.
>
> Despite the many myths spread by Trump Republicans, there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud in the [U.S.] The same is true in Alberta. Like their Republican counterparts, the UCP is solving a problem that does not exist, with the likely consequence (and perhaps intent) of reducing participation among demographics less likely to support them.
>
> This amounts to the government choosing its voters, not vice versa.
>
> All of these measures feed conspiracy narratives surrounding election integrity, once again sowing baseless doubt in the sanctity of proven election processes.

The bill also lowers thresholds for recall petitions, which is the Recall Act. The bill changes the threshold for a successful recall petition from 40 per cent of all registered voters to 60 per cent of actual votes cast in the electoral division. It reduces the waiting period to file a recall application from 18 months to 12 months after an election. This legislation extends the petition submission period from 60 to 90 days, providing more time to collect signatures required. The bill adds a response statement option for MLAs facing recall, allowing them to formally present their case. The UCP says that this will create greater accountability, but Dr. Wesley shows evidence to the contrary.

> While pitched as a mechanism for greater accountability, experience from the [U.S.] suggests otherwise. Lower thresholds facilitate the weaponization of recall petitions by organized political groups seeking to destabilize elected officials over ideological disputes, not misconduct.
>
> In Republican-led states, such tactics have created a chilling effect, discouraging politicians from making difficult but necessary decisions for fear of constant political retaliation.

In a nod to separatists in their party the UCP is lowering thresholds for referenda in the Citizen Initiative Act. The legislation reduces the threshold for citizen initiatives from 20 per cent of all registered voters to 10 per cent of votes cast in the previous election, extends the signature period for initiatives from 90 to 120 days, giving petitioners more time to gather support.

This bill also specifies requirements for constitutional referendum proposals. It also establishes timelines for holding referendums following successful petitions. Well, where does this legislation originate? It was introduced by the minister on April 29 of this year, just one day after the federal election that saw the Liberal government secure its fourth consecutive term.

I have just a few more minutes left, so I'm going to skip to one of the biggest things that we have to look at about this. Let's talk about Indigenous sovereignty. The Premier emphasized that referendum initiatives must uphold treaties 6, 7, and 8, but treaty relationships legally exist between First Nations and the Crown, which is Canada. Section 47 of Bill 54 adds consultation requirements for band councils and Métis settlements regarding voting places but doesn't address the fundamental constitutional question of treaty status in a sovereignty scenario.

The Treaty 8 grand chiefs and Treaty Six confederacy have both publicly questioned how provincial sovereignty could maintain treaty obligations. The Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations issued a statement accusing the Premier of comments and actions that promote the idea of a referendum on Alberta's separation from Canada, calling it reckless and a violation of treaty agreements. The Blackfoot Confederacy chiefs to the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, and Amskapi Piikani nations reject Bill 54 and assert treaty sovereignty. The chiefs emphasized that the 1877 Blackfoot Treaty 7 along with treaties 6 and 8 were negotiated as a nation-to-nation agreement grounded in mutual recognition, peaceful coexistence, and shared stewardship of territory. These agreements were not instruments of land surrender and remain binding legal frameworks within Canada's constitutional structure.

You know, as updated on the *Edmonton Journal*'s website only just a few hours ago:

> First Nations chiefs from Treaty No. 6, 7 and 8 gathered in Edmonton for an emergency meeting [today], and all stood firm on denouncing any movement towards a referendum on separation. Chiefs of the Confederacy of Treaty No. 6 First Nation said they cancelled their annual protocol meeting . . . with [the Premier] for Tuesday and said that it will remain that way until [the Premier] "changes her tone."
>
> Chief . . . Jacko of Cold Lake First Nations said for the Confederacy of Treaty No. 6 to meet with [the Premier], [the Premier] needs to start thinking about First Nations and "lift [their] people out of poverty."
>
> "If you want true reconciliation, give us a share of resources. Our water is suffering. Our animals are suffering . . . when everybody thinks about economics, and . . . we're left out of it."

At the meeting treaty chiefs addressed concerns over Bill 54 and the so-called sovereignty act, prompting First Nations to band together and emphasize their historic and ongoing presence on the land.

In this House today the Alberta Indigenous Relations shadow minister and Member for Edmonton-West Henday put forward a motion to respect treaty rights and called on the Premier to denounce separation. Of course, the UCP could not support it, and the motion did not receive the required unanimous consent. The member went on to say that if the Premier truly believed in reconciliation, then she must denounce separatism clearly, unequivocally, and immediately and must commit to amending Bill 54 until meaningful consultation with First Nations has occurred because no government in this province has the right to tear up the treaties that define the land because treaties were entered into with the Crown.

9:40

Mr. Speaker, out of the many reasons why this legislation should not pass, the issue of First Nations sovereignty is the issue that should stop it in its tracks. We must oppose this legislation. If the Premier wants to continue down this path, she needs to have a fulsome discussion with all of the First Nations in Alberta prior to developing further legislation of this kind.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has risen.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Bill 54, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. We heard earlier the Minister of Justice quietly and in a monotonous tone, a confident, surly voice, relay to Albertans that everything was fine with this piece of legislation, that it was a piece of legislation designed to create trust and strength in the faith that they have in democracy and protect the belief that they have a democratic system that is worthy of their respect. Well, what, in fact, we've heard was, as my baba would have said, a supremely tall crock of sauerkraut. It looks harmless, but the more you chew into it, the more bitter and sour it gets with every bite. That's what I felt as I heard the minister delineating, piece by piece, this legislation that chews away at our democracy.

Albertans would be right to say that this is a quiet steamroller and is heading for every street, Mr. Speaker, in the province, whether you live in small-town Alberta, you live on a farm, you live in a subdivision in a city, you live in a high-rise in downtown Calgary. It doesn't matter. This velvet steamroller is coming to crush your democratic rights and is being done with the quiet voice of the Justice minister, who says: don't worry, we're here to protect you; we'll look after you.

But what they're doing on the other side of the House is what Conservative governments have done in this province forever. Forever, Mr. Speaker. What they're doing is making sure that they pervert democracy to favour themselves, to benefit themselves, and that's exactly what's happening with Bill 54 once again. Others have mentioned the donation limits. Many folks, of course, in this province understand what it means to have democracy up for sale. This UCP government, as Conservative governments in the past, have openly advertised that they are for sale; their influence is for sale. Once again, the reversion back to opening up the election finances to corporate and union donations is once again saying: our democracy is for sale and open to the highest bidder, and let the floodgates open.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, the UCP government knows full well what they're doing when they raise contribution limits to half a million dollars. They know full well that union memberships and unions themselves are going to be completely overwhelmed in that fundraising race to meet the new fundraising limits that the government is putting in place to, quote, protect their democracy and give rights to voices throughout Alberta. They're protecting their own skin. They're doing whatever they can to tilt the balance in their favour, and it is not something that Albertans will quietly stand for, as they hope when we listen to the monotone of the Minister of Justice quietly detailing the elements of this piece of legislation and he says such things as, "We're going to protect your democracy by making it fair by eliminating the vote tabulation machines," when, in fact, there is no evidence whatsoever to support the claims of fraud by the use of those machines.

Indeed, this whole piece of legislation is rife with contradictions that do not support the Minister of Justice's claims that he's here to help the electoral process be more fair and strengthen democracy for Albertans. What it does: it indeed strengthens the possibility that a UCP government will get elected because the rules they're enacting under this bill favour them.

Mr. Speaker, I think that there's going to be ample time to consider this legislation. I could go on at length, but I will, I hope, have another opportunity to speak to this legislation because it's pretty perverse and it deserves a full airing and it deserves the ability of Albertans to completely witness what's going on here and realize that this is going back not just to dark money but to the dark ages of Conservative government where it was verboten in their catalogue to even think of dissent, to even think of having an opposition, even think of having anybody other than themselves in government. Those days are over – those days are over – and we'll soon see that that's a fact. So we'll debate this more, but a pretty disgusting piece of legislation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there are others? Seeing none.

Mr. Dach: I think I choose to move to adjourn debate. I do indeed. I do.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung has moved to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 55
Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Mental Health and Addiction on behalf of the Minister of Health.

Mr. Williams: On behalf of the Minister of Health I would like to move second reading of Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

The Speaker: Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate this opportunity to get involved and to rise and move second reading of Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

The Speaker: I'm sorry; I have to interrupt. Unfortunately, if a minister moves a piece of legislation on behalf of another minister, which is what took place, that minister is deemed to have spoken to the legislation, and, as such, you've spoken at second reading. My guess is that there will be other opportunities to speak to the piece of legislation, but you have spoken at a second reading already.

Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me tell you what this bill is about. This bill is about privatization and consolidating power under the minister and the Premier, and I'm happy to take the next 19 minutes and 50 seconds to walk you through some of the sections that are so antidemocratic and anti public health care in this bill. You might recall, Mr. Speaker and all Albertans, that the Premier was very clear in saying that there was no intent to privatize health care or to outsource the public provisions of health services, that this wasn't a campaign to bring back American-style, two-tiered health care or Bill 11.

Then last year the government brought forward in a town hall – I believe it was in, I think, Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, there was a town hall where the Premier talked about taking away the ownership of hospitals from hospital operators, Alberta Health Services, even Covenant Health, and consolidating that or allowing others to operate hospitals as opposed to the public service and the public sector. Well, Mr. Speaker, that was the first serious red flag that I think we all saw.

I'm just going to review a press release from August 2024, where the government talks about doing reorganization, changing the ownership of hospitals, and of course they did that. They changed the title of the land of 700 structures approximately and 380 land titles, taken over, moved to Alberta Infrastructure. That was step one in the privatization agenda.

9:50

Step two, I will assert, is this bill. We have seen nothing but chaos in the health care system since the UCP decided to blow up the hospital operator, Alberta Health Services, and create all of these different pillars; five, they say, but really, they didn't do anything to get rid of AHS, so that could be six, and then they absolutely had to add an integration pillar as well, which isn't part of one of them. So they went from, you know, one CEO to somewhere between five and seven CEOs.

In this bill I want to highlight some of the concerns I have. The first one is actually on page 1. It's section 2(a)(i).

> A hospital operator of a health services sector in an approved hospital under the Provincial Health Agencies Act, other than a hospital operator that is a provincial health agency, regional health authority or provincial health corporation under the Provincial Health Agencies Act.

Again, creating openings right there for the corporatization and the privatization of acute-care hospitals. Now, the government might say: well, we've done that with private surgical centres. Mr. Speaker, there is a big difference between life-changing but not life-saving emergency procedures in a day-surgery setting, possibly one night, two in the most severe situations, although those aren't happening right now, and an emergency room and an operating room that's doing life-saving surgeries or life-changing surgeries.

I also want to flag section 26(1), which is an amendment to the Health Insurance Premiums Act. Just for scope, like, this is a massive bill. It amends 54 acts and it impacts 19 ministries, and the crux of it is around privatization. The Health Insurance Premiums Act is amended in this section. Hospital operator is defined in section 26(2)(f.1).

> "Hospital operator" means the hospital operator of a health services sector in an approved hospital under the Provincial Health Agencies Act.

Again, this very well could be a private for-profit entity.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that when we called the Premier on privatization of health care during the election, she said: oh, this isn't about privatization. But this is absolutely allowing hospitals like the Stollery to be run by corporations like Telus. I don't know about you, but I already have enough frustration dealing with Telus when it comes to renewing my contract when the bills get tripled the second that I don't have an extension to my contract. I don't want that in our health care system.

So many amazing TV dramas are based on U.S. private health care and the chaos it causes. We don't need more drama. We should be committed to making health care boring again and making sure that all Albertans get the care that they need.

Part 2, Operation of Approved Hospitals. Again, this term "approved hospitals" is something that started setting off some alarm bells for me. They talk about the administrator in this part, section 9(a) in part 2.

> "Administrator" means the person who is the most senior official in the administrative organization of a hospital and is responsible for the day to day operation and management of the affairs of the hospital.

They talk about in (c):

> "Board" means the corporate body or person that owns or operates a hospital . . .

A corporation that owns and operates a hospital.

> . . . and includes a regional health authority.

But, of course, they're getting rid of regional health authorities, and they've already made that clear in the legislation. This is absolutely about a board or individual operating a corporation that's running a hospital.

They go on. I think anyone in this Chamber – and I know probably there are folks on the other side who haven't had a chance to read this bill yet. It was only introduced on Thursday. So let me read.

> 30(1) When hospital, medical or other services are provided by a board to a person,
>
> (a) if the person is a minor and is unmarried and is not an adult interdependent partner, that person and that person's parents or guardians and their respective executors and administrators are liable to the board of the hospital for the payment of all proper charges for any services so provided.

Again, this is about individuals or their dependents being responsible for the payment of services that were provided. It goes on to say:

> (b) if the person is an adult, that person and the spouse or adult interdependent partner, if any, of that person and their respective executors and administrators are liable to the board of the hospital for the payment of all proper charges for any services so provided.

It goes on in the next section to talk about

> (c) if that person is a minor . . .

So under 18.

> . . . and married or in an adult interdependent [partnership], that person and the spouse or adult interdependent partner . . .

So the adult who has married the child, if that child incurs a bill, the adult that they're married to is responsible for paying

> . . . all proper charges for any services so provided;
>
> (d) if the person or any other person signs an agreement, admission form or other document assuming responsibility for the payment of charges as a result of . . . the admission of the patient to the hospital is gained or hospital services are obtained, the person or persons who sign the document and their respective executors and administrators, notwithstanding the Guarantees Acknowledgement Act, are liable to the board of the hospital for the payment of all proper charges for any services so provided.

Mr. Speaker, this is a whole page dedicated to when somebody accesses one of these hospitals that the government has sold off. Right now these public hospitals – again, there were over about 700 structures. Some of those might not be a hospital or acute-care structure; some of those could be parkades or other assets. Seven hundred structures and 380 land titles, the government selling them off to private entities as outlined in the bill and then talking about how they can collect, collect payment for people who have used those services and agreed to the admission when they were admitted to the hospital.

Let's go on.

> 31(1) The Minister or the board or administrator of any approved hospital may
>
> (a) declare that a patient is no longer in need of the services provided by that hospital or of the services provided in a particular ward, section or unit of that hospital, and is eligible for transfer or discharge.

It talks about how they're going to move the patient out of the hospital. If an operator says, "You know what? There's not enough profit tied to this patient. We're going to discharge the patient . . .

> (b) move the patient
>
> (i) to another type of accommodation or to another ward, section or unit of that hospital,
>
> (ii) to another approved hospital, or

. . . discharge them from the private for-profit hospital," presumably there will be some two-tiered hospitals left in Alberta.

So send them to another hospital where profit isn't a driving factor or

> (iii) to a continuing care home or other accommodation.

We just sat through, last year, the government having to defend discharging patients from hospital into hotels, hotel medicine, saying that patients weren't worthy of staying in a public for-profit hospital, moving them off their books, sending them to a motel, delivering them, you know, takeout and SkipTheDishes. This is being solidified in this bill, and it is allowing not the government to own it; they're saying that the hospital operator, the person who is operating that hospital, the approved hospital, they get to make that decision. They get to discharge. They get to send them home with a bill, and they get to send them into homelessness or a hospital that is not the one that they were admitted to originally or into a hotel. That, Mr. Speaker, is unconscionable.

When this bill was tabled so late in the session – there's kind of a tradition. I know that you've been around here for 10 years, Mr. Speaker, so I know that you, too, understand that there's often a tradition that bills that get tabled towards the end of the session are the poison pills of the session. When I sat through the bill briefing from department officials, this certainly wasn't flagged as part of what the big changes were. There were lots of things talking about how: oh, we're going to go from hospital boards to not having hospital boards because we haven't had them for years anyway. That's fine. Those aren't the problems. The problems are what's hidden in here, and what's hidden in here is the poison pill and is absolutely further evidence that the current Premier is more focused on privatization than she is on providing great public health care.

This continues in section 31(4).

> Any patient who has been declared eligible for transfer or discharge as provided in this section and who refuses or fails to move or to leave when requested to do so is a trespasser.

Trespassing in their hospital. Imagine living in Drayton Valley and you go to your hospital because you need medical care, and a few days later or immediately the hospital says: "No. You're trespassing. No profit to be made here. You are out." What happens once they're deemed a trespasser? Well, if they remain on the premises without the consent of the board or a representative of the board, they fail to refuse to leave the premises in order to do so, they are a trespasser, it says, and the patient will be declared eligible for discharge.

It goes on to say what the consequences can be for trespassing.

> A person referred to in subsection (1)(a) who fails to comply with a notice given [pursuant to] subsection (2) is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine of not more than $50 and, in default of payment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 days.

If you don't leave the hospital when you're discharged by the private hospital, you could go to jail for up to 10 days. That is atrocious, Mr. Speaker. That section, again, is 32(4).

10:00

It should be no surprise that we will absolutely have significant amendments to this bill. If the government wants to pretend that they're not in this for privatization, they must accept these amendments because this is just filled with all sorts of consequences for those who aren't paying and opportunities to profit off the health care system that we all so cherish.

I originally was planning on coming here to speak about the seizing of control of the chief medical officer of health overseeing public health, specifically the medical officers of health. I still do have concerns over that. As we've heard, it's been reported to folks that over 200 desired applicants have been approached, people who wouldn't apply but the government desired them to apply, for the chief medical officer of health position. That has not been filled. There is an acting chief medical officer of health. When asked at a press conference – I believe it was only yesterday; the days, though, do blend together, Mr. Speaker – if he would be willing to take on the position long term, he said no.

Some of the people that I believe have been approached to take on that role are the regional medical officers of health, the people who won't come and work for government because – let's be honest – anyone who's worked for this UCP government and the last UCP government, anyone who's been a chief medical officer of health under the UCP, has been forced to stand on a stage with people who spout antiscience and then often fired and blocked from getting any other jobs in public health locally, where, speaking specifically to Indigenous health, we have some of the worst outcomes. We've seen worse outcomes now than we had many years ago. When leaders in that area wanted to hire a former chief medical officer of health, the Premier's office interfered and blocked that hiring. So who would want to come work for this government when it is a dead end to their medical career?

They approach over 200 people. They say: no, thank you. Now they move the reporting of some of those people, medical officers of health in zones who are responsible for making sure that things like measles don't continue to spread at record rates, which of course they are here.

Yesterday I talked about there being 55 new cases over the weekend. Between yesterday and today at noon: an additional 22 cases, so this is growing significantly. It is not a mild consequence for those who suffer measles. We know that there are at least three children in the ICU fighting for their lives. Of those who have measles today, the report says that there were 287 cases, up from 265; 155 of those are school-age children. The day before it was 144, so 10 more school-age children. Those under the age of five: we were up to 83. So 55 over the weekend, 24 between Monday at noon and Tuesday at noon. The south zone is growing the quickest. We are up to 171 cases out of those 287 in the south zone.

This is what the government should be focused on. They should be focused on making sure that the people who work in public health have the tools that they need to save lives and help kids be safe. They should be focusing on putting in caps on the number of patients that health care providers need to serve, staffing ratios to make sure that those who we love and who are loved in the community, who are sitting in long-term care centres without adequate staffing ratios, get more support. There are lots of things that I would love this government to do in a health bill, but privatizing hospitals: absolutely not.

The government should know. Let me give you a little history lesson. The hon. Raj Pannu passed away recently. I went to two of his memorial services, and at both of them they talked about the fight that he and Brian Mason led in fighting back against Bill 11, the privatization of health care in hospitals specifically during that time. I remember Ralph Klein rising to his feet after repealing that bill and saying: if it weren't for those two naysayers over in that corner, we would have gotten it done. Well, there are a lot more than two naysayers on this side of the House, and I imagine there are some naysayers on that side of the House, too.

I imagine there are some people over there who are thinking: holy crap. "Crap" is probably not parliamentary; holy smokes. Holy smokes, Mr. Speaker. Holy smokes, if even 10 per cent of what she's saying is true, there probably are some issues here, especially when it comes to rural hospitals. Some of the least profitable hospitals in our province are in the ridings represented by the members opposite. I know that they are the least profitable because I looked at the balance sheet year after year after year. But guess what? Hospitals aren't supposed to be profitable. Hospitals are

supposed to be there for those of us who are in need to get the services that we need when and where we need them.

Profit margins for Telus or any other corporation should not be the priority of this government or any government. We have the tremendous honour of being stewards of the public health care system. It is an honour, and it is a burden, but it is the thing that makes us so Canadian. When we travel around the world and we put our own flag on our backpacks – and Americans often put our flag on their backpacks, too – the number one thing people usually talk to me about is the health care system.

I know that the minister rose in this place just a few days ago and said: you always talk about American style. Well, this is American style. "What about Australian style? Have you thought about Australian style? Maybe Australian style wouldn't be so bad." Oh my, Mr. Speaker. Please, any of you over there, take a few minutes, ask ChatGPT, if that's your favourite first source to cite in this House. Feel free to ask them what's happening to acute care in Australia.

Dr. Elmeligi: ChatGPT is not a primary source.

Ms Hoffman: It is not a primary source. It's some people's primary source, but it is not a legitimate primary source. Thank you, Doctor. It is not a legitimate source. But if you want to, even ChatGPT will tell you how bad Australia's acute-care health care system is.

Let me also summarize some of it for you, because we do still have a minute and 15 seconds at this stage for me to explain to you a little bit about what this bill does. In Australia in the midst of the public health crisis of COVID-19 the privatized hospitals, of course, weren't profitable. Nobody was profitable. Everyone was fighting to save lives. That's when they said: oh, we need to increase our fees; government needs to pay us more, patients need to pay us more, or we're going to close our hospitals. What's happening now: further fallout from that, further impacts of the privatization of health care. In an election where Conservatives were supposed to form government, just this last week the people in Australia said no and elected a Labour government again.

The privatization of hospitals in Australia was a horrific mistake. Private health care in the United States is atrocious. Nobody when we door-knock says that they want privatized, two-tiered health care. Maybe some of the rich donors that are now being allowed to donate more money, should Bill 54 pass, will be impacted. But every single Albertan should know that public health care is there for them and that the government respects the Canada Health Act. This does no such . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. Is there anyone wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in strong opposition to Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. Let me begin by stating the obvious, and I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora articulated it quite well. Alberta's health care system is in crisis. People are waiting hours in emergency rooms, weeks for diagnostic tests, and months, sometimes years, for life-changing surgeries. Family doctors are becoming harder to find, and rural Albertans in particular are feeling abandoned. Albertans have been clear about what they want: more doctors, faster access to care, trust in the professionals who keep us safe, dignity and safety for their loved ones in care.

Bill 55 delivers none of that. Instead, it delivers sweeping structural changes that increase centralization, dilute accountability, and set the stage for further privatization of Alberta's health care system. This bill does absolutely nothing to reduce wait times, nothing to retain health care workers, and nothing to restore the shattered trust between Albertans and their health system.

10:10

Let's talk about the hospital governance changes that are in the bill. Bill 55 eliminates traditional hospital boards. While that hasn't existed for a while, it consolidates all types of hospitals under a new term called "approved hospitals." This sounds simple, but the implications are serious. The minister is now empowered to designate any person as a hospital operator, and we know that under Alberta law a person includes private for-profit corporations. That means a minister – not a health board, not a public committee, not a panel of experts but a single minister – can hand over the operation of a public hospital to a private company. My question to this government is: is that the intent? With this bill, it means there's no oversight, no guarantee of transparency, no requirement that should these private hospitals – God forbid – make profit, it will be reinvested into care, and there is no mechanism in this bill for local communities to have a say.

I ask again, because Albertans deserve clarity and they deserve to know: will the minister guarantee that this bill will not allow private for-profit corporations to operate public hospitals in Alberta? If the answer is yes, then that clause should be removed or amended. If the answer is no, let's be honest about what this bill is; it's a quiet but intentional and deliberate privatization pipeline.

Here's another example. The new, quote, Health shared services agency is framed as a way to consolidate human resources, IT, and administrative support across the health system, but this is just another level of centralized bureaucracy, another way to concentrate power, one more layer between patients and care providers.

Let's address one of the most dangerous elements of the bill, the restructuring of public health care. Under Bill 55 public health nurses are transferred from AHS to Primary Care Alberta. The medical officers of health are transferred into the Ministry of Health and made civil servants. Strategic policy staff working in disease prevention, surveillance, and health promotion are centralized under the minister's direct authority. This is a dramatic and regressive politicization of public health. We heard days ago from the former chief medical officer his sentiments of not being able to speak freely against what was happening with the measles outbreak, not being able to offer his unvarnished advice without fear of reprisal. And here we are again with this bill, a very blatant example of this government's attempt to further politicize the public service, our public health professionals.

We learned from COVID-19 that public trust hinges on the independence of our public health officers. When medical officers of health are required to toe the government line, we lose neutrality and transparency essential to managing public health threats. The former CMOH Dr. James Talbot put it bluntly, quote: it's a step backwards. End quote. Professor Lorian Hardcastle, one of the country's foremost experts in health law, said that the changes, quote, further concentrate control in the hands of politicians, coming on the heels of previous legislation that already eroded the CMOH authority during public health emergencies. End quote. And let's not forget what the Premier said on record in her *West of Centre* podcast interview: that she dismissed public health officials involved in the COVID-19 response; that cabinet, not the CMOH, should make decisions during large-scale outbreaks; that she didn't approve of the scientific approach taken during the pandemic.

You see, Mr. Speaker, this is a long-standing pattern of this government's intentions. Their plan is clear. This bill is really the beginning of the end. They have every intention to privatize health care, and that is deeply, deeply concerning because we are talking

about the lives and safety of millions of Albertans. Medical decisions should be made based on science and evidence, not politics and polling.

I want to talk about transparency and trust because Bill 55 fails there, too. The amendments to the Protection for Persons in Care Act, PPCA, allows the director to delegate responsibilities to ministry employees, but what we've seen in practice is horrifying. Earlier this year a CBC investigation revealed that the PPCA office had stopped publishing the outcomes of abuse investigations because of a backlog so severe that cases were taking over two years to be resolved. Families were left in the dark, seniors were left in danger, and the trust was shattered. This government has not explained how Bill 55 will prevent that backlog from growing again, nor has it shown how victims of abuse in continuing or long-term care will receive the swift justice they deserve. These changes are being made without clear performance benchmarks, without new resources, and without a public accountability framework. Mr. Speaker, that is unacceptable.

Let me now turn to the treatment of health care workers, the very people holding up the system while it's being dismantled from the top. The United Nurses of Alberta has responded to the changes affecting public health nurses. In a statement they said the UNA "remains deeply concerned about the chaos caused by this restructuring on nurses and their ability to deliver the best patient care possible within the public health care system." Mr. Speaker, this government is not listening to the very people that are so critical to our public health system: the public health care professionals, the nurses. This very chaos introduced by this government affects morale, it affects recruitment and retention, and ultimately it affects patient outcomes.

Bill 55 imposes sweeping change without engaging the professionals who will be expected to make it work. It's a recipe for burnout, for further disruption, and for further collapse in a system already pushed beyond its limits. As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora says, we know that there are folks in this Chamber on both sides of the House that deeply cherish our publicly funded health care system. I ask you to now vote against this bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I feel like there is some Speakerly requirement. While I may be a Flames fan, I certainly am the Speaker for all Albertans, including the Oilers fans, who, for the benefit of *Hansard* and the permanent record of all time, took a 1-nothing series lead just moments ago. [interjections] Nothing brings the Chamber together like an Oilers win.

Are there others wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

10:20

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for that announcement.

To the other members of the House, through you: what rhymes with bloated contracts for UCP insiders? Bill 55. Sounds like corruption. Bill 55 sounds a lot like corruption. The privatization agenda, so aptly phrased by the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, is in this bill. The corporatization of health care which is being brought into our province with this bill is something we need to be alarmed about.

Mr. Speaker, before I came into this role, my time was spent in corporations, being a managing director. There is a change in here that highlights corporatization. It is corporate speak. It came straight from the management consultants that convinced the board of governors, in this case the cabinet of the UCP government: here's a great idea; here's a great way to make money. But do you know who makes money from this idea? Just the management consultants. The businesses don't.

Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, introduces significant changes to Alberta's health system, particularly in hospital administration and governance. Some key areas will be hospital governance overhaul. Hospital boards will be replaced. There will be ministerial oversight. Community health councils will be disbanded. We'll get to that – or maybe we'll get to that now. Mr. Speaker, community health councils in my understanding are volunteers, so what I'm reading into this is that the UCP don't like volunteer councils to advise them on how to provide regional health care probably because their friends would prefer to get paid to be able to provide advice to the government.

But what really caught my attention is the new shared sector services agency. Oh, boy, Mr. Speaker. Shared services: that comes right from the management consultant handbook. That is how you lose money. I'll tell you a couple of stories. One of my first enterprises was going very well. We became profitable and large in Canada, and we got acquired by a large international firm. It seemed like a great thing. Everything went well until we joined the large corporate firm, and they had shared services. All of a sudden a business that was running extremely well in Canada, profitably in Canada, could not make a profit because of the tax that we had to pay to shared services.

If you think you're going to be bringing efficiency into the health care system by bringing in shared services, you are fooling yourself. A shared services department is going to tax every operation within our health care system, and they are going to be drawing more money away from front-line workers into management consultants and management within the health care system. It's not going to be providing more doctors. It's not going to be providing more technicians, more nurses into our health care systems.

I thought that was just a one-off. I thought that maybe that was a German experience, but then I had the opportunity to join a large Alberta firm with about 100 companies within it. It was a home building land development firm, and the joke around the offices between the managing directors was that we were no longer a home building company; we were just an accounting company. Shared services were brought in, and shared services took away the profits of all the companies. We had 100 companies that on their own stood up and got the job done, and then as a large corporation with shared services there was no more profit.

Bring that into a health care system where we are trying to squeeze dollars, make the dollars stretch, find better ways to get health care provided to Albertans – you're going to be bringing in health shared services? We are on a pathway to cost Albertans more money and provide fewer services, which is just in line with the government, which is so fond of corruption, chaos, and cuts and also contracts for their friends.

Bill 55 fails to address the pressing needs of our health care system, Mr. Speaker, and it does not improve patient care. So when we go through the bill and we look through the aspects of it and we're finding ways to assure our friends in the health care system that help is on the way, they're not going to find it from Bill 55.

We have a government that is so fond of making announcements. I think they said they were going to fix the health care system in their first 90 days, but what we had was a firing and a hiring and a firing and a hiring and a firing and a hiring, ongoing firing and hiring of boards and CEOs. I guess maybe somewhere along the way there were a lot of people that were saying that maybe the public health care system is actually a good thing, and we just need to find a way to treat the health care workers with decency and

respect instead of delivering severance packages to our boards and to our CEOs.

I'm seeing a massive step backwards being brought forward with this bill that rhymes with bloated contracts for UC insiders. Let's go to some of those other corrupt care scandals that we have had to address in this House, Mr. Speaker. There was the Turkish Tylenol debacle from 2022, which we're still trying to figure out. We're still dealing with it because the government gave $50 million to their friend, who is holding on to that $50 million with a credit that they will one day be able to provide us with – I don't know what they're going to provide us with. All I know is that I figured out that if you put that money in a money market account, it could have made $2.5 million since they gave that money to the friend of a UCP insider. We found out that the Tylenol they did get cost $5,800 per bottle; $5,800 for a bottle of Tylenol.

Ms Chapman: Fifteen hundred dollars?

Mr. Kasawski: Fifty-eight hundred. Five, eight, zero, zero, Mr. *Hansard*, $5,800.

Personal protective equipment: another example of ways UCP insiders can prop up a company and provide a contract to the government. Mr. Speaker, I came from a world of business where I sold to other businesses, so this world where the way you make your money is by selling to governments is not familiar to me. But it is familiar to UCP insiders because this is how they make their profit. Then they say: the government is great; privatization is awesome. There has been an acute highlighting of conflicts of interest from this government where relatives of the government are the ones that are getting the contracts.

Ms Hoffman: That's not cute.

Mr. Kasawski: That's not cute. Thank you, Member for Edmonton-Glenora. Appreciate that.

The undermining of the chief medical officer of health is also in this bill, and that has been something that is creating alarm and fatigue, Mr. Speaker. To my friends Ron and Ginetta and Shirley and Kim, who are doctors and are thinking of leaving the profession, Bill 55 does nothing to assure them that this government respects professions.

We need to talk about doctors a little bit in this House, Mr. Speaker. When I think of doctors, I think all the way back to high school. I think: who is the smartest kid in high school, and did they become a doctor? I would say that if you took two high schools and took the smartest kid, the smartest kid out of two high schools is the one that became the doctor. Now, to get into nursing, students have to have 94 per cent averages. Smart people. At NAIT to become an ultrasound tech requires almost a 95 per cent average to get into that. Techs, nurses, doctors, professions that work in medicine: when they provide us with advice, we are wise to heed it. When a government doesn't provide any respect and decency to these professions, they get tired, they get fatigued, and they start thinking about leaving the profession.

10:30

Mr. Speaker, we need to do what's right for the front-line workers. We need to do what's right for Albertans. We don't need hotel medicine anymore. And we need to oppose Bill 55. Send it back. Don't bring us this fat omnibus bill at the end of session and expect us to pass it when we know what's in this. It just sounds like corruption.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I'd like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate lost]

The Speaker: Hon. members, before the Assembly is second reading of Bill 55, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. Is there anyone else wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-North East.

Member Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Tories, I think, were anxious when they went into battle. They knew that they were trying to sell what is not sellable. Now they have found out that Albertans are very strongly outraged. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. member.

Member Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is what Dr. Raj Pannu told the reporters about Bill 11. It was back in 2000, and 25 years later, today in 2025, private health care is still not sellable, and Albertans are still outraged with what the UCP is doing with health care. Public health care isn't just a service in Alberta. It's a promise, a promise that no matter your income, your immigration status, or your postal code, you will be cared for with dignity.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

It's a great equalizer, the reason a sick child at midnight gets an ambulance, not a bill. But in places like Calgary-North East, where people can't afford private options or skip care, every cut to the public system hits harder. When public health care is underfunded, it's not just a budget line; it's someone's father going without a family doctor, someone's mother waiting longer for surgery. Let's be honest, when the system breaks, CEOs won't suffer. It's the seniors, the single mothers, the new immigrants, and the front-line workers who carry Alberta on their backs. Madam Speaker, they deserve better.

In this province we should stand together not just in prosperity but in pain, too. All Albertans carry this deep emotion in their heart when they pay taxes, that every single dollar of their tax money will be used to serve their neighbours, will be used to serve the senior across the road who can't afford groceries, that taxpayers' money will be used for someone across the road, for someone that they deeply care about who can't afford a medical bill. Albertans are not asking for miracles. They're asking for a health care system that works when they need it most. They want more doctors. They don't want to spend more time in waiting rooms. They want ambulances to arrive on time, not after it's too late. They expect timely access to MRIs and treatments, and they don't want to be on wait-lists for months, and they do not want uncertainty in health care.

Albertans also want clear, honest communication from health experts when it comes to disease outbreaks like measles, like COVID-19. They want clear communication from independent public health experts when it comes to public health advisories. Transparency builds trust, Madam Speaker. Above all, they want to know that their loved ones are safe, whether in long-term care, addiction recovery centres, or hospitals. When something goes wrong, families deserve a clear process to report harm, seek answers, and get justice. In this province caring for each other shouldn't feel like a fight. It should be a guarantee.

Bill 55 does not create more doctors or fix wait times in ERs or reduce the long wait for surgery, for an MRI. Bill 55 does not increase trust in the public health care system. It doesn't build trust in the system's ability to protect us from preventable diseases like measles or E coli outbreaks or COVID-19. Bill 55 does not prevent our loved ones from abuse or harm while in long-term or continuing care.

I want to say this to the UCP government. Albertans are tired of excuses. They don't want photo ops; they want solutions. It's time

to stop ignoring the crisis in our health care system and start fixing it. Hire more doctors. Cut down wait times. Ensure ambulances arrive when lives are on the line. Provide more timely access to MRIs and essential treatments, and start communicating to Albertans transparently, especially during disease outbreaks. Above all, protect our loved ones in long-term care and recovery facilities. Albertans deserve to know that they are safe and that there's a real process in place to report and get a response when they are in trouble. Enough delay, Madam Speaker. It's time this government finally put people before their ideology.

Bill 55 makes a number of changes to Alberta's health care system. First and foremost, a hospital governance overhaul. All hospital types are consolidated under the term "approved hospital." This could have serious impacts on health care due to this change. It could lead to erosion of local control of hospitals in decision-making. The UCP wrongly thinks that they are really good at decision-making; they are not. In fact, they can't even secure children's Tylenol during the time of a health emergency.

This can impact the rural communities as well, which are already struggling due to the health care crisis, and the UCP is opening up the doors for more privatization in health care. This will be very dangerous for the future of health care in Alberta. While Canadians are proud of the universal public health care system, the UCP wants to copy the American-style, two-tier health care system in Alberta. This is so un-Canadian, Madam Speaker. In fact, the UCP is un-Canadian.

10:40

Accountability is another issue with this change. Since power will be centralized in the hands of the minister, who will take responsibility if the proper care is not provided to Albertans? Will the approved hospital take that responsibility, will the minister take responsibility, or will the blame game continue? This will make it really hard for Albertans to advocate for their complaints. Albertans do not trust the Minister of Health at this point. In fact, they do not trust any minister at this point.

Currently performance and service data are often broken down by hospital time. This change could make it harder to track outcomes, compare hospital quality or identify systemic issues, especially in rural communities.

The second thing that this bill does: it replaces hospital boards. Again this opens the door for privatization in Alberta's health care system, one private hospital agreement at a time. It will continue one at a time, and eventually the entire health care system will be torn apart by this UCP government and it will be working at the mercy of the private operators. The operators will be selected by the minister, which means there will be more political involvement in the selection of those operators. Who trusts the UCP when it comes to staying at arm's length from decision-making? More centralized and privatized health care will not serve Albertans. It will serve the close allies of the UCP.

Ministerial oversight is the third point. Thank you to the Member for Sherwood Park for highlighting the recent event, which I hope the UCP will try to understand. The Minister of Health is given direct authority over hospital-related bylaws within specific health sectors under this bill. Previously bylaws went through governance processes. Hospital boards, legal review, public input, and so many other things were in place so that the bylaws were actually enacted and written to serve Albertans, but under Bill 55 the minister can now make unilateral changes with little oversight. If a bylaw is changed to reduce public input, weaken staff protections, or alter service delivery, Albertans may never know. Albertans may never know until the damage is done. This undermines the trust and accountability in public institutions. That's not a good sign for democracy.

[The Speaker in the chair]

The fourth thing is: community health councils are dismantled. This means the loss of a grassroots community voice. Community health councils were a vital link between everyday Albertans and the health care system. Disbanding them means silencing local perspectives in health care, especially from underrepresented regions like Calgary-North East, where diverse needs require tailored responses. These councils often flagged gaps in service, whether it was language access, seniors care, or culturally sensitive programs. Now those community watchdogs are gone under this bill and will be replaced by a government that has already shown that it doesn't listen unless it's forced to listen.

Fifth, shared sector services agency. Centralizing HR, centralizing IT and admin staff into a new sector-wide agency risks creating a megabureaucracy that's slower, less responsive, and more prone to red tape. It will lead to job losses.

The sixth thing that it does is public health restructuring. Public health nurses will be transferred from AHS to Primary Care Alberta, and all medical officers of health, staff, and policy development functions are transferred to the Ministry of Health under this bill. This is the same government that passed bills 33 and 34 last year, and that means that the information will be hidden from Albertans. Albertans will not be able to find out what kind of decisions this government is making that are impacting the lives of millions of Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, this is the government that is politicizing the Alberta health care system, that is privatizing the Alberta health care system. On this side of the House we will never stop fighting for a publicly funded, publicly delivered health care system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise tonight to speak to the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

Mr. Getson: In support of?

Dr. Elmeligi: No, I am not in support of this bill. I said earlier tonight that I have a blanket "no" for everything. So no; don't like it; not a fan. Except for our amendments; I liked all of our amendments that we proposed tonight, but no for everything else.

Health care. I mean, wow. It's a big thing to talk about at 10:47.

Mr. Nally: You don't have to.

Dr. Elmeligi: I'm going to. I'm doing it right now.

There's no doubt, Mr. Speaker, that our public health care system needs some support, and there's also no doubt that Albertans who are trying to get into the system also need some support. I believe that public health care is the greatest gift that we give each other, and at this time in history where we spend an awful lot of energy looking across the border, I'm increasingly thankful for our public health care system because I'm increasingly aware that they don't have that in the States. That is one of the things that makes Canada so great, that we have public health care. I know that everybody in this House appreciates a public health care system even if we disagree on how to get there and how to manage it.

This bill introduces significant changes to the Alberta health system, especially in regard to hospital administration and governance. For the

past few months the minister has been conducting consultations across Alberta on these updates of separating the health care system into these four ministries, and this division, and this general restructuring or refocusing of health care. The legislative changes have been discussed.

I attended the public consultations in Canmore and Banff because I wanted to hear what people in my community had to say in these consultations.

Ms Chapman: Oh, you listen to people in your communities?

Dr. Elmeligi: I listen to people in my community. I know it's crazy.

I went to these consultations as the MLA and I participated, but mostly I listened. The people who attended these consultations were community residents, health care professionals, municipal leaders, small-business owners, some of them were people who had parents in care or maybe they were in long-term care themselves, seniors in our community.

The biggest question that people in my community asked at these public health care consultations was: why? Why are we separating health care into these four buckets, into these four ministries? Why now? And how will this choice make our health care system any better?

The odd thing was, Mr. Speaker, that there were no answers to those questions. In fact, the public consultation wasn't even really allowed to discuss those questions because Albertans were never asked if they wanted their health care to be split into four buckets. They were just told that it's happening. Then the question was: how should we do it? But everybody was really largely confused as to why we're even having the conversation in the first place. I have yet to hear a reasonable justification from this minister of how separating our health care system into four buckets is going to make it better.

10:50

How will this bring more doctors to my community in the Bow Valley of Canmore and Banff? How will it bring more doctors to Bragg Creek, to Redwood Meadows? I mean, people in Bragg Creek; you think it's close to the city. It's not. It's closer, but people in Bragg Creek don't want to drive to Calgary all the time when they want to see a doctor. They'd sure like to see a doctor in their own hamlet.

It's a little bit interesting that, you know, the minister has this travelling consultation road show. The consultation isn't really getting to the matter at hand that people want to discuss. When they try to ask questions about it, there aren't answers. Basically, it's a flawed consultation from the very beginning, and the results of that flawed consultation feed into this flawed Bill 55. So it's just flawed all over the place.

This bill creates a new shared sector services agency, which, I find, is really funny to me. The bill creates a new shared sector services agency to manage human resources, information technology, and administrative functions across the health care system. It's bringing the four buckets back together under one bucket called the shared sector services agency, which kind of sounds like what we have right now. It really makes me feel like this is what a lot of bureaucracy looks like, Mr. Speaker. It looks like about 165 pages of a bill that is shuffling deck chairs on the *Titanic* and not actually addressing the concerns or the issues that Albertans have.

We actually need to fix health care in meaningful ways, not just move things around and create a whole bunch of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy isn't more doctors in my community. It's not more nurses. It's not more anaesthesiologists to make sure that every OR in the province is operating and actually conducting surgeries. It's just bureaucracy. I thought that everybody in this House hated big bureaucracy. I guess I was wrong. I guess that's just me.

Mr. Eggen: I hate it.

Dr. Elmeligi: And my colleague on this side of the House.

The other thing that this bill does is that it gets rid of hospital boards. I have to ask if hospital boards were consulted and why are we getting rid of hospital boards? This was another thing that was not discussed at these consultations that I attended. Similarly, hospital governance overhaul, in terms of the types of hospitals being consolidated under the term of approved hospital, that also was not discussed at these public consultations. We've got these public consultations happening, where the questions that people are asking aren't being answered, and some of the most significant changes to health care functionality are also not part of the consultation. So I have to ask, Mr. Speaker: what is the consultation for? It's just gathering a whole bunch of – what? – meaningless information that isn't actually being fed into bills at all. It's a little bit disappointing. I don't really know why we're replacing hospital boards or how hospital boards were consulted, but I would really love some additional information from the minister in that regard.

I'll tell you some things I have heard in my riding, Mr. Speaker, that are not included in this bill. I've kind of talked a little bit about the idea of needing more doctors. I think most communities around Alberta need more doctors. Part of the challenge for the Bow Valley is the cost of living. It is one of the barriers to attracting new doctors and nurses into Canmore and Banff, the cost of housing, the cost of operating expenses for clinics, and how difficult it is for a doctor to be a business person and a doctor while trying to live in one of the most expensive communities in Alberta. This bill doesn't do anything to address housing or operating expenses for clinics or making life easier for doctors.

Recently, I had an emergency doctor from my community come into my office. She also does work in Lake Louise, and she informed me that the clinic in Lake Louise – I mean, it's not a hospital; it's a doctor's clinic – three days a week used to do blood work, where they would draw the blood and then send it to Banff and send it off to Alberta labs for analysis. That service of drawing blood three days a week in Lake Louise costs about $47,000 a year, and that service has been cut. So now patients in Lake Louise who need to have their cholesterol tested or have any other kind of blood work done are told to drive to Banff to have their blood work done. Well, Banff is not Lake Louise, Mr. Speaker. Depending on the road conditions, Banff is at least half an hour, maybe 45 minutes, maybe an hour, maybe multiple hours if there's an accident on the Trans-Canada highway away from Lake Louise.

Ms Chapman: It's like they don't understand rural Alberta.

Dr. Elmeligi: Right. It's like they don't understand that in rural Alberta small towns are actually far apart from each other.

People in Lake Louise who need to have blood work done now need to take a day off work. Well, a lot of people in Lake Louise don't have cars, so they have to take the bus, and the bus schedule doesn't work for them. They might have to take a whole day off work. That day off work is not subsidized or covered in any way. Basically, Mr. Speaker, what this means is that people in Lake Louise aren't getting their blood work done. It costs $47,000 a year. I really feel like we could probably fund that and make a pretty big difference in the lives of people with rural health care needs.

Similarly, doctors on call in Lake Louise are paid $23 an hour to be on call every weekend. They work during regular clinic hours

Monday to Friday, and then they're on call every weekend, to get paid $23 an hour. If they see patients, they get a little bit more money for that work, but if they don't see patients, they're stuck in Lake Louise because they can't be out of cell service. Again, a very rural-specific thing. Once you leave town, you're not in cell coverage, and if you're on call, you have to be in cell coverage. It basically means that our doctors in Lake Louise work seven days a week and get paid very little money to do that. They don't even get to enjoy the mountains that they live in because they have to stay in cell reception the whole time.

I find those situations really disturbing and upsetting, Mr. Speaker, and this bill does nothing to address that. This bill is not going to improve rural health care. I know members across the aisle are concerned about rural health care as well. This bill doesn't do anything for rural health care.

That brings us to this whole idea of hospital operators and this ministerial oversight. I really, really, really cannot stress enough how uncomfortable I feel that every single UCP bill puts more powers in the hands of the minister that is proposing the bill. It is not cool, Mr. Speaker. I don't know another way to describe it, because it's 10:58 p.m. It's not cool, and I don't like it. I'm not a fan. You put more power in the hands of the minister; the minister changes. Every couple of years there could be a new minister on that file. We put more power in the hands of the minister and I think we just create uncertainty and inconsistency, and that is not what a robust health care system needs to serve Albertans, especially if somebody is on a wait-list for a couple of years. They could be working under a different minister's direction by the time they actually get to have their knee surgery.

This government has a problem with accountability when it comes to health care. We've seen that through the corrupt care scandal. We've got allegations of favouring providers who are also donors and who happen to hang out at playoff hockey games and have great tickets and private jets. We've got questionable contracts with private surgical facilities, yet this bill opens the door for private hospitals. I don't trust the UCP to manage private health care. I don't trust them to manage public health care. So I have a pretty big problem with this idea that the minister can designate hospital operators if they are deemed capable. What are the criteria for deeming an operator capable? What is this based on? Is there going to be an RFP that goes out, that people or corporations can apply to run and own a hospital?

11:00

This also speaks to the Premier's previous sentiment that competition fosters good care. It doesn't. Competition fosters profit-making, Mr. Speaker. It doesn't make better hospitals if companies or hospitals have to compete for an RFP to own a health care operation. Health care is not a business; it's a service. It's a service that we provide to Albertans. It's how we take care of each other.

This should not be in the minister's hands. I don't care who the minister is; I don't care if the minister is me. We should not leave the decision-making power of who deems a hospital acceptable up to a minister.

An approved hospital allows the minister to designate an operator or corporation if the minister deems them capable of delivery appropriate with the ministerial oversight and considered recommendations by the provincial health agency. All of that is really, really subjective, Mr. Speaker. It all raises questions. What happened the last time this kind of stuff was up to the minister? Well, we kind of saw how it turned out when the provincial health agency was allowed to enter into agreements with chartered surgical facilities. I don't want to end up with a whole bunch of Mraiche hospitals.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Environment and Protected Areas.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. After all of this interesting and colourful debate I would like to move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, May 7, 2025.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:02 p.m.]

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