LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

First Session, 43rd Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday, May 12, 2025
Afternoon Sitting
Issue No. 62

THE HONOURABLE RAJ CHOUHAN, SPEAKER

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PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Entered Confederation July 20, 1871)

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR

Her Honour the Honourable Wendy Cocchia, CM, OBC

First Session, 43rd Parliament

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Honourable Raj Chouhan

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Attorney General and Deputy Premier ..... Hon. Niki Sharma, KC
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BC NDP

Anderson, Hon. Brittny ..... Kootenay Central
Anderson, George ..... Nanaimo-Lantzville
Arora, Rohini ..... Burnaby East
Bailey, Hon. Brenda ..... Vancouver–South Granville
Beare, Hon. Lisa ..... Maple Ridge–Pitt Meadows
Begg, Hon. Garry ..... Surrey-Guildford
Blatherwick, Jennifer ..... Coquitlam-Maillardville
Boyle, Hon. Christine ..... Vancouver–Little Mountain
Brar, Hon. Jagrup ..... Surrey-Fleetwood
Chandra Herbert, Hon. Spencer ..... Vancouver–West End
Chant, Susie ..... North Vancouver–Seymour
Choi, Paul ..... Burnaby South–Metrotown
Chouhan, Hon. Raj ..... Burnaby–New Westminster
Chow, Hon. George ..... Vancouver-Fraserview
Davidson, Hon. Tamara / Laanas ..... North Coast–Haida Gwaii
Dhir, Sunita ..... Vancouver-Langara
Dix, Hon. Adrian ..... Vancouver-Renfrew
Eby, Hon. David, KC ..... Vancouver–Point Grey
Elmore, Mable ..... Vancouver-Kensington
Farnworth, Hon. Mike ..... Port Coquitlam
Gibson, Hon. Diana ..... Oak Bay–Gordon Head
Glumac, Hon. Rick ..... Port Moody–Burquitlam
Greene, Hon. Kelly ..... Richmond-Steveston
Higginson, Stephanie ..... Ladysmith-Oceanside
Kahlon, Hon. Ravi ..... Delta North
Kang, Hon. Anne ..... Burnaby Centre
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Lore, Hon. Grace ..... Victoria–Beacon Hill
Ma, Hon. Bowinn ..... North Vancouver–Lonsdale
Malcolmson, Hon. Sheila ..... Nanaimo–Gabriola Island
Morissette, Steve ..... Kootenay Monashee
Neill, Hon. Randene ..... Powell River–Sunshine Coast
Osborne, Hon. Josie ..... Mid Island–Pacifc Rim
Parmar, Hon. Ravi ..... Langford-Highlands
Phillip, Joan / Amshen ..... Vancouver-Strathcona
Popham, Hon. Lana ..... Saanich South
Rotchford, Darlene ..... Esquimalt-Colwood
Routledge, Janet ..... Burnaby North
Sandhu, Harwinder ..... Vernon-Lumby
Shah, Amna ..... Surrey City Centre
Sharma, Hon. Niki, KC ..... Vancouver-Hastings
Sunner, Jessie ..... Surrey-Newton
Toporowski, Debra / Qwulti'stunaat ..... Cowichan Valley
Whiteside, Hon. Jennifer ..... New Westminster–Coquitlam
Wickens, Hon. Jodie ..... Coquitlam–Burke Mountain
Yung, Hon. Terry ..... Vancouver-Yaletown

CONSERVATIVE PARTY OF BC

Banman, Bruce ..... Abbotsford South
Bhangu, Harman ..... Langley-Abbotsford
Bird, Rosalyn ..... Prince George–Valemount
Block, Lynne ..... West Vancouver–Capilano
Boultbee, Amelia ..... Penticton-Summerland
Chan, Hon ..... Richmond Centre
Chapman, Brent ..... Surrey South
Clare, Sheldon ..... Prince George–North Cariboo
Davis, Pete ..... Kootenay Rockies
Day, Brennan ..... Courtenay-Comox
Dew, Gavin ..... Kelowna-Mission
Dhaliwal, Mandeep ..... Surrey North
Doerkson, Lorne ..... Cariboo-Chilcotin
Gasper, Reann ..... Abbotsford-Mission
Giddens, Kiel ..... Prince George–Mackenzie
Halford, Trevor ..... Surrey–White Rock
Hartwell, Sharon ..... Bulkley Valley–Stikine
Hepner, Linda ..... Surrey–Serpentine River
Kindy, Anna ..... North Island
Kooner, Steve ..... Richmond-Queensborough
Loewen, Kristina ..... Kelowna Centre
Luck, Tony ..... Fraser-Nicola
Maahs, Heather ..... Chilliwack North
McCall, Macklin ..... West Kelowna–Peachland
McInnis, Scott ..... Columbia River–Revelstoke
Milobar, Peter ..... Kamloops Centre
Mok, Lawrence ..... Maple Ridge East
Neufeld, Korky ..... Abbotsford West
Neufeld, Larry ..... Peace River South
Paton, Ian ..... Delta South
Rattée, Claire ..... Skeena
Rustad, John ..... Nechako Lakes
Stamer, Ward ..... Kamloops–North Thompson
Sturko, Elenore ..... Surrey-Cloverdale
Tepper, Bryan ..... Surrey-Panorama
Toor, Jody ..... Langley-Willowbrook
Van Popta, Misty ..... Langley–Walnut Grove
Warbus, Á'a:líya ..... Chilliwack–Cultus Lake
Wat, Teresa ..... Richmond-Bridgeport
Williams, David ..... Salmon Arm–Shuswap
Wilson, Donegal ..... Boundary-Similkameen

BC GREEN PARTY

Botterell, Rob ..... Saanich North and the Islands
Valeriote, Jeremy ..... West Vancouver–Sea to Sky

INDEPENDENT

Armstrong, Tara ..... Kelowna–Lake Country–Coldstream
Brodie, Dallas ..... Vancouver-Quilchena
Kealy, Jordan ..... Peace River North

PARTY STANDINGS

Total seats – 93

BC NDP – 47 | Conservative Party of BC – 41 | BC Green Party – 2 | Independent – 3

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF RIDINGS

A

Abbotsford-Mission ..... Reann Gasper
Abbotsford South ..... Bruce Banman
Abbotsford West ..... Korky Neufeld

B

Boundary-Similkameen ..... Donegal Wilson
Bulkley Valley–Stikine ..... Sharon Hartwell
Burnaby Centre ..... Hon. Anne Kang
Burnaby East ..... Rohini Arora
Burnaby–New Westminster ..... Hon. Raj Chouhan
Burnaby North ..... Janet Routledge
Burnaby South–Metrotown ..... Paul Choi

C

Cariboo-Chilcotin ..... Lorne Doerkson
Chilliwack–Cultus Lake ..... Á'a:líya Warbus
Chilliwack North ..... Heather Maahs
Columbia River–Revelstoke ..... Scott McInnis
Coquitlam–Burke Mountain ..... Hon. Jodie Wickens
Coquitlam-Maillardville ..... Jennifer Blatherwick
Courtenay-Comox ..... Brennan Day
Cowichan Valley ..... Debra Toporowski / Qwulti'stunaat

D

Delta North ..... Hon. Ravi Kahlon
Delta South ..... Ian Paton

E

Esquimalt-Colwood ..... Darlene Rotchford

F

Fraser-Nicola ..... Tony Luck

J

Juan de Fuca–Malahat ..... Dana Lajeunesse

K

Kamloops Centre ..... Peter Milobar
Kamloops–North Thompson ..... Ward Stamer
Kelowna Centre ..... Kristina Loewen
Kelowna–Lake Country–Coldstream ..... Tara Armstrong
Kelowna-Mission ..... Gavin Dew
Kootenay Central ..... Hon. Brittny Anderson
Kootenay Monashee ..... Steve Morissette
Kootenay Rockies ..... Pete Davis

L

Ladysmith-Oceanside ..... Stephanie Higginson
Langford-Highlands ..... Hon. Ravi Parmar
Langley-Abbotsford ..... Harman Bhangu
Langley–Walnut Grove ..... Misty Van Popta
Langley-Willowbrook ..... Jody Toor

M

Maple Ridge East ..... Lawrence Mok
Maple Ridge–Pitt Meadows ..... Hon. Lisa Beare
Mid Island–Pacific Rim ..... Hon. Josie Osborne

N

Nanaimo–Gabriola Island ..... Hon. Sheila Malcolmson
Nanaimo-Lantzville ..... George Anderson
Nechako Lakes ..... John Rustad
New Westminster–Coquitlam ..... Hon. Jennifer Whiteside
North Coast–Haida Gwaii ..... Hon. Laanas / Tamara Davidson
North Island ..... Anna Kindy
North Vancouver–Lonsdale ..... Hon. Bowinn Ma
North Vancouver–Seymour ..... Susie Chant

O

Oak Bay–Gordon Head ..... Hon. Diana Gibson

P

Peace River North ..... Jordan Kealy
Peace River South ..... Larry Neufeld
Penticton-Summerland ..... Amelia Boultbee
Port Coquitlam ..... Hon. Mike Farnworth
Port Moody–Burquitlam ..... Hon. Rick Glumac
Powell River–Sunshine Coast ..... Hon. Randene Neill
Prince George–Mackenzie ..... Kiel Giddens
Prince George–North Cariboo ..... Sheldon Clare
Prince George–Valemount ..... Rosalyn Bird

R

Richmond-Bridgeport ..... Teresa Wat
Richmond Centre ..... Hon Chan
Richmond-Queensborough ..... Steve Kooner
Richmond-Steveston ..... Hon. Kelly Greene

S

Saanich North and the Islands ..... Rob Botterell
Saanich South ..... Hon. Lana Popham
Salmon Arm–Shuswap ..... David Williams
Skeena ..... Claire Rattée
Surrey City Centre ..... Amna Shah
Surrey-Cloverdale ..... Elenore Sturko
Surrey-Fleetwood ..... Hon. Jagrup Brar
Surrey-Guildford ..... Hon. Garry Begg
Surrey-Newton ..... Jessie Sunner
Surrey North ..... Mandeep Dhaliwal
Surrey-Panorama ..... Bryan Tepper
Surrey–Serpentine River ..... Linda Hepner
Surrey South ..... Brent Chapman
Surrey–White Rock ..... Trevor Halford

V

Vancouver-Fraserview ..... Hon. George Chow
Vancouver-Hastings ..... Hon. Niki Sharma, KC
Vancouver-Kensington ..... Mable Elmore
Vancouver-Langara ..... Sunita Dhir
Vancouver–Little Mountain ..... Hon. Christine Boyle
Vancouver–Point Grey ..... Hon. David Eby, KC
Vancouver-Quilchena ..... Dallas Brodie
Vancouver-Renfrew ..... Hon. Adrian Dix
Vancouver–South Granville ..... Hon. Brenda Bailey
Vancouver-Strathcona ..... Amshen / Joan Phillip
Vancouver–West End ..... Hon. Spencer Chandra Herbert
Vancouver-Yaletown ..... Hon. Terry Yung
Vernon-Lumby ..... Harwinder Sandhu
Victoria–Beacon Hill ..... Hon. Grace Lore
Victoria–Swan Lake ..... Nina Krieger

W

West Kelowna–Peachland ..... Macklin McCall
West Vancouver–Capilano ..... Lynne Block
West Vancouver–Sea to Sky ..... Jeremy Valeriote

CONTENTS

Monday, May 12, 2025
Afternoon Sitting

Page

Routine Business

Introductions by Members 2541

Tributes 2541
- Art Charbonneau
  - Hon. Mike Farnworth

Statements 2542
- Chilliwack Chiefs Hockey Team
  - Darlene Rotchford

Introductions by Members 2542

Speaker's Statement 2543
- Removal of Legislature Cat from Speaker's Office

Introduction and First Reading of Bills 2543
- Bill M214 — Firefighters' Health Act
  - Misty Van Popta

Members' Statements 2544
- Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing
  - Amshen / Joan Phillip
- Ski Industry in Columbia River–Revelstoke
  - Scott McInnis
- Value of Local Newspapers
  - George Anderson
- Mike Morgan
  - Debra Toporowski / Qwulti'stunaat
- Men's Shed Society in Mackenzie
  - Kiel Giddens

Oral Questions 2546
- Government Response to Antisemitism and Police Investigation of Hate Crimes
  - John Rustad
  - Hon. David Eby
  - Hon. Niki Sharma
- Access to Health Care Services
  - Ward Stamer
  - Hon. Josie Osborne
- Affordable Housing Options and Rental Housing Vacancy Control
  - Rob Botterell
  - Hon. Ravi Kahlon
- Government Action on Youth Mental Health and Addiction Issues
  - Claire Rattée
  - Hon. Josie Osborne
  - Hon. Ravi Kahlon
  - Á'a:líya Warbus
- Justice System Staffing Shortages
  - Hon Chan
  - Hon. Niki Sharma

Oral Questions *(continued)*
Attack by Repeat Offender and Action on Community Safety
Korky Neufeld
Hon. Garry Begg
Government Action on Sexual Assault of Women
Reann Gasper
Hon. Niki Sharma
Rosalyn Bird
Safety of Women and Support and Justice for Victims of Crime
Teresa Wat
Hon. Niki Sharma
Scott McInnis
Government Response to Community Health and Safety Issues
Elenore Sturko
Hon. Niki Sharma

Tabling Documents 2551
Legislative Assembly Management Committee, report, 2023-24

Reports from Committees 2551
Private Bills and Private Members' Bills Committee, Bill M204, Perinatal and Postnatal Mental Health Strategy Act
Amna Shah

Tabling Documents 2551
WorkSafeBC, annual report, 2024, and service plan, 2025–2027

Orders of the Day

Second Reading of Bills 2552
Bill 14 — Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, 2025 *(continued)*
Korky Neufeld
Hon. Sheila Malcolmson
Linda Hepner
Brennan Day
Lynne Block
Scott McInnis
Kristina Loewen

Reporting of Bills 2573
Bill 11 — Employment Standards Amendment Act, 2025

Third Reading of Bills 2573
Bill 11 — Employment Standards Amendment Act, 2025

Second Reading of Bills 2573
Bill 14 — Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, 2025 *(continued)*
Harman Bhangu
Bryan Tepper
Anna Kindy
Claire Rattée
Gavin Dew
Reann Gasper
Heather Maahs

Reporting of Bills 2595
Bill M202 — Eligibility to Hold Public Office Act *(continued)*

Proceedings in the Douglas Fir Room

Committee of Supply 2595
Estimates: Ministry of Children and Family Development
Hon. Jodie Wickens
Heather Maahs
Trevor Halford
Amelia Boultbee

Proceedings in the Birch Room

Committee of the Whole 2615
Bill 11 — Employment Standards Amendment Act, 2025
Kiel Giddens
Hon. Jennifer Whiteside
Anna Kindy
Bill 13 — Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025
Ward Stamer
Hon. Ravi Parmar
Macklin McCall
Donegal Wilson
Rob Botterell

MONDAY, MAY 12, 2025

The House met at 1:35 p.m.

[The Speaker in the chair.]

Routine Business

Introductions by Members

Sheldon Clare: It's my pleasure today to introduce my Prince George constituency assistant Johnathan Raine, who's down here this week.

Johnathan, if you would stand and be recognized.

I hope everyone here will make Johnathan feel especially welcome.

Hon. Brittny Anderson: Today I rise to welcome representatives from the Canadian Propane Association, who are joining us here in the gallery. Propane is an essential part of British Columbia's diverse and resilient energy system. From heating homes in remote and Indigenous communities to fuelling equipment on farms and job sites, propane supports reliable energy access across our province. It also plays a key part in barbecue season.

Joining us in the gallery today are Katie Kachur, Clint Hillman, Curtis Kitchen, Cale Runions, Courtney Seir-Todd, Sammy Malhi, Allan Murphy, Curtis Robinson, Willie Stephens, Devin O'Neal, Ryan Hudson, Nancy Borden, Bill Gourley, Richard Charbonneau, Alan Penner, Harry Singh, Tracy MacDonald and David Gulliver.

Will the House please make them feel very welcome and thank them for lunch.

Larry Neufeld: Apparently, I didn't stand quickly enough, so I am going to echo the hon. member in thanking and recognizing the presence of the Canadian Propane Association. I won't repeat the names, because we just heard them.

Again, please, from this side of the House, help me make them feel welcome.

Hon. Adrian Dix: Today we're welcoming guests from EDF Power Solutions, which is a major international renewable energy company. I want to welcome Cory Basil, who's the regional senior vice-president for Canada and U.S. northeast, and David Thornton, the director of regulatory and legislative affairs.

Let the House make them welcome.

Brent Chapman: Yes, I am honoured to have some good friends join us here today. They are leaders in the Bangladeshi-Canadian community. They are strong proponents of Bangladesh-to-Canada and Canada-to-Bangladesh A solid Conservative federal and provincial candidate, Syed Mohsin; also his wife, Razia Mohsin; and his mother-in-law, who joins us here today, Syeda Khan, from Orange County, New York.

Please make them feel welcome.

Dana Lajeunesse: It's my pleasure today to introduce to the House some very good friends of mine from the South Island Prosperity Partnership, otherwise known as SIPP. Aaron Stone is the chief executive officer of South Island Prosperity Partnership, formerly mayor of Ladysmith. Dallas Gislason serves as the executive director of community economies.

Jason Goldsworthy is the executive director of the Centre for Ocean Applied Sustainable Technologies, or COAST, a SIPP initiative focused on the sustainable blue economy. Christina Clark is the inaugural executive director of the Indigenous prosperity centre, an Indigenous-led initiative under SIPP that supports self-directed economic development for First Nations.

Please give them all a warm House welcome.

Á'a:líya Warbus: It's my pleasure to welcome today 50 grade 10 students from Sardis Secondary, which is in my riding of Chilliwack–Cultus Lake. They will be here with Principal Lynnet Schramm, their teacher Kevin Gambell and many chaperones that are going to be with them.

I just want to highlight that I went to Sardis Secondary. The programs, the teachers and the school are amazing. They have a great focus on agriculture and skilled trades and are home to the Sardis Falcons Football team.

I'd also like to take a quick opportunity to wish my son, Kymani Seymour…. He's 15, and he goes to Sardis Secondary. He is the absolute light and treasure of my life. Everything in my life changed the day that he was born.

Happy birthday, son. I love you.

[1:40 p.m.]

Tributes

ART CHARBONNEAU

Hon. Mike Farnworth: I rise today with some sad news, and that is the passing of Art Charbonneau, who was the MLA for Kamloops from 1991 to 1996.

Art also served as the Minister of Transportation and Highways, as it was known then, as well as the Minister of Forests and of Education. I served with him in this House for five years. I always remember him as someone who stood up for Kamloops, was very thoughtful and had an amazing sense of humour.

I just want to give this news to the House and that we pass on our condolences to his family.

Statements

CHILLIWACK CHIEFS HOCKEY TEAM

Darlene Rotchford: I made a challenge to a fellow member in this House on Friday, to my fellow colleague for Chilliwack North. I may have challenged her BCHL team to a friendly competition, which, you can see, I did not win.

I would like to congratulate the Chilliwack Chiefs on their next round in playoffs.

Best of luck to you all.

Introductions by Members

Anna Kindy: I have the pleasure to introduce Dr. Rod Nugent. He's a retired dentist and also the chair and on the board of directors of Strathcona Connected Coast Network Corporation.

Also, Mr. David Leitch. He's the chief administrative officer of the Strathcona Regional District. David has almost 30 years of local government experience in the field of engineering, administration, public works and utilities.

Together with City West, they are working to improve the north Island and coastal B.C. internet services.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I have some very special guests in the Legislature today. Today in the Legislature I have, visiting, Dave Taylor, Louise Witt and Catherine Taylor. Louise and Catherine are both dedicated and hard-working social workers doing very important work in our communities. Dave is a retired pilot who spends part of his retirement volunteering and supporting families and organizations filling out their disability tax credit.

Fun fact: I came to the Legislature for the very first time of my entire life a little over 14, 15 years ago with Louise. We wore t-shirts, and we were advocating to MLAs at the time. It is a full-circle moment for her to be visiting me, in the Legislature, as the Minister of Children and Family Development.

Would the House please join me in giving them a very warm welcome.

Heather Maahs: I would like to take this opportunity to thank my friend across the aisle for being such a wonderful sport and proposing this wonderful bet. The Victoria Grizzlies did a wonderful job.

It was a good game, but yay, Chiefs.

George Anderson: I would like to take a moment to recognize Jim and Eva Manly, who are celebrating 66 years of marriage. They were married May 9, 1959, and I think it's a testament to the love and the care that they have for one another to also build upon a great community here in Nanaimo.

I just would hope that the House would join me in congratulating Eva and Jim on such a remarkable milestone.

Rosalyn Bird: It's my pleasure today to introduce Stefan Woloszyn, the CEO of City West, a full-service telecommunications and entertainment provider in Prince Rupert. City West has partnered with the city of Prince Rupert and the regional district to Connected Coast project, to bring high-speed internet accessibility to rural and remote communities along coastal B.C., Haida Gwaii and Vancouver Island.

Can everybody in the House please make him feel welcome here and throughout the precinct today.

Jessie Sunner: It is not quite 66 years, but I would like to congratulate two very, very special people in my life who just yesterday celebrated 39 years of marriage: my parents.

I want to thank them for all of their love, their support, for truly making me believe and know that I can do anything in this life and for setting such a great example of what a loving marriage looks like.

Congratulations, parents.

[1:45 p.m.]

Will the House please join me in a warm welcome.

Jordan Kealy: I rise today to welcome the Canadian Propane Association as well and Katie Kachur, who is a good friend of mine that I have known for just about four years.

They are a fierce advocate for propane. Propane is an essential resource in so many different ways in our lives. Without them, in the North, we would be left out in the cold. For some, this is their only option for heat or energy. Propane is resilient, heating communities, fuelling farms, and it also puts the sizzle in my steak.

Please join me in recognizing their leadership and contributions to B.C.'s energy future.

Welcome to the Legislature, and thank you very much for making sure I have propane for my barbecue, and the lunch you provided was wonderful.

Hon. Spencer Chandra Herbert: Well, I rise to share some good news for British Columbia, news I think we all could be very proud of.

Over this last week in Kamloops, it's been the National Aboriginal Hockey Championships, and I can tell you this weekend our B.C. young women's team, they placed silver. They won the silver medal, and I want to congratulate them and also congratulate the young men's team for doing very well.

Next year you'll get them.

Go, team, go! Congratulations, B.C.

Hon. Sheila Malcolmson: Joining us today in the gal-

lery is Mr. Kevan Shaw, a Nanaimo constituent of mine and president of the Victoria Crescent neighbourhood association.

Will the members please make him very welcome.

Speaker's Statement

REMOVAL OF LEGISLATURE CAT FROM SPEAKER'S OFFICE

The Speaker: Members, about three weeks ago a member catnapped our Macey, and Macey has still not returned home. Today I have appointed Rob Shaw as a commissioner to bring Macey back home — not a real cat, just Macey.

If the cat returns by the end of the day, I will make a generous donation to SPCA, so the catnapper is urged and encouraged to bring the cat back home.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

BILL M214 — FIREFIGHTERS' HEALTH ACT

Misty Van Popta presented a bill intituled Firefighters' Health Act.

Misty Van Popta: I move that a bill entitled Firefighters' Health Act, of which notice has been given in my name on the order paper, be introduced and read a first time now.

I am so pleased to present the Firefighters' Health Act to the House today. This bill is paramount to protecting the health of those who protect us on a daily basis.

It is noted that both the government and the opposition party committed to supporting firefighters during the fall 2024 campaign, and it is my hope here today and moving forward that we can work together to maintain our commitment to them. This is not a partisan issue.

This bill is inspired by two men in my community. I will go into their stories further, hopefully at second reading debates, but the crux of their stories is that they are both younger than me. While their chances of dying from cancer are two to four times higher than mine due to the very job they go to every day, they are not afforded early screening for colon cancer due to their age. One man under the age of 50 has already had life-altering cancer, while the other, also under 50, has a family history of cancer, compounded to his occupational hazard of cancer.

We all know a firefighter. Some are even family. You know one. You know one. You know one.

The topic of updating the list of presumptive cancers and the need for regular and early health screenings is not new to either this government nor the last government. It is time that we all here today stand and take ownership of making these important changes to the health outcomes of the over 13,000 men and women firefighters who protect this province.

[1:50 p.m.]

This bill is about updating the presumptive-cancers list and crafting a health plan strategy for firefighters, which would include earlier and regular screenings. This would be accomplished based on a collaborative approach with the BCPFFA, the Doctors of B.C. and the ministers in charge.

I want to thank my Local 4550 for inspiring this bill and to thank all the union locals that came to Victoria a few months ago and met with all of us.

May you never have to do that again. May you know that everyone here supports and values your life always.

The Speaker: Members, the question is first reading of the bill.

Motion approved.

Misty Van Popta: I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

[1:55 p.m.]

The Speaker: Members, before we take the vote, I want to remind members that division is usually called at the first motion at the first reading, not on the administrative side of the bill. But today we will allow it.

Motion approved unanimously on a division. [See *Votes and Proceedings*.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I see that joining us in the House now is a grade 10 class from Gleneagle Secondary. Really grateful that all of the students and teachers are here today.

I had a bit of a panic this morning when I was told that the Grade 10 social studies class was visiting us. I thought that maybe I forgot to fill out a permission form, and I texted my son and said, "Are you in the Legislature?" and he said: "No, that's the other Grade 10 social studies class." I hope you all go back to Gleneagle and tell Ashton that his mom said hi.

Please enjoy question period. I know my colleagues will all be on their best behaviour. Thank you for being here.

Members' Statements

IRONWORKERS MEMORIAL SECOND NARROWS CROSSING

Amshen / Joan Phillip: Today I rise to talk about the collapse of the Second Narrows Bridge, June 17, 1958, while it was still under construction. While 79 workers plunged into the Burrard Inlet, it caused the deaths of 14 ironworkers, two engineers, a painter and, later, a commercial diver attempting a rescue.

[2:00 p.m.]

The accident remains the worst disaster in Vancouver's history. A royal commission determined that a miscalculation in the design of the temporary structure played a significant role.

I was six years old at the time, driving down 3rd Avenue with my mother, when I looked over and I said: "Look, Mom, the bridge is falling." And I didn't realize it was really bad until she started swearing in two languages. By the time we got to Maplewood, emergency vehicles were flying by us. When we got home on Dollarton Highway, my mom and dad got into their 36-foot troller, gillnetter, and were fishing survivors out of the inlet.

It is now called the Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing to honour the lives lost in that tragedy. Let us reaffirm our commitment to strong protections and a culture that values the health and safety of all workers.

Huy ch q'u siem.

SKI INDUSTRY IN COLUMBIA RIVER–REVELSTOKE

Scott McInnis: Another wonderful ski season has come to an end in Columbia River–Revelstoke. I rise today to express my deepest gratitude to the incredible individuals who power the ski industry in the riding I am so lucky to represent — from lift operators, ski patrol, instructors, hospitality staff, maintenance crews and countless others behind the scenes.

Thank you. Your dedication, professionalism and hard work have formed the backbone of a world-class tourism economy that supports families, small business and entire communities across our region.

The riding I represent has the best ski resorts in the country, if not the world. Revelstoke Mountain Resort, Kicking Horse, Panorama, Fairmont and Kimberley Alpine Resort get knee-deep powder all year long that falls like sheets of paper from the sky. Ask anyone who's been there, and most certainly they'll agree.

Our mountains are among the most iconic in the world, but it is the people, those who work long hours in all weather, who greet visitors with a smile, who keep our operations running smoothly and safely, that make the experience truly exceptional. Whether it's grooming the slopes before sunrise or serving a warm meal or a cold beverage after a long day of skiing, your efforts do not go unnoticed.

I'd also like to thank those who work and support the back-country skiing experience. Cat- and heli-skiing operations provide a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shred powder like you've never seen before. These folks often work weekends without a break and weeks on end, not because they need the money, necessarily, but because they love the lifestyle and the camaraderie and, of course, the stoke, which this industry most certainly provides.

Tourism drives opportunity in Columbia River–Revelstoke, and the ski industry is at its heart.

We simply couldn't do it without you. Your work brings joy to visitors, pride to our communities and prosperity to our local economy. On behalf of my constituents and all British Columbians who benefit from your service, thank you for all you do.

Now go grab your mountain bike, your golf clubs and your fly-fishing gear. We'll see you next year.

VALUE OF LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

George Anderson: Across British Columbia and Canada, printing presses, once loud with purpose, one by one are falling silent. Over the past 17 years, 529 local publications across Canada have shut down, and 76 percent of them have been community papers. With each closure, something greater disappears, the heartbeat of our communities.

When I was a kid, I had a paper route and ensured that those papers arrived before 7 a.m., even with the dogs chasing me and people being upset that they weren't getting their papers on time. That being said, these presses printed the first photos of individuals, and final farewells. They captured victories, losses, the ordinary moments of everyday life, holding space for the stories that shape who we are.

Many might say we can just read the news online, but printing presses have never been just about convenience; they've been about credibility and permanence. A printed page can't be quietly edited. A printed page doesn't vanish behind a paywall or algorithm. It stays, a public record of what we valued, debated and demonstrated who we were in that moment.

Behind those pages were journalists and also real people, collators, who were doing repetitive, labour-intensive work, stitching together the printed memories of our communities.

[2:05 p.m.]

When a printing press closes, it's harder for small-town voices to be heard, which should concern all of us. Former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour once said: "The search for truth is becoming more elusive." And when we lose the tools for truth — local news, public record,

printed word — we risk blurring facts, erasing memories and silencing communities.

To every collator, press worker and worker who kept those presses running: your labour mattered. You didn't just assemble newspapers; you assembled the memories of our local communities and history.

So as the presses may be falling silent, we cannot, because when a community loses the ability to tell its story, it risks losing its identity altogether.

MIKE MORGAN

Debra Toporowski / Qwulti'stunaat: My father-in-law, Mike Morgan, turns 90 today. He was born in 1935, and a lot was happening that year.

May 25 Babe Ruth hit the last of his 714 home runs, in a Major League record which would stand until 1974. Ruth retired on June 2. The world's first parking metre was installed in Oklahoma City, on January 16. September 13 Howard Hughes set a new airspeed record of 354.4 miles per hour in his Hughes H-1 Racer plane. November 5 the Parker brothers began marketing their recently acquired real estate game as Monopoly.

The Kit Kat bar, initially Rowntree's Chocolate Crisp, was first launched in September 1935. In the U.K., Hoover dam was opened. Elvis Presley was born. The first canned beer by Gottfried Krueger Brewing Company. The number one song in 1935 was "Cheek to Cheek" by Fred Astaire.

When Michael was five years old, he was watching the Battle of Britain out his window. When he was nine years old, his parents would pack him up and move to Canada from England. They started in Nakusp, B.C., and they finally settled at the end of Mount Sicker Road in Chemainus.

He would marry Barb Williams at the age of 21 years old. They had two sons, Douglas and William.

One of his jobs in 1957 was as a carpenter at the Crofton pulp mill. His shop is full of model airplanes that he built himself. He had a flyers club and people that came as far as Victoria and Nanaimo. You could find him out on the field on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Another previous job would be travelling around and running a karaoke. He attracted groupies that became known as Michael's angels. You will still find him enjoying karaoke on Wednesday afternoon at the Eagles' hall.

Happy birthday, Mike.

MEN'S SHED SOCIETY IN MACKENZIE

Kiel Giddens: I know that men's sheds have been talked about here in this Legislature, but I think it's important to talk about men's mental health. Men are much less likely to seek help and often suffer alone.

So today I want to share some of the inspiring mission and achievements of the Mackenzie Men's Shed Society. This is a growing movement in Mackenzie, with 44 men and counting, with often more than 20 showing up at the weekly coffee chats. They get together and discuss the community, and they come up with new ways to support their neighbours.

This organization is dedicated to building camaraderie, sharing valuable skills and promoting overall well-being. They believe that by creating a welcoming space for a cup of coffee, to volunteer together, to foster connection and growth, they can empower each other to overcome challenges while giving back with their time and their talents.

The group has really been collaborative with local organizations, like their partnership with Mackenzie Community Services. Through their honey-do list, they assist seniors, individuals with special needs and those facing limited resources with minor home repairs, life-and-limb repairs, accessibility supports and much more, operating under the belief that everyone deserves support and deserves dignity.

I had the chance to tour their new shed workshop space recently, and it's really coming together as a project hub in the community. The commitment of these men goes beyond just assisting. They also host workshops that enable community members to learn new skills and collaborate on various projects. One of their current teaching projects includes the building of wooden beds for youth, and the goal is to donate these to families and young individuals in need throughout Mackenzie.

[2:10 p.m.]

The men's shed has really flourished recently, creating an inclusive environment where men can foster good mental health while combatting social isolation.

Thank you to president Lucky McDonough and to Tony Vander Warden and Stacy Wengo. I want to thank Knut Herzog for the recent tour and his community work. This guy is a power volunteer in Mackenzie, a proud retired public servant and one of the most kind people I've met.

I think all of us can recognize the importance of giving back in our communities.

Harman Bhangu: I'd like to request to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

Harman Bhangu: A constituent of mine, John Hof, has his twin granddaughters in the gallery today from Sardis Secondary in Chilliwack — Hannah and Olivia Ivany.

Would the House make them feel very welcome.

Á'a:líya Warbus: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Á'a:líya Warbus: I also just wanted to, now that the guests are here, have the House make Sardis Secondary and their teacher Kevin Gambell very welcome as they enter just in time for question period.

Oral Questions

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO ANTISEMITISM AND POLICE INVESTIGATION OF HATE CRIMES

John Rustad: Victoria-based hate preacher Younus Kathrada launched yet another antisemitic-laden tirade against the Jewish community last Friday. Add this to the long list of Kathrada's disgusting sermons, where he called Jews "evil and filthy."

On Friday, yet again, he violated section 318 of the Criminal Code. Enough is enough.

Can this Attorney General tell this House whether there is an active hate crime investigation underway?

Hon. David Eby: First of all, I want to stand with the Jewish community and recognize how disgusting and deplorable these comments were, and this pattern of conduct from this individual. This kind of hateful speech has no place in our province. We have given police tools and support to ensure that hate crimes are investigated in our province — prosecutors with new hate crime policy.

For people who are aware of conduct like this but reluctant for some reason to call police, please don't hesitate. We also have a racist incident hotline where people can report this. It assists the province in eliminating hate in our province.

I'm glad that we can stand in this place against that kind of hate and all forms of hate and discrimination in our province and, certainly, support the police and the work that they need to do to investigate this and all incidents of hate.

The Speaker: Leader of the Official Opposition, supplemental.

John Rustad: I'm happy to hear the words from the Premier, although it has been 19 months of this carrying on, and it's not the first time we have called for this action to be taken.

The Canadian Antisemitism Education Foundation sent a note and a letter to the Victoria chief of police, Del Manak, yesterday. In that letter, they requested that Chief Manak commence an investigation into the conduct of the hate preacher.

Unlike Charlotte Kates, which was never actioned by this government, despite the hate crimes that this person indicated, if the police recommend charges, can the Attorney General today confirm that they will actually act upon those charges?

Hon. Niki Sharma: We all need to be very concerned that the system is appropriately responding to hate speech and condemning it when necessary.

We've put resources into making sure that police officers can get the training that they need to learn how to investigate appropriately and respond to any hate crimes that are happening in this province. I expect the system to take this action very seriously. As the member knows, it's not the Attorney General that approves charge assessments, but it's my job to make sure the system is tooled up to do the work appropriately.

[2:15 p.m.]

That means a series of things that we've done — the Premier talked about it — to make sure the Crown prosecution service has a directive policy on antisemitism, to make sure that police have proper training to respond to hate crimes that are occurring in any of our communities and to make sure that the system is set up to respond to people for the victim supports that they need if they've experienced an incident of hate. That's through the racist incident helpline.

I am always looking for ways that we can push on changing the Criminal Code to make sure that we are responding appropriately when hate crimes happen in this province, and it's work that we always need to continue to do.

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES

Ward Stamer: James Roland Mansell is a 68-year-old constituent of mine. His wife, who has just recently passed, found him a doctor shortly after moving from Abbotsford. Eight years ago, their doctor quit, citing the stress of running a doctor's office.

What does this Health Minister have to say to James, who has utterly lost faith in our health care system, still waiting eight years for a doctor?

Hon. Josie Osborne: Thank you to the member for the question.

It is difficult to hear when somebody is having a hard time accessing a primary care provider, and we know there are far too many British Columbians in this place. We know that we are experiencing a global shortage of health care workers, and that includes physicians. That is why this government has put so much effort and investment into training and recruiting more nurses, nurse practitioners, doctors and health care workers to build out our primary care system. The primary care system is the backbone of our public universal health care system here.

To the member's constituent…. I am certain that he has registered on the health connect registry and is awaiting.

I want to assure him that we are doing everything that we can to connect him to a primary care provider and, in the meantime, that he has access to the health care that he needs.

The Speaker: Member, supplemental.

Ward Stamer: After 15 years of supporting James and Tracy, their doctor quit, leaving a community reeling. Even worse, James told me that health care in Kamloops has gotten so bad that his two grandchildren haven't had a checkup in six years. Doing more of the same over and over again and expecting different results is insanity.

How is it acceptable that this government, after eight years in power, is allowing children and seniors to go without health care?

Hon. Josie Osborne: Doing more of the same wouldn't work. That's why this government has taken the action that it has, by taking the opportunity to open a brand-new medical school; expanding the seats at UBC; increasing the number of residency positions for family physicians; increasing the opportunities for family physicians to move; and incentivizing them to be in rural and remote communities out of the Lower Mainland, like where this member is from.

That's why we're continuing to take the action, and it is showing results. We're finally starting to head in the right direction. We're turning the corner. Since 2023, we have hired over 1,000 new family physicians. We've connected 675,000 people since 2018. This is work we're going to continue to do. I know that the member's constituent is waiting, and we are not going to stop until every single person in this province is attached to a primary care provider.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS AND RENTAL HOUSING VACANCY CONTROL

Rob Botterell: Last week the Minister of Housing lauded this government's work on affordable housing. He said that housing is central. Housing is health care. I'm sure we all agree.

But gaps in B.C.'s services continue to let people fall through the cracks. Available spaces mean nothing if the units and services don't meet people's needs. Numerous barriers to shelter persist: minimal storage space, limits to cohabitation, no pets. Many people have a history of experiencing abuse or assault in shelter settings. Housing options that meet people's unique needs, that don't replicate trauma, must be readily available.

To the Minister of Housing: how are you providing housing options that actually meet people's needs?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I thank the member for the question.

Housing is central. One of the core beliefs that we have on our side is trying to ensure that housing is available with the supports that each individual needs, their unique needs — making sure that those are met.

[2:20 p.m.]

The member speaks about different types of shelters. He surely knows that we have a whole host of different types of housing options available for individuals. We do fund storage spaces for individuals that need to store their valuable belongings. We do create units that have pet-friendly options. We do create options for people, if they're in a relationship, to be able to be in those units. We have teams on the ground that are dedicated to this work, catering our supports for individuals.

If you see, for example, the work we did at Crab Park — close to 100 people, over 100 people there. It took almost a year for us to meet with every individual and ensure that they had housing that met every individual's needs. We're doing that work in Prince George. We're doing that work in communities like Campbell River, Nanaimo, Abbotsford, and the list goes on. We know we have more work to do, but we are making some significant progress.

The Speaker: Member, supplemental.

Rob Botterell: This government has committed to expanding affordable housing. Last week the Housing Minister committed to expanding rent supplements for young people so they can find housing that they can afford. All members of this House can agree that we need to create certainty so young people can stay in their communities.

Yet bad-faith evictions, renovictions and a profiteering rental market have created immense uncertainty, especially for young people, families and people with disabilities. Vacancy control is one tool this government hasn't evaluated that could offer immediate relief.

To the Minister of Housing, it's been seven years. Isn't it time for you to reopen the Rental Housing Task Force to evaluate vacancy control?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: There was a lot in that question.

I will share this with the member. We have taken considerable steps to ensure that renters are protected and that decisions both for renters and landlords can be done in an expedited manner. We went from some of the longest wait times for hearings, before the Premier became Premier, to now the shortest time, because of the early investments the Premier made when he first became the Premier of British Columbia.

We have been taking steps to ensure that we reduce bad-faith evictions. A new digital web portal now ensures that people fill in basic information and verify that the information is valid, ensuring that anyone that's caught has a steeper fine so they're discouraged from doing this type of behaviour. And we're seeing those numbers drop.

The member is talking about vacancy control. The member surely knows that we did have an all-party committee. His predecessor was on that committee. They advised government that vacancy control would not be a good option to proceed with. I appreciate the member may have a different opinion than his predecessor.

We have been ensuring that we can do everything we can to support renters, by increasing housing supply, by beefing up the rules to make sure that people are protected, and we'll continue to do that work as we go forward.

GOVERNMENT ACTION ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION ISSUES

Claire Rattée: An Indigenous youth in the riding of Kootenay Central, whose father reached out to me last week, needs help. She was turned away from Stepping Stones emergency shelter because of her age, and the next morning the staff there found her dead on the front steps. Dead, Mr. Speaker. She had to be revived with Narcan three times and is lucky to be alive.

This young woman's case is a catastrophic failure across multiple ministries with numerous chances to intervene. Her father has pleaded for help from child and family services, from the Ministry of Health; from the local MLA, the member for Kootenay Central, but his pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

What will it take? Does this young woman have to die for this government to finally intervene with compassionate care?

Hon. Josie Osborne: Thank you to the member for the question.

It is terrible to hear of a story like this. I think all of us, our hearts go out to the family and to people connected to an individual like this.

That's why this government is taking every step that we can to connect people with the care that they need: for youth, providing more supports in schools; establishing Foundries, a safe space for youth to go to be able to connect with physical and mental health supports, substance use supports; continuing to build the housing and provide the wraparound supports for families in need.

[2:25 p.m.]

We're not going to stop doing this work. We're going to continue to do this in a place where everybody has the potential to live a thriving life and the life that they deserve to have.

The Speaker: Member, supplemental.

Claire Rattée: To say that you're going to continue doing this work is completely unacceptable, because clearly what this government is doing has failed this young woman.

She just turned 18. She has a paralyzed leg, a brain growth and untreated neurological damage. Her father, a recovered addict himself, says that she has now lost all sense of agency. She has been begging for help since she was 14 years old. There were moments of hope, times she wanted treatment, but the system failed her every time.

She now sleeps in a tent in a drug camp. She has been repeatedly sexually assaulted over the last four years. If she doesn't qualify for intervention, then who does?

Why won't this Premier bring forward compassionate care legislation to prevent tragedies like this?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I can't speak specifically to this case and this individual, but I can say, hearing from the member, that it aligns with what we've been saying and what we've been hearing, which is that encampments are not safe. They're not safe for individuals living in them. They're not safe for the community at large.

Interjection.

The Speaker: Member.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The member says that she was turned away from an emergency weather shelter, which are usually operated by the local government. We provide the resources to them, so we can certainly find out what happened in that particular case. People don't get turned away from shelter unless there was some issue, and we don't know what those issues are. We can look into them.

But I can tell the member that what we know for a fact is that there's a lack of housing options for people, in particular with special needs. Thanks to the work that my colleague, the MLA for that riding, and many not-for-profits…. We've actually been targeting, ramping up housing for those with special needs in particular.

I can share with the member that we've got a new 47-unit building that just opened up there at the Lakeside Place redevelopment, another at 620 Nelson Avenue in Nelson and another one at 535 West Houston Street in Nelson. All of those focus on people who have, in particular, special needs.

I can't, again, speak to the specifics of what the member refers to because, again, the local governments operate the emergency weather spaces, but we certainly can make sure that the different ministries can follow up.

Á'a:líya Warbus: This individual's story unfortunately gets worse. When she was 17 and turned away from the shelter, the technicality of her not being an adult ended up in the travesty that we heard from the member for Skeena. But as a youth, she was also harmed within the system.

She was molested in an Interior Health facility by a

male nurse, and he was later convicted. Despite repeatedly asking to not be placed under the care of male nurses due to the horrific traumas that she has endured, she was repeatedly put in the care of male nurses.

My question is this. Why does this government continue to retraumatize survivors like her instead of respecting their most basic safety requests?

Hon. Josie Osborne: The safety and health of our youth has to be our top priority, the top priority of every single person in this House. We cannot see youth and children suffering from mental health issues, from substance use issues and from being traumatized by care. That's why this government takes this issue so incredibly seriously and will continue to work in our health care system, eliminating all forms of racism, working with health authorities and health care workers to build an integrated, culturally safe, trauma-informed system of care for youth just like this.

I want to express my commitment to the member asking the question to continue to do everything that I can to support people in situations like these and to continue to work with her and other members on the other side of the House in this incredibly important work.

[2:30 p.m.]

JUSTICE SYSTEM STAFFING SHORTAGES

Hon Chan: Speaking of justice denied, the NDP said they have graduated several classes of sheriffs and have fixed the court sheriff shortage. But in the trial after the death of pastor Tom Cheung, his family informed this side of the House that one of the reasons why the sentencing was delayed was because of a B.C. chronic sheriff shortage.

How many more families will see delayed justice because this government cannot ensure adequate staffing in our justice system?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I want to start by saying how grateful I am for the work that sheriffs do every day in our court system. They truly are heroes of public safety and making sure that our court system runs smoothly.

We have made gigantic strides in our sheriffs, and we are very close. I'm really grateful for all the work that everybody has done to graduate more sheriffs. We've upped our classes, upped the numbers, and we're very close to being at the full complement of sheriffs. We will continue to do that work to make sure that their much-needed services are in the courtroom so trials can keep going.

I'm very grateful for all the team in my office that have put that work in, for that progress that we've made.

ATTACK BY REPEAT OFFENDER AND ACTION ON COMMUNITY SAFETY

Korky Neufeld: Well, here is the reality of Mother's Day in British Columbia today. A mother was walking her baby in a stroller through downtown New Westminster when a man shoved her stroller and punched the mother in the face.

Now, the assailant was a repeat offender. Sound familiar? This was a completely random, unprovoked attack in broad daylight, just crossing a crosswalk.

Through the Premier, what does it say about public safety in this province when even a mother can't safely walk her child in a stroller down the street without being assaulted?

Hon. Garry Begg: Thank you to the member opposite for the question.

I said it before in this House, and I repeat. We all in this province want people to feel safe where they live, where they recreate and where they do their things.

Interjections.

The Speaker: Shhh.

Hon. Garry Begg: The incident that you refer to is unfortunate, and my heart goes out to the people involved. She deserves protection.

We have in this province a repeat violent offender program.

Interjection.

The Speaker: Member.

Hon. Garry Begg: It makes a difference so that people can get in control of their lives, unlike the member opposite.

For example, the Prince George ReVOII is a good example of what we've done on this side of the House by monitoring people who present a threat to the public. A former ReVOII client recently stopped by the custody centre in Prince George. They shared with the staff there how they've successfully completed addiction recovery and have now been able to reconnect with their family.

Our actions are starting to make a difference. That's important, and it's important that that continues.

GOVERNMENT ACTION ON SEXUAL ASSAULT OF WOMEN

Reann Gasper: I'm sorry, but we've had eight years. These are real lives. These are victims.

In Abbotsford this April, a woman was walking alone in Mill Lake Park. She was lured into a conversation and

sexually assaulted by a stranger. Later that month another woman was forced into a car and assaulted while waiting for a friend, again in broad daylight. And this week women were sexually assaulted on a B.C. Transit bus in Victoria, midday.

Why is the Parliamentary Secretary for Gender Equity standing idly by while women are assaulted daily on this government's watch?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Sexual assault and how it shows up, particularly in the lives of women, is an issue that I take very seriously as Attorney General of this province. That's why I've asked Dr. Stanton to do a full review of our justice system: to understand why it is that so many victims of this type of assault don't come forward with this abuse.

We've invested in front-line services for sexual assault centres across this province. We've made sure that our gender-based action plan is in place, and the parliamentary secretary is hard at work at that.

[2:35 p.m.]

On this side of the House, we want to make sure that we're there for every woman that experiences sexual assault, no matter where they are, and that the resources are in place to do that. It's something that I will continue to take very seriously, and I know we will on this side of the House.

Rosalyn Bird: Another review. I'm sure that women in B.C. are very excited to hear about that.

Even when women come forward and charges are laid, justice may still slip away. In Duncan, a sexual assault case involving two women was tossed out not because there wasn't enough evidence but because of delays. Delays. The judge said it had run out of time under the Supreme Court's 18-month ceiling.

How does this government expect survivors to trust a system when even a day in court is not guaranteed? How can this NDP government achieve their mandate of gender equity when women can't even get justice?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The member raises a very serious issue, and that's the Jordan stays and how Jordan stays are in our justice system. We have been making strides in B.C. to reduce the number of Jordan stays down to single digits. Compared to Ontario and other jurisdictions, it's a low number, but one is too many.

I'm working with every level of our court system, and we're focusing on figuring out how to make sure of the timelines, that when people come to court, they get access to a trial within the time limit set by this country. We'll continue to do that work to bring down those numbers so we can reduce Jordan stays to zero.

SAFETY OF WOMEN AND SUPPORT AND JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

Teresa Wat: How can women, including myself, feel safe and secure when this government is just talking the talk and not walking the walk?

Even when women report abuse, survive the justice system and ask for help, they still aren't safe. In one case, a survivor's confidential files were allegedly accessed by government employees without authorization, and her abuser may have learned what was in them.

How can this government claim to support victims when it can't even protect their private information?

Hon. Niki Sharma: On this side of the House, we care about supporting victims of sexual assault. In fact, we care so much that we had to restore the funding that was cut by the opposition when they were in government — or some of them were in government and cut funding to 34 sexual….

Interjections.

The Speaker: Members. Members. Order.

Hon. Niki Sharma: I want to talk a little bit about what that meant for people. I used to work and volunteer at a centre that received women that had just been sexually assaulted. The front-line groups of people that are there to support those women through the whole system…. They cut funding to those centres, so over 30 had to shut down across this province — 30.

So I find it really hard to take when they're saying they care about victims on that side. We restored that funding, and we're going to continue to do that work.

Scott McInnis: Tatyanna Harrison, a 20-year-old Indigenous woman, was found dead, partially naked, on a yacht in Richmond in 2022. No clear cause of death, no rape kit, no explanation for how she got there. Her mother wasn't told her body had been found until three months later. It has taken three years and an external forensic review just to get a coroner's inquest.

How can this government claim to care when women must fight for years just to get justice for their daughter's death?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It's vitally important that our justice system, from the front-line, which is the RCMP officers, all the way to the court hearing, is equipped to deal with these very important cases of sexual assault, to make sure that women feel safe to report and to go through the justice system and that they get their day in court in a timely way.

[2:40 p.m.]

It's something that I care so much about as Attorney General. Dr. Stanton is tasked with going around and speaking to all members of our justice system to make sure we can understand how to make every system there respond in the way that it should be responding. I'm going to be receiving that report in June, and I look forward to rolling up my sleeves and doing the work.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

Elenore Sturko: We've heard so many examples here today of failures by this government, failures to protect the physical safety and the well-being of people across this province.

A young Indigenous woman left to overdose on the steps of a shelter. A family without access to a doctor for eight years. A mother punched in the face while pushing her stroller across the street. And yes, I did check the court services online. This is a repeat offender who had already done an assault causing bodily harm and assault P.O. less than a month previously.

Domestic violence victims having their privacy breached, possibly their safety compromised. Sex assault trials tossed because of delays caused by NDP deficiencies. Seniors without health care, no matter what ministry — whether it's Health, Housing or the Attorney General — NDP failures are placing people at risk.

How can this Premier assure British Columbians that they'll be safe and that their well-being will be cared for when so many ministries are failing under his watch?

Hon. Niki Sharma: On this side of the House, we care about investing in people, investing in the programs that are going to show up to make a difference in people's lives, to make it safer for women that are going through the justice system, to make it safer everywhere in our street.

When the Leader of the Opposition was in power, they cut programs to services. They cut victim services programs continually.

Interjections.

The Speaker: Members. Members.

Interjections.

The Speaker: Members, enough.
Attorney General.

Hon. Niki Sharma: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are going to stay focused on the investments that we know are making a difference. We've had a chance, through this question period, to talk about how those programs are making a difference.

Almost a full complement of sheriffs after decades of under-resourcing sheriffs. Reinvesting in sexual assault response centres across this province for victims of sexual assault. Making sure the ReVOII program is focused on repeat violent offenders in our system. Reducing Jordan stays compared to the rest of this country.

Interjection.

The Speaker: Member, let the Attorney….
Member.

Hon. Niki Sharma: We're going to keep on doing that work.

[End of question period.]

Tabling Documents

The Speaker: Hon. Members, I have the honour to table the Legislative Assembly Management Committee report, 2023-24.

Reports from Committees

PRIVATE BILLS AND PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS COMMITTEE

Amna Shah: The Select Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Bills reports Bill M204, intituled Perinatal and Postnatal Mental Health Strategy Act, complete with amendment.

The Speaker: The Perinatal and Postnatal Mental Health Strategy Act will proceed to report stage during the next private members' time.

Tabling Documents

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I have the honour to present the annual report of WorkSafeBC.

Orders of the Day

Hon. Mike Farnworth: In this House, I call continued second reading on Bill 14.

In the Douglas Fir Room, I call continued estimates for the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

In the Birch Room, House C, I call committee stage on Bill 11, to be followed by Bill 13.

[2:45 p.m.]

[Mable Elmore in the chair.]

Second Reading of Bills

BILL 14 — RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS (STREAMLINED PERMITTING) ACT, 2025
(continued)

Deputy Speaker: I call the chamber to order.

Korky Neufeld: I was cut halfway in between on Thursday; we were so eager to get home. So I will continue with Bill 14, streamlined permitting.

While we should be finding ways to responsibly streamline permitting processes, we should never do it by cutting transparency. Decisions behind closed doors, with no public scrutiny, don't build confidence. We shouldn't do it by ignoring legislation and this Legislature — 93 elected MLAs. We are accountable to the public, not the Energy Regulator. And it should never be done by silencing community voices, especially those of Indigenous nations whose rights are directly affected. Streamlining should never mean silencing.

This legislation fails the test of good governance. It hands sweeping authoritarian powers to cabinet, to the Energy Regulator, and it undermines safety. It threatens environmental and cultural protections, and it also opens the door to political interference in land use and conservation decisions.

The NDP may sell this as a way to get wind turbines in the ground, but let's not be fooled. Bill 14 is not about building energy infrastructure. It's actually about building political power, unchecked power, unbalanced power and unaccountable power. I urge this House to carefully study, review the implications of this bill and demand a real pathway forward, one that supports renewable energy without sacrificing our democratic institutions, and that is debate in this House, without removing environmental safeguards which have been put in place and without losing public trust.

I finished with clause 13 on Thursday, and I will now continue with clause 14, application of the Environmental Assessment Act. It carves out major projects from the EAA coverage, weakening the province's commitment to environmental due diligence. This clause enables large-scale projects to proceed without cumulative impact assessments, ignoring broader ecological consequences.

Clause 15, the Agricultural Land Commission Act, allows industrial uses, subdivisions and exemptions on agricultural land, without needing justification through a land use plan. This undermines the integrity of the ALR land protections.

Clauses 16 to 19, other statutes. Each clause successively limits the application of otherwise robust statutes such as the Safety Standards Act, the Wildlife Act, etc., creating a patchwork of carve-outs that erode consistent regulatory application.

Here it gets really interesting: clause 20, cabinet regulations. Again, it resembles bill 7, 2.0. It provides cabinet near-unfettered discretion to define the projects, to define the eligibility, to define fee regimes and to define streamlining levels; the ability to delegate to any public servant or agency, further centralizing control with minimal oversight mechanisms. You know, this is like putting lipstick on a pig. The pig is still a pig. This is Bill 7 with lipstick on it.

[2:50 p.m.]

Clause 21, validation. Retroactive validation of past action undermines legal certainty and may shield improper regulatory conduct from challenge.

Clauses 22 and 23, transition provisions. Permitting cancellation of existing environmental assessment certificates without due process effectively voids already established environmental obligations. It's like with a pen, you're just cutting through what has been in place for years, these environmental obligations. Replacing them with vague new conditions opens the door to less stringent and selectively enforced requirements.

Clause 24, the Agricultural Land Commission amendments. This embeds statutory preference for energy projects over agricultural protection. This potentially sets a dangerous precedent for prioritizing development over food security. This bill does nothing to protect farmers who put food on our tables.

Clauses 25 to 26, the delegation and facility definitions. Delegation to the B.C. Energy Regulator without oversight increases risk of inconsistent and unreviewable decisions. If they make a decision that impacts someone, there's no opportunity for recourse. You need to accept it because we need just to trust them.

Clause 27, commencement, allows government to delay enactment indefinitely. You heard it right. It allows government to delay enactment indefinitely, which introduces uncertainty for stakeholders and project developers alike.

I guess the question needs to be asked: how will this attract long-term investment? Investors rely on certainty to put millions and billions and years and years of investment in our province.

Now I want to read from an article that was written this last Thursday, May 8, by Jacqueline Gelineau. Here it states:

> "The B.C. Wildlife Federation is flagging major risks over the K2 wind energy project, a large-scale wind farm proposed for the Pennask Mountain area west of Peachland.
>
> "The B.C. Wildlife Federation argues that the province's approach neglects critical environmental safeguards. The K2 project site lies within the Pennask watershed, home to the world's largest known run of wildlife trout, it stated in a media release. These trout have been the primary source for B.C.'s hatchery sys-

tem since 1927, supporting the stocking of approximately 150 lakes across the province.

"The B.C. Wildlife Federation director highlighted the need for a thorough environmental review." He said: "It is essential that test excavations and a full environmental review be conducted before this project breaks ground." The same executive director referenced "a study commissioned by a local fish and game club, done in 2014, that warned of significant risks to the watershed's habitat and trout populations due to potential metal leaching and acid rock drainage."

Here it gets really interesting: "The B.C. Wildlife Federation also points to a historical precedent. In the late 1980s, construction of Highway 97C, near the same area as the proposed wind farm, led to acid rock drainage and metal leaching, causing long-term environmental damage. The B.C. Ministry of Transportation was prosecuted under the Fisheries Act, and remediation efforts have cost taxpayers millions over the years."

They push things through without proper process, and then it costs the taxpayer. It doesn't cost the government; it costs the taxpayer.

"The ministry has since constructed a water treatment facility to treat the water that has been affected." How many millions of tax dollars will be spent because of ramming through projects? This is why we do not recklessly move ahead with projects without the process.

"Construction of the K2 wind energy project is slated to begin in 2028." End quoting from the article by Jacqueline Gelineau, May 8.

You see, ramming through projects without proper consultation and process can cost the taxpayer, similar to the way Highway 97 construction cost the taxpayer millions.

This bill represents a significant centralization of authority. Here's the problem. They dress it up with wind turbines. Actually, it is bill 7, 2.0 — extensive regulatory carve-outs, a reduction of environmental, agriculture and public oversight protections.

[2:55 p.m.]

While streamlining may support project efficiency, the extent of deregulation risks undermining sustainability goals, public trust and long-term environmental stewardship.

This side of the House looks forward to the committee stage, where we'll be asking this government to clarify the intent behind this bill.

I want British Columbians to know something. Your B.C. Conservative MLAs have consistently requested commonsense amendments to the government bills over the last month and a half, amendments that would protect your rights, only to have every one of them voted down. But they're on record, and we will bring them back up.

We look forward to the committee stage, where we will dig deeper into this bill, uncovering the intention of this bill, talking about the glaring errors of this bill and talking about the overreach in this bill. We'll get answers for the public, because that's our job.

Introductions by Members

Deputy Speaker: Before we go to our next speaker, we have students from Sardis Secondary School here. I want to welcome teacher Kevin Gambell and folks from the school, on behalf of your MLA, the MLA from Chilliwack–Cultus Lake. We're here debating Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects Act.

I ask everybody in the House to please give them a very warm welcome here.

All right. We're continuing with our debate and discussion. I recognize the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction.

Debate Continued

Hon. Sheila Malcolmson: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and welcome to the students.

For me, in the work that brought me to this place, this is pulling on a lot of threads.

On graduating university, for five years, I worked for an organization called Energy Probe. It was a time of enormous expansion of the electrical system in Ontario — 16 new nuclear plants, 15 new coal plants, natural gas and a lot of new hydro dams, almost universally opposed by First Nations — still with no permanent waste disposal system for nuclear power, let alone that at that time the cost of megaprojects was skyrocketing electricity prices.

These were all-hands-on-deck stop projects, and a lot of it was so that we could make room for the kind of renewable energy projects that I now have the great honour of being part of on a team in government that is building.

Following that work I spent 12 years working in local government, where, my goodness, we went through the minutiae of local government zoning, of land use plans, line by line, piece by piece. I had, honestly, community members saying: "Look, we just want to build the youth centre. Why can't we just do that work? We have the intention, we have the donation, we have the land, and we certainly have the need. Let's just get the work done."

Let me say, just so briefly, that at the moment that we are in, where we have had a lot of really big power projects, many that we did not initiate ourselves but that a whole bunch of people in the province were working on — the Kinder Morgan TMX pipeline, for example — we've got skilled people ready to do work, with those federal projects finished.

We have got a lot of ambition, a lot of imperative, a lot of need to build the solar, to build the transmission lines, to move clean electricity in British Columbia. Knowing British Columbia's deep reserves of clean hydro dam stor-

age, it's perfect twinning with our ambition around building more wind power, which is already happening across British Columbia.

The call for power has been so extremely successful, almost all of it with some kind of Indigenous partnership. This is an imperative for our government, to see First Nations not just agreeing with projects but also actively involved in their construction and design, because they'll feel the most local impacts, and then also being investors and beneficiaries.

[3:00 p.m.]

Let me say, just so briefly, before I pass it back to the minister, that the imperative for us is not just to sign the contracts, to have the ambition and the vision to build up renewable energy and clean power in British Columbia; it's also to get the work done.

We have got enough familiarity with the impacts of wind, solar and transmission line projects that we're confident about the ability to keep…. Notwithstanding the work that we've already done to streamline permitting and authorization systems to get faster, more efficient permitting, driving towards better outcomes, we know that that outcome can be either a yes or a no. But the slow maybe is, I understand, extremely frustrating for energy power developers.

With this legislation, Bill 14, we're making progress towards permitting more quickly, but absolutely maintaining environmental standards and doing the systemic overhaul to fix some of the really complex regulatory processes that have slowed the actual construction and realization of some of our ambition around renewable and electrical energy.

We have been reviewing permitting processes to make sure that we're getting high-priority projects such as housing, hospitals and connectivity permitted faster by eliminating duplicative processes, focusing resources and seeking solutions. This particular legislation, focusing on wind and solar projects in the near term, will enable our existing B.C. Energy Regulator to oversee those projects, to cluster within one decision-making body, the one-window approach that will accelerate permitting of those critical renewable energy projects.

Hydro, big dam projects are excluded. We've also heard widely that oil and gas are not part of this either. We're really focused on the kind of projects that we can foresee the impacts. For wind power, the impacts are very well understood.

Acceleration of the process doesn't necessarily mean project approval, but streamlining, getting a timely decision to either a yes or a no, is what we're hearing very much from British Columbians that we need to get.

Environmental protection and collaboration with Indigenous people remain fundamental to every decision that we make as a government, and rigorous permitting that will include socio-economic impacts, including the construction impacts — what happens with communities when construction is underway, let alone operation.

This is a time, big picture, that we are needing to generate revenue within the province; needing to employ people within the province; and, especially, needing to have that imperative around self-sufficiency, internal resource reliability, given the great pressures and the threats from the American president. This is a time for us to declare, as we have been over the last seven years and in this fall's election campaign….

British Columbians know what our intentions are around climate action, around energy self-sufficiency. With Bill 14, this is our way to get the decisions reached at quickly and then to get the construction in place as quickly as we can so that British Columbians can get the benefit of this work.

With that, Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity. I'll end my time.

Linda Hepner: I rise today in opposition to this bill, a bill that would fundamentally weaken our democratic oversight and community input by allowing a single-step approval process for renewable energy projects, particularly wind energy projects, and implementing a process that allows the government regulator to change the Energy Resource Activities Act.

Let me be clear on what that does. That allows the regulator to change their own regulations without approval from the Legislature. On the face of it, that may sound expeditious. Or, on the side of reality, it just puts the cat among the pigeons.

[3:05 p.m.]

Let me be clear. I am not opposed to renewable energy. I support a responsible transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy future. But I cannot support a process that prioritizes speed over scrutiny and blanket approvals over balanced local decision-making.

This bill focuses primarily on wind farms. It strips away the vital layers of consultation and review that ensure these projects are not only environmentally sound but also socially responsible, economically justified and locally supported. The purported holy grail of clean energy, wind farms, despite their benefits, are not impact-free. They alter landscapes. They affect local ecosystems. They raise concerns about noise, land use and even human health in some communities.

Yet under this bill, such concerns would be swept aside with a single signature. That is not good governance; that is expediency masquerading as progress.

Let's talk about the environmental impacts that are too often ignored with wind farms. The more well-known impact is that the wind turbines kill hundreds of thousands of birds and bats every year, many of them protected or migratory species. These projects disrupt local habitats

and fragment ecosystems, especially in rural or sensitive areas.

However, there are lesser-known impacts. Beneath every turbine lies a massive concrete foundation, sometimes up to 60 feet deep, made up, often, with up to 1,000 tonnes of concrete and steel. These are permanent scars on the land, and the turbines themselves contain hundreds of gallons of petroleum-based lubricants — that's right, fossil fuel — which must be replaced regularly. And then when these machines reach the end of their life, which I understand to be around 20-25 years, their blades, made of non-recyclable composite materials, are sent to landfills, where they remain forever.

So yes, wind energy reduces emissions at the point of generation, but let's not pretend these projects are environmentally invisible or impact-free.

Notwithstanding those comments, worse still is the policy overreach built into this bill. In the name of streamlining, cabinet is now empowered to approve new projects at its sole discretion. No hearings, no local impact, no environmental review, just a rubber stamp from the top down. No government should be charged with the omnipotent power of picking winners and losers in the energy arena.

They're calling it streamlined. Let's be honest. It's a power grab. It's a dangerous precedent when a few ministers can override community opposition, sidestep scrutiny and impose infrastructure without meaningful consent. This isn't efficiency; it's erosion, erosion of regulatory consistency, erosion of local democracy and erosion of public trust.

This government would never allow fossil fuel projects to move forward with such little oversight. They have vehemently opposed that in the past. So why should wind energy be treated differently? Because, I think, this government is relying on the public's blindness about any environmental impacts regarding wind farms in the hope that they can tick off the box for speed on energy advancement, a plan that could have been advanced some eight years ago. Now, when we are facing a real energy shortfall, the caped crusader arrives as if it's a brand new phenomenon.

In Surrey, we have been asking for a stronger power grid in Campbell Heights for years. In fact, I met just recently with businesses there, and the problem has now grown. A local food services business looking to expand in Campbell Heights, with more than 500 jobs, cannot be accommodated. That's not good planning or any exercise of economic priority.

[3:10 p.m.]

There's an old saying: "The arsonist doesn't deserve applause for showing up with a bucket of water." Yet that is exactly what this government is asking for. For years, this government has piled regulation upon regulation and treated every economic activity as something to be micromanaged from the top down, imposing complex permitting systems, procedural delays, bureaucratic bottlenecks. Infrastructure has stalled, and investment has fled.

Now, miraculously, they say they've seen the light. They're calling it efficiency, streamlining, even common sense. But let's be clear. This is not the product of vision. It's the product of failure, a failure they now want to repackage as reform. They created a problem, let it fester and now expect congratulations for cleaning up the mess they made.

Yet their idea of streamlining isn't consistent or fair. It's selective. They haven't proposed comprehensive reform to remove burdens across the board. They've simply chosen a few pet sectors, like wind energy, to fast-track. Instead of fixing the system, they're playing favourites. That's not responsible governance; that's convenience disguised as principle.

Let me ask you this. Where was this sudden clarity when energy producers were strangled with compliance rules and outright disdain for many years? This government has had every chance to listen. It chose control over collaboration, and it chose delay over delivery. Now, under pressure and failing public trust, they want to flip the script.

We welcome any government that is finally willing to reduce red tape, but you cannot forget the years of damage caused by the very policies they now quietly abandon. We won't allow them to trade one form of overreach for another, pushing through large-scale projects without oversight simply because the reality of their previous position has had to shift, out of pure necessity.

True reform means accountability. It means consistency. It means applying that same fair, transparent rule to everyone. What this government is doing is not reform; it's rebranding, and the public knows the difference. So no, they don't get to call themselves heroes for walking away from a fire they helped ignite. And they certainly don't get to centralize more power in the name of fixing a broken process they designed.

We need real regulatory reform, not selective deregulation. We need leadership, not damage control, and we need to stop pretending that political convenience is the same as political courage.

The urgency of energy action does not now give us licence to abandon that good governance. We must reject the false choice between clean energy and democratic accountability. We can and must do both. This bill, in its current form, undermines local voices, bypasses environmental oversight and concentrates far too much power in the hands of a few. It dresses up central control as efficiency and calls it progress. But progress built on exclusion, overreach and unchecked authority is not progress at all. It's regression.

Let's support renewable energy the right way — transparently, responsibly and with the people, not against

them. This bill in its current form is a Trojan Horse. It rides in on the promise of sustainability, but once passed, it delivers deregulation by fiat.

It hands sweeping unprecedented authority to cabinet and to the B.C. Energy Regulator — authority to change rules without legislative oversight, authority to override heritage protections, authority to scrap environmental assessments, authority to cancel angling and trapping permits, and all of it done behind closed doors with no input from the people who will actually live with these projects in their community.

[3:15 p.m.]

Let's review definitions. The bill defines renewable resources to include wind, solar, geothermal, biomass, biogas and ocean-based energy. Here's the catch. Cabinet can expand that list by regulation. That means the scope of the legislation is not fixed; it's fluid. It can grow at any time without returning to this House, without any public debate. What does that mean in practice? It means this bill may start with wind projects, but it won't end there. In fact, the government has already signalled its intention to use it for the North Coast transmission line and any other project that it deems convenient.

The Environmental Assessment Act is explicitly disapplied to these projects. That's not an oversight. It's not an error. It's a choice. We are talking about removing environmental review for industrial-scale infrastructure across vast swathes of British Columbia. Wind farms, transmission lines and beyond. No assessment. No studies. No accountability. Just go.

Clause 2 of the bill designates the nine wind farms and the North Coast transmission line as streamlined projects and gives cabinet the power to designate any other prescribed renewable project the same status in the future. That may sound harmless, in fact even inviting in some cases, but in practice it allows cabinet to bypass consultation, to fast-track projects and exempt entire developments from any democratic review, all by regulation.

It's important to understand what "streamlined" actually means here. It means exempt from public inquiry. It means stripped of obligations under the Environmental Assessment Act, the Agricultural Land Commission Act, the Heritage Conservation Act and the Safety Standards Act. And perhaps most alarming of all, it allows the regulator to amend the very act that governs its own activities. That's right, under this bill, the B.C. Energy Regulator can unilaterally change the Energy Resource Activities Act without seeking approval from this Legislature.

We are not just delegating authority here; we are abandoning it. And levels 2 and 3, streamlining under Bill 14, remove key sections of the Energy Resource Activities Act, sections governing environmental protection, sections that define how long permits last, sections that deal with abandoned or orphaned sites, sections that define who owns what, sections that let the public request investigations — gone.

It doesn't stop there. The regulator can suspend Safety Standards Act for certain projects. Yes, the same Safety Standards Act meant to protect workers, ecosystems and communities. It can suspend or cancel hunting, trapping and angling permits — think about that — without notice or process. The regulator could suspend traditional land use rights that have existed in some communities for generations. Why? To make room for a project the community had no say in, no environmental review of and no recourse against.

Clause 15 allows renewable energy projects to proceed on agricultural land reserves, including exemptions from the soil and fill restrictions that protect our farmland. Again, this may sound technical — in fact, it does sound technical — but the implications are real. Our most fertile and protected agricultural lands are now open to being carved up by cabinet order. The irony is rich. The NDP spent years telling us that they were the protectors of the ALR, and now with one stroke of the pen, they've turned those same protections into Swiss cheese.

[3:20 p.m.]

The bill also allows for the creation of a new orphan fund for renewable projects, similar to the fund that exists for orphan oil and gas wells. But here's the problem: it offers no structure, no rules, no limitations on liability, just a blank cheque. And who pays for it? That's also left open.

The regulator can impose fees, levies and taxes, even retroactively to 2024. Imagine that your company followed every rule in good faith, and suddenly you're handed a retroactive tax bill. Is that the kind of business climate we want in B.C.?

Bill 14 uses renewable energy as a shield to hide a deeper agenda: centralized control, deregulation by stealth and the erosion of public accountability. We owe it to our communities, our workers and our future to call this bill what it truly is. It is not a clean energy plan but a dangerous blueprint for regulatory overreach.

As I continue my remarks on Bill 14, I want to focus a little bit about what this legislation means at the ground level for residents, for municipalities, for businesses and for anyone who believes in transparent governance. This bill doesn't just weaken our laws; it undermines our process.

Let's be clear about what happens when you remove environmental assessments, public consultations, ministerial accountability for major energy infrastructure decisions. You silence communities, you silence landowners, you silence those that have a right to speak, and you replace democratic oversight with unilateral discretion.

Streamlining — let's unpack that term. The government claims it means cutting red tape. But what they really mean is that it's cutting the public out of the process. Under clause 2, the government can designate any future project

as streamlined at any time. This is not a one-time list of nine wind farms and a transmission line. It's an open-ended pipeline — no pun intended — for unreviewed, unconsulted projects to move forward without regard to who they may impact.

Let's think about that from the perspective of a local government — a mayor, a town council, a community that suddenly finds a 100-metre wind turbine project or a high-voltage transmission corridor being fast-tracked through their agricultural zone beside a residential development. Under Bill 14, that community has no official say. There is no environmental assessment, no public hearing, no requirements to consider the cumulative impact on wildlife, infrastructure or water system. That is not how you build public trust; that is how you destroy it.

Clauses 4, 7 and 10 allow the Energy Regulator to not only administer the act but to delegate its functions even further, down to individual employees or outside contractors. So not only does cabinet get to make decisions behind closed doors, but now the regulator gets to offload key decisions to people who may or may not be public officials at all.

What's next? Letting consultants sign permits? Letting project proponents police themselves? This is not administrative efficiency. This is a system designed to avoid responsibility, a system built to shield decision-makers from scrutiny when something goes wrong. Let's be clear. Something will go wrong, because when you remove environmental reviews, when you ignore land use policies and exempt projects from safety regulations, the risk cannot help but multiply.

Now I want to spend a moment on clause 12. This provision allows the government to impose levies — effectively, new taxes — retroactively, which I spoke of earlier.

[3:25 p.m.]

Let that sink in. The Legislature is being asked to give the regulator the power to bill project developers the past costs they had no knowledge of, based on rules they didn't even know existed at the time, and those fees don't need to be approved by the full House. They can be set by regulation or sub-delegation.

How is that fair? How does that promote investment certainty? What kind of a message does that send to renewable energy investors looking to do business in British Columbia? Let me tell you. It says: "We'll change the rules after the fact, and you'll pay the price." This is a surefire way to drive investment out of the province, especially when there are jurisdictions across Canada and around the world offering better regulatory certainty, lower permitting risks and higher levels of public support.

Then we come to clause 13, perhaps the most constitutionally concerning clause in the entire bill. It allows cabinet to make regulations modifying the Energy Resource Activities Act itself, not just how it's administered but how it legally applies to projects.

I don't want to sugar-coat this. We're saying, for the first time, that the executive branch can change the application of a provincial statute without bringing a bill before this Legislature. We are saying that cabinet can override sections of a statute or even disapply them entirely by regulation.

That is not how parliamentary democracy is supposed to work. Statutes are written by legislators, not regulators. Accountability must run through this House, not around it. This is executive overreach, plain and simple.

If it's allowed here, who's to say it won't be used again or on other statutes, in other sectors, on other projects? Today it's energy. Tomorrow it could be housing, health or education. We are setting a precedent that undermines the foundation of legislative oversight and authority.

If you're a rancher, a farmer or a guide-outfitter who relies on stable access to land, then this bill makes your life more uncertain too. If you're a rural resident who fought for years to preserve a wetland or a wildlife corridor, you've just been erased from the conversation. This is not progress; this is regression dressed up in renewable clothing.

Let me close by saying that the NDP government wants to say this bill is about renewable energy, but at its core, it's about cutting people out of the decision-making process. It is not consistent with the principles of sustainable development or reconciliation. If we allow it to pass in this form, we are not only undermining environmental protection, we are undermining the very legitimacy of the Legislature.

Let's confront what I see as a double standard in this bill. If an oil and gas company asked to build a pipeline through ALR land without an environmental assessment, every NDP MLA in this chamber would be on their feet in outrage. But under this bill, a transmission corridor for a wind farm can run through farmland, disrupt wildlife, impact heritage sites and override local zoning, all with the stroke of a pen.

Suddenly, that's good. We're supposed to cheer. That's not environmentalism; that's ideology masquerading as energy policy. We must hold all energy projects to the same standard. Renewable does not mean invisible. Green doesn't mean good by default.

As I bring my remarks to a close, I want to return to where I began, not with the technical flaws of this bill — though there are many, as I see it — but with its deeper implications for how we govern.

[3:30 p.m.]

Bill 14 is not just a bad piece of legislation; it's a betrayal of the very principles that should guide public decision-making in this province. The NDP will tell us this bill is about renewable energy, about climate action, about seizing the future. But I would challenge every member in the chamber to ask: "At what cost?"

The cost here is high. We are being asked to hand over

unchecked authority to cabinet; to allow the B.C. Energy Regulator to rewrite its own rule book; to exempt major projects from environmental review, land use restrictions and Indigenous consultation; to validate retroactive decisions that would never stand up to scrutiny in real time.

This is not bold vision; this is legislative cowardice behind green branding. We lose transparency. We lose accountability. We lose the confidence of communities that have worked hard to protect this environment, the economy and their rights.

Worst of all, we lose credibility. When we say we believe in clean energy projects but push them forward with the same heavy-handed tactic we would never accept from other energy suppliers, we send a message: process only matters when it is now politically convenient. We undermine the very environmental movement that you claim to support.

The transition to renewable energy has got to be rooted in respect for communities, for the rule of law and for science. Bill 14 turns renewable energy into a simple blank cheque. It tells the public: "Trust us. We know what's best." It tells municipalities: "You're no longer needed." It tells First Nations: "We'll call you when the bulldozers arrive." And it tells this Legislature: "Don't worry. We got this."

This is not good government; this is executive fiat. If we allow it to pass unchallenged, unamended, unchecked, we will have no one to blame but ourselves when the public turns and says: "Why were we never consulted?" British Columbians deserve better than this.

What could we be doing instead? We could modernize the environmental assessment process to be more efficient without eliminating it entirely. We could develop a true regional planning framework for renewable projects, ensuring that development aligns with local needs and ecological capacity. We could invest in grid reliability where it's actually needed, like Campbell Heights, the Kootenays or north Vancouver Island. We could build participation with Indigenous communities into energy development from day one, not as an afterthought. We could make renewable energy a source of pride, not division.

But that takes work. And most of all, it actually takes humility, the humility to admit that fast isn't always fair and progress isn't always streamlined.

History tells us what happens when governments overreach, when they ignore process in the name of speed, when they cut corners and call it courage. We end up with legal challenges, with environmental damage, with projects stalled by public backlash, not advanced by public support. We've seen it with Site C. We've seen it with Coastal GasLink. We've seen countless megaprojects rushed through without proper process, only to be mired in controversy for years.

Do we really need to repeat those mistakes, or can we not learn from them?

Brennan Day: I rise today to speak against Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, a piece of legislation that, on the surface, claims to promote renewable energy development but, underneath, reveals a troubling pattern of centralized control, legislative overreach and democratic erosion. It's simply Bill 7 in steel toes and a vizi-vest.

[3:35 p.m.]

On the topic of PPE, the members opposite probably want to stick on their hearing protection now.

This government wants British Columbians to believe that Bill 14 is about progress, about clean energy and about the future. Let's not be fooled by the branding and title. This bill isn't about wind turbines and transmission lines. It's about consolidating power in the Premier's office a second time this session and slapping a green label on it to make it go down a little bit easier.

After eight years of saying no to development in this province, they are trying desperately to rebrand themselves as the party of yes. But they can't decide whether they're wearing work boots or Birkenstocks.

The NDP is the party of no. Site C? No. LNG Canada? No. LNG Canada 2? No. Trans Mountain? No. Only after being pushed and prodded did we get these at all, not because of the NDP but despite them. These are projects that, despite government opposition, managed to keep our anemic provincial economy breathing — barely.

Now the same folks who wanted to cancel or delay everything that moved a few short years or months ago are trying to rebrand themselves as champions of investment in the province of British Columbia. As our former speaker referred to, it's the arsonist with the garden hose showing up with a bucket when the fire is already started.

This is not a miraculous pivot by this government; it's a power grab by the Premier's office. Bill 14 hands sweeping authority to cabinet to designate projects as streamlined. Translation: exempt from environmental assessments, Indigenous input, local government input, safety standards and, in some cases, basic logic. This isn't streamlining; it's scorched-earth administration. It is a Humvee with a Green Party sticker slapped on the back, and it's almost as subtle.

But the good news: just like a Humvee in the parking lot, this bill is extremely hard to ignore. This bill divides projects into three tiers of streamlining. Think of it as a pyramid scheme for regulatory exemptions. The higher up the ladder, the fewer rules you follow and the less likely it is anyone gets to ask why.

If you're thinking that surely there must be some oversight baked in, allow me to introduce the B.C. Energy Regulator, formerly a neutral referee, now fully deputized as Rule Writer-in-Chief. Under this legislation, the regulator can rewrite the Energy Resource Activities Act, because apparently, the Legislature is now just a suggestion

box. That includes all the members outside of the Premier's office.

Now they can waive safety standards — as if industrial accidents are just, maybe, character-building moments — unilaterally decide what is not heritage land, cancel hunting, trapping and angling permits on a whim and impose taxes and levies retroactively — which, last I checked, was frowned upon in most democracies.

If you're wondering whether this bill comes with a sense of proportion, it doesn't, but it does come with a staggering sense of entitlement. The Legislature exists for one very specific reason: to prevent this exact kind of legislative overreach, to ensure that the rule of law isn't written behind closed doors by whoever holds the pen in the Premier's office.

Yet, here we are debating a bill that essentially puts an entire class of industrial activity on an express train to cabinet approval. Journalist Rob Shaw said it best: "Bill 7 in a safety vest." Just a small cabal of decision-makers in the engine room, hands on the throttle, are going to wave at democracy as they speed past.

Given the red tape and stagnation this government has become famous for, this should be a step in the right direction. But in typical fashion, the NDP is going to try and maintain control and try to pick winners and losers as they flail to meet even the most basic emissions targets and struggle to explain exactly how we get to net zero in this province.

[3:40 p.m.]

This government has perfected announcements. Hordes of communications people in the background prove that. But they always come up short on a real plan to actually get us there.

The definition of renewable resources in this bill is elastic. It includes solar, geothermal, wind and biomass — all good things, especially here on Vancouver Island, where we desperately need to look for sources of more renewable power. But it also leaves the door wide open for cabinet to add anything else they like by regulation — not by legislation but by regulation.

Today it's nine wind farms and a transmission line. Tomorrow, who knows? Maybe we should streamline the definition of "streamlining" while we're at it. At least then we'd all be playing by the same rules, from the same rule book.

Here's what's not a joke: this bill takes a chainsaw to local government authority and throws meaningful Indigenous consultation straight into the biomass generator. The Union of B.C. Municipalities, not exactly a radical group or typically offside with this government, has sounded the alarm, loudly, about this overreach. They've said this bill strips communities of the ability to determine what happens on their own land, from zoning and land use to public safety and environmental risk.

These are the same municipalities that already have to fight tooth and nail for infrastructure funding and housing support. Now they won't even be part of the conversation about major projects in their own backyard. That is quite the pivot.

I'll take a bit of a detour here because I've observed something that this government seems to be struggling to recognize. With an $11 billion deficit, they've seemingly run out of carrots to hand out to municipalities that toe the line and meet cabinet targets. So now they're relying solely on the stick.

Bill 14 is just that. It is all stick and no carrot. We ask municipalities to manage wildfire response on the front lines, the homelessness that plagues our communities, emergency services, health care, infrastructure and climate adaptation. But when it comes to massive energy infrastructure in their backyard, the message from this cabinet is clear. The Premier knows best.

Joining UBCM is the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. They've raised an equally damning critique of this legislation. This bill enables the B.C. Energy Regulator, not the First Nations whose territory is affected, to decide what is or isn't a site of cultural or spiritual significance. One person appointed, no consultation required. That's not reconciliation; that's regression. That's 19th century colonial governance with a Green Party sticker slapped on top of it for cover. Have you really no shame?

To put it charitably, the government's environmental values since the election have been extremely flexible — perhaps, maybe, since 2021 leadership, when they elected a Premier offside with the will of the party.

We say we want to honour Indigenous rights, but this legislation strips away input from nations before the first shovel hits the dirt. This government constantly tells us, "Nothing about us without us" until it gets inconvenient.

We need to work through permitting challenges and delays along with our First Nations partners, not in spite of them. Is there work to do on restoring investment stability in British Columbia around this issue? One hundred percent. Both sides can agree that that work needs to happen. But this is not the way to have that conversation. All stick, no carrot. All pomp, no plan.

Let's review what we're actually doing here. No requirement for environmental assessments, because fast is more important than responsible. ALR protections? Gone. Farmland is now just future space for solar panels instead of sweet potatoes. Safety standards? "We'll see." Heritage and cultural protections? Left to the discretion of a regulator. Community input? "Meh, we don't need that either." Legislative oversight? Not by this government. God forbid somebody points out the flaws in this bill: "How inconvenient."

[3:45 p.m.]

It's a Green Party bumper sticker on a Humvee. But don't worry. It's all fine because it's "green." Apparently, that word now means whatever cabinet wants it to mean,

whenever they need it to mean something. Great job with the new communications department hires. They are certainly earning their keep with the flip-flopping principles of this government. They are certainly earning their paycheque, trying to figure out what exactly the position of this government is from day to day.

What exactly is the point of having a legislative process, of gathering in this chamber, debating, amending and voting if the government can simply rewrite the rules after the fact with the stroke of a regulatory pen?

We're going to talk a little bit about clause 13. This clause grants cabinet the power to amend, disapply or reapply entire sections of the Energy Resource Activities Act retroactively, if they so feel. That isn't legislation; it's a choose-your-own-adventure book where every ending is being ghostwritten by the Premier.

And clause 21? That one takes it even further. It validates any regulatory action taken since April 1, weeks before this bill was even introduced to this House.

So let me get this straight. They've already acted like this bill was law, and now they want us to rubber-stamp it after the fact to apply retroactively. I know this government is fond of invoking the Wayback Machine when it suits their messaging. We heard it earlier today in question period. They love a good stroll down memory lane when they can spin it in their favour. It all lands flatter these days, since they are the previous government. And they are asking us to trust them to fix their mistakes. I don't trust them.

But using retroactivity to cover their own backsides for regulatory overreach they didn't have the authority for in the first place? That's not nostalgia. That's legislative fraud dressed up as efficiency, wearing a Green Party bumper sticker. Is this law, or is it improv theatre? I truly would like to know. Most days I cannot tell.

I ask with all sincerity: is this what democracy looks like in British Columbia? Decisions made behind closed doors, authority concentrated in cabinet, this House and this Legislature neglected as a ceremonial afterthought, brought in only to retroactively justify whatever the Premier has already decided.

British Columbians deserve a lot better than that. They deserve a renewable energy policy that is transparent, accountable and rooted, truly rooted, in local and Indigenous consultation, not a pipeline of politically favoured projects rammed through by insiders, exempt from scrutiny, competition or even basic logic.

If this government truly believes in renewable energy, and I genuinely hope they do, then build the public trust to match. Let the projects stand on their own merit. Let the communities be heard. Let the public actually see the process, not just the press release after the fact, not just the bumper sticker slogan. When you exempt projects from scrutiny, you don't speed up progress. You speed up skepticism, and I am certainly skeptical.

When you concentrate every meaningful decision in one office, you don't just remove accountability. You also centralize blame. So yes, at least we'll know exactly who to blame when this bill delivers exactly the fallout we're warning about today. This is not hidden. The stakeholders have been very vocal about their opposition to this bill. We on this side are speaking up for those stakeholders, hoping somebody over there doesn't have their hearing protection in today.

Let's be honest. We've seen this movie before. The government pushes through legislation without meaningful consultation, and then when the backlash hits, when the unintended consequences of failed consultation start piling up, they feign surprise, blame the feds or the President or, frankly, whoever is convenient, and spend a fortune trying to spin their way out of it. Bill 14 will be no different.

[3:50 p.m.]

When all else fails, no problem. Just give the bloated government comms team another budget bump, hire a few more well-connected advisers and start work on a fresh distraction for next week's news cycle.

As a British Columbian and a student of political science, the practice and the theory of politics could not be further apart in this province. This bill is yet another symptom of a broken system. While they're managing optics, it's the people on the ground, the farmers, the local councils, First Nations and small business owners who are going to ultimately pay the price for this bill.

I think some members may know of the wind turbine on Hornby Island, if you've ever been to Ford's Cove. It's the perfect example of green policy in action in an area where we have division — Hornby Island, an extremely progressive region. I have many friends from there. I love the area, love visiting Tribune Bay, an absolute gem in the Gulf Islands.

It took them eight years, on Hornby Island of all places, to get a privately built quarter-million-dollar wind turbine active at Ford's Cove, to meet the regulatory requirements, because there was opposition. There were other considerations. This legislation would absolutely sidestep those considerations for expediency and not safety. When we marginalize the very people that this House is meant to represent, we do more than sideline their voices; we make a mockery of this chamber.

I won't stand here and pretend every regulation we have is perfect. We've tied the hands and feet of economic development in British Columbia in red tape for way too long. We need to unwind ineffective and economically damaging regulation and overreach. Lord knows we've got red tape in places we didn't even know we had places.

B.C. has a serious efficiency problem, but the answer isn't to light the whole framework on fire, call it streamlining and hope the flames distract everybody from the actual problems — unless, of course, arson is now being

considered a renewable resource, unless that's the new renewable resource this government is pushing.

Burning public trust for fuel seems to be, certainly, in demand. That's easy. This government is pretty happy to run around with a can of gas and figure out how to put the fire out later. How about we try and avoid lighting it in the first place?

There are certainly amendments to this bill that could be made by this government to fix the problems of their poor consultation in advance. I often hear members praising the Nordic model, the cradle-to-grave social safety net of Scandinavian countries. It's become something of a touchstone for this government. What's consistently left out of that conversation is how those countries actually afford it. Bill 14 attempts to start to square that circle.

Norway, Denmark and Sweden didn't build world-class public services by accident. They built them by establishing a clear and honest social contract that responsible resource development is not a threat to progress but a way to fund it. They understood that you can't have a robust public sector without a thriving private one. They didn't shy away from developing those natural resources. They embraced it, regulated it properly and used the revenue to build social infrastructure that works for everyone.

We should be doing the same here in British Columbia and across this country, but this bill doesn't come close to doing that. It avoids the hard work of reforming the regulatory maze that is a massive problem in this province. It ducks the tough conversations about normalizing responsible resource development across all sectors, not just the ones the Premier's office finds politically convenient at the moment.

Instead, this bill gives the illusion of action, a handful of handpicked projects pushed forward under the guise of climate policy, while the government waves a green flag in one hand and buries its economic failures with the other. We need to do better not just for the economy but for the integrity of our democratic institutions and for the long-term sustainability of the public services that British Columbians count on and that rely on resource revenue.

[3:55 p.m.]

This bill doesn't strengthen democracy; it simply bypasses it. This bill doesn't improve the permitting process; it eliminates the process altogether for the politically favoured few. It doesn't lift the burden of red tape across the board, which desperately needs to happen in this province. It shifts decision-making into back rooms, into cabinet meetings and into corridors, where public scrutiny has no access and where accountability has no seat at the table.

Let's not forget what else this bill does. I'll just remind everybody. It neuters the Environmental Assessment Act. It strips decision-making away from municipalities. It empowers unelected regulators to impose fees and levies retroactively. It allows the Premier's office to decide, alone, which projects matter and which ones don't. This is pay-for-access politics at its absolute worst.

It gives the regulator the ability to override protections for cultural heritage, agricultural land and even basic safety standards if it feels fit. It hands the government the power to act first and legislate later, then retroactively validate it through clauses like clause 21.

[Lorne Doerkson in the chair.]

Through it all, it completely skirts meaningful consultation with the very people this is going to affect the most: not the downtown Vancouver people, not the downtown Victoria people, but local communities in rural B.C. and Indigenous communities across this province, who will end up eating the sandwich of this government's failure. That isn't how you build trust with rural British Columbia. That's not how you demonstrate leadership. That isn't even how you govern in a functioning democracy.

Bill 14 is not good for democracy in British Columbia. It's not good for municipal autonomy in British Columbia. It is not good for reconciliation in British Columbia. It's not good governance, and it's not a good bill.

This bill won't bring regulatory certainty. It does bring more regulatory manipulation. It does not create fairness in our system; it institutionalizes favouritism in B.C.'s energy industry. It does not support investment; it creates confusion and distrust, the very things that investors and capital fear most and the thing that they most bring to my attention when they look to invest in this province.

While the Premier's office may see this as getting things done, what they're really doing is cutting corners and cutting out the very people who are supposed to have a say. I urge all members here in this House to vote against Bill 14, because this bill isn't about streamlining; it's about strong-arming. This bill isn't about green energy; it's about green-washed authority. It is a bumper sticker on a Humvee.

Once you accept this kind of overreach in the name of convenience, you normalize a style of governance that treats the rule of law as a suggestion and this Legislature as a formality. If the shoe were on the other foot, I ask the members that are here and paying attention, would you support this bill?

We can do better. I know the other side of the House can do much, much better. The people of British Columbia — every community, every First Nation and every citizen who expects transparency and fairness from their government — deserve nothing less.

Lynne Block: Well, we are here today to discuss a piece of legislation before us, Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act. Its stated purpose, as you can gather from the title, is to provide for the regulation of renewable energy projects by the British Columbia Energy Regulator at different levels and to accelerate the approval process through streamlining. This is achieved,

supposedly, by modifying or disapplying the application of the Energy Resource Activities Act and other statutes in relation to these projects.

[4:00 p.m.]

While the goal of accelerating approvals might sound appealing on the surface, the method employed by this bill has drawn significant criticism, and rightly so. It is seen as a form of fast-tracking that bypasses democratic checks and balances, consolidates power with the regulator and reduces public and local government oversight.

What are some of the key mechanisms within this bill that lead to these concerns? First, and perhaps most fundamentally, the bill dictates that the Environmental Assessment Act simply does not apply in relation to specific, streamlined projects. This is alarming, especially if you're an environmentalist or a person of the Green Party. This includes projects like the selected wind energy projects, the North Coast transmission line project and certain prescribed wind energy or related electric transmission line projects.

For existing wind projects that become level 3 and are prescribed, any existing environmental assessment certificate is outright cancelled. The conditions from that cancelled certificate are then merely deemed conditions under a permit issued under the primary act. This wholesale bypassing of the standard environmental assessment process is significantly watering down environmental protection and oversight. This is egregious.

Beyond the Environmental Assessment Act, the bill also provides for the disapplication of crucial provisions from the primary act, the Energy Resource Activities Act, for level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects. Subject to regulations, entire sections and divisions of this act, which are normally intended to provide oversight and accountability for energy resource activities, simply will not apply. Again, egregious.

Consider what this means in practice. For level 2 projects, the general permit requirement itself may not apply. Provisions related to permit expiry or obligations upon cancellation also may not apply. Specifically, for both level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects, subject to regulations, several key provisions of the primary act generally do not apply.

Which ones are they? They're 7(2), 10, 55 and 59. Division 2.1, expanded responsibility of Part 3, does not apply — specifically, 7(2)(f), 10(c), 56, 60 and 91. What about Part 3.1, regarding dormant sites? Doesn't apply — specifically, 7(2)(g), 10(d), 56, 60, and 91. And Part 4, regarding orphan sites, again does not apply. What specifically? It's 7(2)(h), 10(e), 57, 60 and 91.

These specific parts and divisions of the primary act are typically the established mechanisms that ensure responsibility for the cleanup and the reclamation of abandoned sites. Their non-application for level 2 and 3 projects means that the standard framework for addressing dormant or orphaned sites and enforcing expanded responsibility for sites is bypassed.

Why is that? What are the consequences when there is no responsibility for cleanup? What are the consequences when there is no responsibility for the sites and reclamation of abandoned ones?

While the Lieutenant Governor in Council has the power to make regulations, including potentially applying Part 4, regarding orphan sites, or establishing a fund similar to the fund for orphan sites under the primary act, specifically 13(1)(c), 20(3), 64 and 75, the default position for level 2 and 3 projects as stated in this bill is the non-application of these critical provisions, again specifically 7(2), 10, 55, 59, and 91.

[4:05 p.m.]

This disapplication creates a significant gap in future accountability for the potential environmental impacts and the required cleanup and reclamation of sites associated with these streamlined projects. The NDP claim that they care about the environment, but how can they say this when this bill completely negates this?

In addition, the disapplication of the public request for investigation provision under the Energy Resource Act for level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects under this bill has significant implications for public consultation, people's voices and accountability. Specifically, for both level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects, Division 3.1, "Public Requests for Investigation" of Part 5 of the primary act generally does not apply, subject to — what regulations? — 13(k), 16(f), 57(k), 60(f) and 91.

This provision is part of the standard framework within the Energy Resource Activities Act. Its non-application is cited as an example of how the bill could be seen as reducing oversight and accountability by bypassing existing rules for energy resource activities.

In practice, the non-application of this provision means that a specific formal avenue for public voices and oversight regarding the activities of these streamlined projects is removed. Within the typical regulatory structure governed by the primary act, the public request for investigation mechanism would presumably allow members of the public to formally request that the regulator investigate potential non-compliance or other issues related to energy resource activities.

By removing this mechanism for level 2 and 3 streamlined projects, the bill directly limits the ability of the public to initiate such formal inquiries. Again, this is egregious. This contributes significantly to the concerns raised by critics that the bill's streamlining processes lead to reduced public and local government, which that includes municipalities and landowners, oversight and involvement.

The ability of the public to request investigations is a form of accountability, allowing external stakeholders to trigger regulatory action when they perceive issues. When

this ability is removed, the accountability framework shifts, relying more solely on the regulators' internal processes or other, potentially less accessible, avenues for raising concerns.

Furthermore, this reduction in formal public input mechanisms, alongside the disapplication of other provisions related to environmental protection and site cleanup accountability, fuels the broader criticism that Bill 14 involves bypassing democratic checks and balancing and involves consolidating power in the regulator. Established statutory processes, often including mechanisms for public input and investigation, are bypassed, reducing layers of review and transparency.

This also touches upon concerns regarding the province's commitments to the alignment of laws with UNDRIP, which is relevant given that streamlining processes could impact consultation with Indigenous peoples.

Therefore, the removal of the public request for investigation mechanism is a tangible example of how the streamlining under Bill 14 can reduce the formal avenues available for the public — including directly affected residents, landowners and farmers — to engage with and ensure accountability from large energy projects. There is no avenue for the public, no framework for the public, no ability for any public member to be able to voice concerns or issues. Or should I say "no public oversight"? Or should I say "unhealthy" or "non-democratic" processes?

In essence, the removal of the public request for investigation provision means that part of the public's potential role in holding project proponents accountable through formal, regulatory process is diminished for these specific, streamlined projects, leading to concerns about the overall level of public oversight and the health of democratic processes in relation to these projects.

[4:10 p.m.]

For level 2 prescribed projects, even sections concerning environmental protection and management under the primary act may not apply. The disapplication of the public request for investigation provision for level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects under Bill 14 has significant implications for local residents, landowners and farmers, affecting their ability to participate in consultation, have their voices heard and ensure accountability.

Specifically, for both level 2 and level 3 streamlined projects, division 3.1 of part 5 of the primary act generally does not apply. Subject to these regulations, within the standard regulatory framework established by the primary act, this provision typically allows members of the public to formally request that the regulator conduct an investigation into potential non-compliance or other issues related to energy resource activities. By explicitly stating that this provision does not apply for these projects, Bill 14 removes a direct and formal avenue for public voices and oversight regarding the activities of these specific projects.

For people, like I say, who live in the vicinity of these projects — such as local residents, such as local landowners, such as local farmers — this disapplication is particularly significant. These individuals are often the most directly impacted by the construction and operation of large infrastructure projects, like transmission lines and wind farms, which can affect their land, environment, quality of life, way of life and property values.

Under the standard Energy Resource Activities Act framework, the public request for investigation could serve as a mechanism for these affected parties to formally trigger a regulatory review if they observe activities they believe are non-compliant or harmful to the environment; for example, environmental damage, safety concerns or impact on their specific land use. Again, the removal of this mechanism means they lose the specific legal tool to initiate a formal investigation, potentially making it harder for them to raise concerns and ensure that the project proponent and the regulator are held accountable for adhering to regulations.

This limitation on the ability to formally initiate investigations contributes to the broader concerns that Bill 14's streamlining processes lead to reduced public and local government oversight and involvement. The ability to request an investigation is a key component of that accountability, allowing external stakeholders to prompt action from the regulator. Its removal means that accountability relies more heavily on the regulator's proactive monitoring, if there is some, and enforcement, again if there is some, or on other less formal or direct means for the public to voice their concerns. This can feel like their voices are diminished within the regulatory process compared to standard projects.

Furthermore, this issue is compounded by the disapplication of other key provisions, such as those related to environmental protection and site cleanup. That means expanded responsibility, dormant sites, orphan sites. The non-application of these cleanup provisions also directly impacts local communities and landowners, as it creates a significant gap in future accountability for the costs and responsibilities of cleaning up abandoned sites, potentially leaving the public or future generations to bear the burden.

Similarly, the disapplication of standard environmental protection requirements for level 2 projects means that local residents lose the assurance that these projects will be subject to the usual environmental safeguards under the primary act.

[4:15 p.m.]

For the North Coast transmission line project, identified as a level 2 streamlined project, the potential to bypass established agricultural land protections and processes is a consequence stemming from how the bill modifies the application of the Agricultural Land Commission Act.

Subject to regulations, the bill allows the regulator to permit non-farm use, soil or fill use, or subdivision of land

within the Agricultural Land Reserve for a streamlined project. Critically, specific sections of the Agricultural Land Commission Act that would normally govern these uses and subdivisions do not apply in relation to land use or subdivision permitted under this bill or its regulations. This mechanism allows the project to potentially bypass established agricultural land protections and processes.

Further centralizing authority, the bill allows for the delegation of powers under acts like the Heritage Conservation Act and the Wildlife Act to the regulator. This means the regulator could exercise powers that would otherwise fall under the purview of the ministries, the ministers or officials responsible for those acts, potentially altering how these important pieces of legislation are applied to streamlined projects.

Compounding these concerns about process, the bill includes a validation provision. This section retroactively deems valid all actions taken by the board, commissioner, regulator or their staff between April 1, 2024, and the act's commencement date, provided those actions would have been valid under the new act. This validates actions taken before the legal framework for streamline permitting was officially in place. Egregious. This is unacceptable and undemocratic.

Criticism of this bill is focused on the approval process established for these projects. The concern is that by bypassing standard environmental assessments and reducing other regulatory checks, the bill creates a system where the potential for negative environmental outcomes is increased due to a lack of stringent review and oversight. The major criticism is directed at the method of approval and regulation, not an assertion that the projects themselves lack environmental merit. It is the method of approval and regulation.

However, there are environmental concerns with each of these projects. One of these specific projects explicitly subjected to this streamlined process under Bill 14 is the North Coast transmission line project. This project involves upgrading and operating existing lines and constructing new lines from around Prince George to around Terrace. It is designated as a level 2 streamlined project. This project raises specific concerns regarding fast-tracking, environmental oversight and process bypassing.

One of the most significant points of this project is that the Environmental Assessment Act does not apply. I'll repeat that. The Environmental Assessment Act does not apply in relation to the North Coast transmission line project. This is seen by critics as bypassing the standard environmental assessment process and watering down environmental protection and oversight.

As a level 2 streamlined project, numerous provisions of the primary act, the Energy Resource Activity Act, do not apply in relation to the North Coast transmission line project. This includes provisions intended for oversight and accountability for energy resource activities, specific provisions related to environmental responsibility and public process that do not apply and which raise huge concerns.

What are they? Provisions addressing expanded responsibility, specifically division 2.1 of part 3. They do not apply. Provisions addressing dormant sites, part 3.1. They do not apply. Provisions addressing orphan sites, part 4, specifically. They do not apply.

[4:20 p.m.]

This is most concerning because orphan site provisions typically address responsibility for reclaiming abandoned sites. While regulations could potentially establish a similar fund for orphan sites, the default under this bill for these projects is non-application of these critical provisions. This creates a potential gap in future accountability for cleanup and reclamation.

The North Coast transmission line project does not provide the right for the public to initiate investigations through public requests for investigation, ignoring a public avenue for oversight and investigation related to this project's activities, and sections concerning environmental protection and management under this act, as well as the general permit required, itself, do not apply. Egregious.

This bill modifies how the Agricultural Land Commission Act applies to streamlined projects, including, potentially, the North Coast transmission line project, if it involves land in the agricultural land reserve. Subject to regulations, the regulator may permit non-farm use, soil or field use, or subdivision of land within the agricultural land reserve.

Importantly, specific sections of the ALC Act that would normally govern these uses and subdivisions do not apply in relation to land use or subdivision permitted under this bill or its regulations. This allows the project to potentially bypass established agricultural land protections and processes.

To make matters worse, the bill allows for the delegation of powers under acts like the Heritage Conservation Act and the Wildlife Act. They leave it to the regulator. This means the regulator could exercise powers that would otherwise fall under the purview of the ministers or officials responsible for those acts. While not explicitly stating environmental flaws, this centralization of authority could potentially alter how these acts, which relate to heritage and wildlife protection, are applied to streamlined projects, compared to how they would be applied by the original managing bodies.

The streamlined processes established by Bill 14, including those applied to the North Coast transmission line project, raise concerns about whether the province is upholding its commitments regarding the alignment of laws with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. This is relevant given the potential for these streamlined processes to impact consultation.

These points collectively illustrate how the bill's ap-

proach to streamlining, as applied to the North Coast transmission line project, is achieved through disapplying fundamental environmental and regulatory laws and reducing public and local government oversight and involvement, which critics view as problematic fast-tracking.

What about prescribed streamlined projects? This category can include any renewable energy project prescribed by regulation, like the prescribed electric transmission line, projects related to the North Coast transmission line, as well as the prescribed wind energy projects.

It was in December 2024 that B.C. approved nine new wind energy projects without requiring environmental reviews, raising concerns about the potential oversight of ecological and social impacts. For prescribed wind projects under section 14, the Environmental Assessment Act does not apply. For level 2 and 3 prescribed projects, many of the same provisions of the Energy Resource Activities Act do not apply, subject to regulations raising similar concerns about responsibility and oversight.

What are the concerns with the selected wind energy projects, the nine wind energy projects selected by B.C. Hydro in 2024 call for power? For these projects, the Environmental Assessment Act, again, does not apply. If they become level 3 streamlined projects and are prescribed, any existing environmental assessment certificates are cancelled. Again, egregious.

What are some of the negative environmental impacts? One such negative environmental impact is wildlife disruption. Wind turbines can pose risks to birds and bats, particularly migratory species. Proper siting and monitoring are essential to mitigate these impacts. But because of the so-called streamlining process advocated in this bill, there would not be the much-needed oversight, consultation and collaboration to ensure that proper siting and monitoring would take place.

[4:25 p.m.]

Then there is habitat fragmentation caused by the construction of wind farms, including access roads, transmission lines, which can lead to habitat fragmentation, affecting local ecosystems. With this bill, such vital and necessary planning and coordination is not a priority. The only priority for this bill is speed. It's only been eight years, so why the hurry now?

What about social and community concerns? There are visual and noise impacts. Wind turbines can alter the visual landscape, leading to opposition from local communities who value natural vistas. Noise pollution is another issue with wind turbines. The operation of turbines generates noise, which some residents find disruptive, potentially affecting quality of life. And once again, without adequate consultation with Indigenous and local communities, it could lead to tensions and concerns over land rights and cultural impacts.

While branded as a path to streamline permitting, Bill 14 achieves this by disapplying or modifying fundamental, environmental land use and regulatory laws. The significant concern raised that this approach, applied to these specific projects, constitutes fast-tracking that weakens critical oversight and protection mechanisms, ultimately centralizing power with the regulator and reducing public and local government involvement.

While these projects may contribute to B.C.'s renewable energy goals, it's crucial to address the challenges and issues associated with each through comprehensive planning, community engagement and robust, I say robust, environmental assessments to ensure sustainable and equitable development.

To do all of this, we need to ensure that this streamlining bill is not the template for future energy development in our province, especially when there is blatant disregard and disapplication of crucial provisions from the primary act, the Energy Resource Activities Act, as well as the Environmental Assessment Act.

Whether you are an environmentalist or not, this is not the issue. It is the disapplication and the disregard of important and critical best practice legislation that is at the core of our concerns. This bill is an attack on our democratic processes. Therefore, I am not supporting Bill 14.

Scott McInnis: It's my pleasure today to speak against Bill 14.

I'm here really for one reason only, and that's to represent the people of Columbia River–Revelstoke. Earlier today there was a very important release, and I want to share a couple of quotes from that release. I live in Kimberley, which is on the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa people. I have to say, the Ktunaxa are a very easygoing people, and it takes a lot to fire them up.

Today, we did have a release from ʔaq̓am, known as the St. Mary's Band, one of the communities of the Ktunaxa. I'm just going to read a couple of quotes here, if I may. "ʔaq̓am chief and council are deeply disappointed and alarmed by the announcement of British Columbia's recently introduced Bill 14 and 15 and demand the immediate withdrawal of these bills."

My second quote: "Bills 14 and 15 were developed with no meaningful consultation with First Nations."

I quote again: "A trust model does not work, and the province needs to implement its interim approach with respect to this proposed legislation to ensure it aligns with UNDRIP, as per its legal commitments."

I'm going to take a little bit of a different approach because, as I said, my first and foremost priority here is to represent the wonderful people of Columbia River–Revelstoke, and I'm going to look at a couple of specific sections of this bill which are concerning to the people I'm here to represent.

[4:30 p.m.]

I'm not here just to speak today to this piece of legislation but to voice the growing concern and unease of many

British Columbians, particularly those in Columbia River–Revelstoke, folks who see this bill, Bill 14, as a shift in how this government treats land, people and power.

At first glance, Bill 14 appears to be about renewable energy. We can all agree renewable energy is extremely important. It's the path forward. But it's this process we're going through which people are extremely alarmed about. This cause finds widespread support across our province — renewable energy. Beneath that promise lies something far more troubling: a legislative structure that concentrates authority, sidelines local voices and undermines some of the very values we claim to hold dear. Nowhere is this more apparent specifically than in clause 18, which I'm going to address.

This clause grants the B.C. Energy Regulator the authority to suspend or cancel permits issued under the Wildlife Act. That includes and is not limited to hunting licences, trapping permits and angling authorizations, activities that, in regions like mine, are far more than recreational pastimes. They're are part of our identity. They're about putting food on the table for our local residents. They are expressions of culture, heritage and, as I mentioned, a key part of our identity. They're how families in the Columbia Valley have lived for generations, all people in the Columbia Valley.

In Revelstoke, Golden and throughout the Columbia River Basin, hunting and fishing are embedded in the rhythms of daily life. They're how we teach our children responsibility and respect for the animals, for the land and for each other. It's how elders pass on lessons that go far beyond the mechanics of a hunt or the placement of a trapline. These are acts of stewardship, part of an unbroken chain of knowledge that ties people to a place and in a way no government office or urban policy ever could.

There's a growing divide in the riding which I represent. People are becoming increasingly concerned and aware, and there's a general feeling that on the eastern corner of this province, this government no longer represents them.

Let me be clear. For many families, especially in more remote parts of my riding, this isn't an aesthetic or lifestyle choice. It's an economic necessity. Groceries, obviously, as we've canvassed before, are very expensive. Fuel is expensive. Access to affordable, healthy food is already strained. Wild game and fish are essential to household food security, particularly in the off-season, when jobs are scarce and incomes are stretched thin.

Clause 18 is very concerning for the people of Columbia River–Revelstoke. A freezer full of wild meat can mean the difference for many families, especially seniors who are still able to hunt. This is the difference between resilience and hardship.

Our communities are very intertwined. People share their wild game. This clause 18 really puts that in jeopardy in Bill 14.

When legislation proposes to hand over the authority to cancel that access, to revoke it without notice, without consultation, without even requiring justification, we're not talking about a technical change in policy. We're talking about a potential rupture in the social and cultural fabric of entire communities.

It would mean a government-appointed regulator, likely based in the Lower Mainland or Victoria, who could decide unilaterally that a local family's right to hunt or fish no longer aligns with the province's priorities for energy development. That is an alarming concentration of power, particularly when exercised over something so vital, so intimate as access to the land.

[4:35 p.m.]

What's more, the Wildlife Act already contains provisions for ecological protection. If a species is at risk, if a population needs time to recover, the minister has the authority, guided by science and process, to impose closures or limitations. That framework already exists, and it includes transparency, public rationale at times and timebound decisions. So we must ask: why bypass it?

Why allow an energy regulator whose primary mandate is approving projects, not managing ecosystems, to suddenly hold the power to cancel hunting or fishing permits, potentially? It raises a troubling possibility that when faced with a conflict between a project and a community, the solution could be to remove people — not through consultation, not through compromise.

This is not theoretical. Consider the mountain valleys east of Revelstoke or the Kinbasket reservoir corridor, areas rich in biodiversity and also heavily targeted for transmission corridors and, potentially, wind exploration. What happens when those development ambitions intersect with long-standing hunting routes or traplines? If clause 18 were to stand, we already know the answer. The human presence will be the first thing to go.

In a region that has already borne the burden of past energy policy, from the flooding of farmlands and habitat under the Columbia River treaty to the displacement of small communities and disruption of ecosystems, we cannot afford to repeat history under, potentially, a greener name. Bill 14 allows an unelected regulatory body to revoke those permits as it sees fit. There's no requirement for consultation, no expectation of public notice and no built-in appeal process. The regulator is not even asked to provide evidence or rationale for its decision. That is a radical departure from the principles of fairness and accountability.

In places like the upper Arrow Lakes, where families have hunted moose for generations, or around Trout Lake, where small trapping operations continue to steward animal populations, the threat of being arbitrarily removed from the land is not theoretical. It's real, under Bill 14. It cuts to the heart of who we are, and it gets worse.

Bill 14 gives the regulator the power to determine whether a renewable energy project is subject to environ-

mental assessment. It determines whether safety standards apply. It determines whether traditional land use will stand in the way of industrial expansion. If there's a conflict between a wind project and a wildlife corridor, or between a transmission line and a community's back country, there is now a legal mechanism to remove the human element — no mitigation, no redesign, just revocation of access by fiat.

I really want to talk about wind energy for a second. Perhaps we can canvass this more in the committee stage. As I understand it, a lot of this infrastructure is not made in B.C. or in Canada. It comes from somewhere else. That is not responsible environmental policy. That is not planning. This is overregulation.

This approach is not limited to non-Indigenous communities. Across the province, and especially in regions like mine, First Nations have exercised hunting and trapping rights for millennia. These rights are not discretionary. They are constitutionally protected under section 35 of the Constitution Act.

There's a lot of ambiguity around what's happening with Bill 14 in relation to rights and title. If permits are suspended on traditional territories without consent or consultation, this government would be in violation of its own legal obligation.

[4:40 p.m.]

More than that, it will be sending a message that at times, under its choosing, reconciliation can be optional when it's inconvenient and that Indigenous stewardship can be overridden when development is the goal.

Then there is clause 20, the clause that ties all others together and reveals the underlying philosophy of this legislation. Clause 20 hands sweeping authority to the Lieutenant Governor in Council, cabinet, to make regulations on nearly every fundamental aspect of the act. Cabinet can define what qualifies as renewable, decide which projects are streamlined, exempt them from environmental assessments and even override the protections of the Agricultural Land Commission.

It doesn't stop here. The pattern continues with clause 15. This provision allows the province to authorize non-farm uses on lands protected under the agricultural land reserve, including subdivisions and exemptions of soil conservation, so long as they are deemed related to renewable energy development.

At first glance, the rationale may seem practical. Good agricultural lands in this province are few and far between. Renewable energy infrastructure — solar arrays, substations, wind installations — often requires flat, open terrain, and the government wants to ensure that agricultural zoning doesn't stand in the way of that progress.

This is British Columbia. We don't have an abundance of flat, open terrain. When you step out of the policy brief and into the land itself, particularly in a region like mine, we have the Purcell mountain range to the west and the Rockies to the east. The Columbia River trench is very narrow. There's not a lot of room for renewable energy projects here.

This picture becomes far more complicated. In places like the Columbia wetlands, ALR land isn't just flat and accessible. They're ecologically significant, agriculturally productive and culturally important. They're home to local food systems, critical wildlife habitat and traditional Indigenous harvesting grounds.

Once again, this clause contains no requirement to consult with First Nations whose unceded territories intersect with these landscapes. There is no legal obligation to assess how traditional land use, food sovereignty or cultural heritage will be impacted. There is no cumulative impact assessment. Each project can be assessed in isolation, as though it exists in a vacuum.

We know better. One transmission line leads to another. One access road opens away for more. Slowly, acre by acre, the integrity of the land can be eroded, not just by a single decision but by the absence of a bigger picture.

It is a piecemeal approach to land management in a region already carrying the weight of past industrial compromise. As I said before, the Columbia River treaty has been a net benefit for my region, but it hasn't come without its growing pains. In the Columbia Basin, we still live with the legacy of the Columbia River treaty. We remember what it meant to be told that agricultural land would be flooded, homes relocated and ecosystems submerged in the name of hydroelectric power.

The voices of those who lived on that land, settler and Indigenous alike, were at times ignored until the damage was already done. To see history repeat itself under the banner of clean energy is not just ironic; it's painful. We support renewable energy. We understand its importance, but we also understand what it means when the means to that end are imposed, not shared.

This brings us to clause 20, the clause that pulls the thread on the entire fabric of Bill 14. Again, the Lieutenant Governor in Council is to make regulations on every foundational element of this act. Clause 20 permits these decisions to be delegated, passed down to a single minister, a regulator or even a civil servant.

[4:45 p.m.]

In other words, decisions that could alter the legal, environmental and cultural landscape of entire regions, like Columbia River–Revelstoke, could be made by someone who may never have set foot there.

There's no requirement to consult the public, no duty to inform the Legislature, no obligation to consider Indigenous input, no mechanism to account for local concern or cumulative impacts. It is government by regulation, executive discretion without democratic accountability. For communities like the ones I represent, where land use decisions are not abstract policy but lived experience, the consequences are very real.

These extraordinary powers don't need to be exercised by cabinet directly. They can be delegated — again, the B.C. Energy Regulator. That means decisions with provincewide environmental, cultural and economic implications could be made without ever being debated in this House. That's very concerning to all of us here on this side of the House.

In places like Golden and Edgewater, citizens are deeply involved in land stewardship. Local governments, community groups and Indigenous leaders have been working to balance environmental protection with economic development, sometimes under tough circumstances. Bill 14 makes this a challenge. This bill tells them that their work, their voices and their knowledge can be set aside with the stroke of a pen.

Across Columbia River–Revelstoke, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents are working to heal the past. There are efforts underway to restore ecosystems, co-manage the land and plan a sustainable energy future together, one that reflects shared values and mutual respect. It's a cooperative approach, something that Bill 14 is sorely lacking.

British Columbians want a clean energy future. We want to reduce emissions. We want to invest in renewables. We want to build infrastructure that reflects both economic opportunity and environmental care, but we will not get there by concentrating power, as in Bill 14, in just a few hands. We will not get there by excluding communities, by sidelining debate, overriding rights or ignoring the lessons of our past.

Bill 14, as it stands, reflects a vision of energy development that prizes speed over consultation, efficiency over equity, and regulation over representation. That is not a future that my constituents can support.

Deputy Speaker: A reminder to both sides of this House for silence on their electronic devices.

Kristina Loewen: Today I rise to speak to Bill 14, a piece of legislation that claims to streamline the approval process for energy projects in B.C. Let me begin by stating clearly that we agree with the intention. We agree that energy projects — whether transmission lines, generating infrastructure or other essential systems — are taking far too long to get off the ground in this province.

We hear it from industry, from local communities and from everyday British Columbians: the current process is too slow, too fragmented and too costly. Developers are stuck navigating a maze of ministries, timelines stretch on for years, and good projects, projects that would benefit our economy and energy reliability, are often stalled or abandoned because the permitting process has become a burden. That needs to change.

British Columbia should be a place where investment is welcomed, where jobs are created and where critical infrastructure can be built without getting lost in a bureaucratic dead end. That's something this side of the House has consistently advocated for.

To the extent that Bill 14 attempts to address that, we support that direction, but what concerns us, and what should concern every member in this chamber, is not what this bill claims to do but how it goes about doing it.

[4:50 p.m.]

This bill doesn't just cut red tape; it cuts out the role of the Legislature. It gives the cabinet the power to designate projects without public input, to waive oversight mechanisms and to hand broad regulatory authority to unelected officials. It allows the B.C. Energy Regulator to rewrite the rules that govern its own actions without ever coming back to this House for debate, approval or accountability. It even allows for retroactive decisions, including the power to impose levies or fees on proponents for actions taken months ago, before this legislation even existed.

That is a dangerous precedent. When government begins to bypass public scrutiny in the name of efficiency, what we end up with is neither fast nor fair. We get concentrated power, unstable rules and a system that serves neither developers nor the public.

While the government is positioning this bill as a breakthrough for energy permitting, I see something else: a deeply concerning expansion of executive authority, with few safeguards and almost no accountability. That's what I'll be addressing in greater detail today, because we can do better. We can support faster project approvals without sacrificing the role of this Legislature and the trust of the people that we serve.

Before I get into the more troubling aspects of this legislation, I want to take a moment to acknowledge where we do find common ground, because there are parts of this bill that reflect priorities that we've been calling for in this House for some time.

Let's start with something that's been long overdue: a single-window approach to permitting. For years, project proponents, whether they're working on energy transmission lines, regional generation projects or emerging technologies, have faced a confusing, time-consuming approval process that spans multiple ministries and regulatory bodies. This isn't just inefficient; it's a barrier to investment.

Too many good projects have died on the vine not because they were flawed but because the system around them was too slow, too convoluted or too uncertain to navigate. So the move towards consolidating permitting under a more unified framework is welcome. If done properly, with proper oversight and transparency, it can absolutely help get important energy infrastructure moving again.

Let me say this as clearly as I can. We want to see energy projects move forward in B.C. We support responsible development. We support investment, and we sup-

port jobs. We support building the infrastructure that will allow our province to meet its growing energy demands, not five or ten years from now but today. We understand that B.C. cannot remain competitive or reliable if we keep sending investors the message that "maybe someday" is the best we can offer.

We have heard time and time again from project developers that they don't just want speed; they want clarity, certainty and consistency. They want to know what the rules are. They want to know the timelines. They want to know that if they meet the requirements, they will get a fair hearing and a fair shot. That's not a partisan issue. That's just good governance. For far too long, we haven't had it.

Yes, the Conservative caucus supports the core goal of making energy permitting in this process faster, more efficient and more navigable. We support changes that reduce unnecessary delays and duplication. We support making the B.C. Energy Regulator more responsive and better resourced to handle modern project timelines.

We also support something else, something that this bill unfortunately starts to cast aside, and that's accountability. If we want to build a system that works for British Columbians, one that earns their trust, attracts investment and gets shovels in the ground, then we have to ensure that the reforms we make are rooted in transparency, in legislative oversight and in public confidence. That's the balance this government could have struck with Bill 14, and that's the balance we'll be fighting to restore through debate and proposed amendments.

As I outlined just moments ago, there are aspects of Bill 14 that are worth supporting, ideas that could help streamline the path forward for energy development in our province. But this is where the agreement ends. While the government presents this bill as a commonsense update to reduce duplication and delay, the legislation itself goes much farther — too far.

[4:55 p.m.]

What Bill 14 actually does beneath the headlines and press releases is hand sweeping, unchecked authority to the cabinet and to the B.C. Energy Regulator.

Let's start with what I believe is the most egregious overstep. This bill gives cabinet the power to fundamentally change how energy projects are reviewed and approved without ever coming back to this Legislature. Under this bill, the Lieutenant Governor in Council can declare by regulation what constitutes a streamlined project. That means they can add, remove or redefine projects behind closed doors, without debate, without input and without any obligation to explain those decisions publicly.

It doesn't stop there. The bill goes on to grant cabinet the power to exempt entire projects from the environmental assessment process — again, not by legislation but by regulation. Not only are the criteria unclear; they are entirely discretionary. If cabinet says a project is exempt, then it's exempt — full stop. No hearings, no public submissions, no independent evaluation.

Now, that might be acceptable if this was limited to a narrow, clearly defined set of projects, but it's not. This bill leaves the door wide open for any project to be added later and for all the usual safeguards to be switched off. That should concern every member in this House, not just those on this side.

It gets worse. Bill 14 also allows the B.C. Energy Regulator to change, suspend or even eliminate parts of the very act that governs its activities, the Energy Resource Activities Act, again without legislative input. Let's pause on that for a moment. We are literally giving a regulator the power to rewrite its own rulebook —no vote, no accountability, no transparency. If that wasn't alarming enough, the bill also gives the regulator the authority to impose fees and levies retroactively, all the way back to April 1, 2024.

Let me be clear. We're not talking about future costs or predictable fee schedules that proponents can plan for. We are talking about rules that haven't been debated yet, costs that haven't been disclosed and obligations that could be applied months after the fact. What business, what developer, what investor would feel confident operating in a jurisdiction where rules can be changed retroactively and arbitrarily?

This is not regulatory reform; this is legal instability. We have to call it what it is: a profound shift in how decisions are made in this province. We are witnessing the slow erosion of democratic process, replaced by a growing reliance on regulation, ministerial direction and executive orders. It's a pattern we've seen before with Bill 7, Bill 15 and now again with Bill 14.

Let's not kid ourselves. This is not about getting projects built faster. This is about government getting out of the way, not for the sake of the public but for the sake of consolidating control.

British Columbians are not opposed to efficiency; they are opposed to being shut out of decisions that affect their future. As members of this Legislature, regardless of party, we should be concerned whenever government attempts to sidestep the very institution we were elected to uphold.

We are not here to rubber-stamp cabinet decisions. We are not here to hand over our authority to regulators. We are here to represent the people, the people of our ridings, and to ensure that when laws are made, they are made here with transparency, debate and accountability. That is the role of this House, and that is the line that Bill 14 crosses, not just in one place but throughout the entire framework of this legislation.

I'll be addressing even more of these powers in detail, including the ability to suspend established rules around safety standards, environmental oversight and public rights of appeal. But for now, let me just say this. Streamlining is not a licence to override democracy. We cannot

— we must not — let efficiency become a Trojan Horse for unchecked executive power.

One of the most frustrating challenges we hear from project proponents, whether they're in energy infrastructure or construction, is not simply the amount of regulation they face. It's the uncertainty of it all, uncertainty about timelines, uncertainty about requirements, uncertainty about what rules apply or whether those rules will change midstream.

[5:00 p.m.]

I want to be clear. Bill 14 does not solve that problem. It deepens it. While this bill is being sold as a way to bring clarity and speed to energy permitting in B.C., what it actually introduces is a whole new level of unpredictability, and it does so in some deeply troubling ways.

Let's begin with retroactivity. Clause 12 of this bill allows the B.C. Energy Regulator or individuals it delegates authority to, to impose fees, levies or other financial obligations retroactively to April 1, 2024. Now, think about that. We're telling project developers that decisions they made in good faith based on rules as they existed at the time could be revisited and re-costed under a completely different regime, a regime that wasn't even law when they acted.

What's worse, there's no requirement that these retroactive levies be reasonable, predictable or appealable. They're simply imposed after the fact, and project proponents are expected to comply. This is a dangerous precedent.

How do you attract investment into this province when businesses can't rely on the rules staying consistent for even a matter of months, when a project that was fully permitted in March could be hit with unexpected fees by July, not because anything changed on the ground but because government rewrote the terms after the fact? This isn't just poor planning. It's a signal to every potential investor that B.C.'s regulatory system is unstable, unreliable and subject to political whim.

Unfortunately, this bill doesn't stop at retroactive costs. It also gives cabinet and the B.C. Energy Regulator the power to designate, redefine or remove entire classes of projects from existing oversight at will. Under clause 20, the Lieutenant Governor in Council may, by regulation, decide what qualifies as a renewable resource, whether a project is subject to environmental assessment or not, whether a particular project is eligible for streamlining and what level of streamlining it receives and whether certain safety or reporting requirements should apply.

Now, this may sound procedural, just background policy stuff, but let's not miss the point. These are decisions that used to be predictable, debated and codified in law. Under Bill 14, they are turned into moving targets, subject to change at any time by regulation, with no guarantee of public consultation or advance notice. That is the exact opposite of regulatory certainty.

Let me put it another way. This bill trades transparency for flexibility in the most one-sided way possible. Government gets the flexibility. Developers get the uncertainty. And for British Columbians? They're left in the dark.

Consider this. A project could begin its development process under one framework, based on publicly available criteria with a reasonable understanding of its obligations. Then partway through, or even after completion, cabinet could issue a regulation that reclassifies the project, imposes new costs or removes protections that were previously in place.

What message does that send? It tells investors that the goal posts can and will be moved. It tells communities that their input can be erased. It tells regulators that they're no longer implementing law; they're rewriting it on the fly.

I would argue that all of this does more harm to energy development in this province than the red tape this government claims to be cutting. At the end of the day, developers don't just want speed. They want stability. They want to know that once a rule is established, once a permit is issued, once a plan is approved, it will hold — not indefinitely, not without accountability, but with the basic fairness that says: "We stand by the rules we gave you when we started."

Bill 14 throws that principle out the window. It replaces a flawed system — yes, one that needs reform — with a discretionary system governed by regulation and open to sudden change.

That makes it harder, not easier, to build the kind of long-term energy infrastructure this province needs, because serious investors don't chase political unpredictability. They look for jurisdictions where the rules are clear, the process is fair and the decisions are consistent. That's what we should be aiming for. Instead, we are left with legislation that undercuts the very certainty it claims to deliver.

[5:05 p.m.]

While the Premier and his ministers may be congratulating themselves on this so-called streamlining, I urge every member in this chamber to look closer and to ask the question: are we making it easier to build or easier for government to change the rules whenever it wants?

In a democracy, when government seeks to expand its power, there is always one critical question that must be asked. Who is watching? Who is checking those decisions? Who is holding that authority to account? Who is ensuring that the public, the people who sent us here, have a voice in how that power is used? Unfortunately, Bill 14 doesn't just concentrate authority in cabinet and the regulator. It also eliminates nearly every meaningful mechanism for public oversight.

Let me start with one of the most alarming features of this legislation. Clause 14 explicitly removes the application of the Environmental Assessment Act from a broad range of projects, including the nine designated wind

energy projects, the North Coast transmission line and, critically, any additional projects cabinet chooses to add by regulation. This is not a temporary exemption. It's not a narrowly scoped exemption. This is a structural change, a long-term bypass of a process that exists to protect the public interest.

Environmental assessments are not just about ecology; they are about transparency. They require a project to be reviewed holistically, to undergo technical analysis and to include public consultation. They ensure communities can ask questions, raise concerns and have a formal role in decision-making. By removing this requirement, Bill 14 is not just speeding things up; it's cutting the public out. We should all be clear-eyed about what that means: fewer voices at the table, less access to information and zero obligation for the government to explain its decisions.

Now, the government may argue that these exemptions are only for low-impact or strategic projects, but let's be honest. Those terms are never defined in the bill. There are no thresholds, no specific criteria, no requirement for impact measurement. Cabinet decides, and the rest of us are expected to accept it.

It's not just the environmental process that gets gutted. Bill 14 also gives the B.C. Energy Regulator the ability to delegate core functions to unnamed officials, private contractors or government employees, with no oversight from this Legislature and no clear reporting obligations to the public.

Think about that. We're talking about a body that can impose retroactive fees, suspend or rewrite regulatory obligations and now delegate those powers to others, without needing to disclose who is making the decisions or how they are being made. Where is the transparency in that? Where is the basic accountability?

Under normal democratic practice, when government exercises authority, there are checks and balances. There are public hearings, published reports, standing committees and appeal mechanisms. But in Bill 14, there are none of these. Instead, it explicitly removes them.

Even under the Wildlife Act, Safety Standards Act and Heritage Conservation Act, we see the same pattern repeated. Government decides by regulation whether these protections apply or whether they don't. That's not how good governance works. The people of this province have every right to expect that major decisions, especially those with broad environmental, cultural or community implications, will be made with them, not around them. Yet time and again, this bill says the opposite. It says: "We'll let you know when it's done."

That approach is not just wrong; it's corrosive. It breaks down trust between citizens and government. It makes communities more skeptical, not less. And it fuels the very resistance and delay this bill claims it will avoid. When people feel excluded from the process, they push back, they organize, and they challenge. They often do so not because they're against development but because they were never brought in at the start. It's ironic, really. By trying to avoid public involvement, the government may well end up creating more conflict, not less.

We've seen this pattern before. We've seen it in Bill 7, where the cabinet sought sweeping powers to override local governments. We see it in Bill 15, which bypasses democratic controls in the name of speeding up infrastructure. And now with Bill 14, we're seeing it again, this time with the added danger of regulatory and financial discretion being placed in the hands of unelected officials.

[5:10 p.m.]

The pattern is clear. This government is slowly but steadily rewriting the role of this Legislature, reducing it, bypassing it and, in some cases, outright ignoring it. I ask my colleagues on all sides of this House: is that a direction we're truly comfortable with?

Regardless of how any one of us feels about a specific energy project, we should all feel uneasy about how this bill was written. We are not here to be spectators to cabinet rule. We are here to be legislators, to scrutinize, to debate and to represent our constituents in the full light of day. That's what public accountability is and what it's all about: not just following the rules but making sure the people who are affected by those rules can see how they were made. That is the trust we were elected to uphold. With Bill 14, that trust is being undermined.

We've now spent a great deal of time going through what's in this legislation and, just as importantly, what's not. We've seen a bill that claims to streamline energy development but instead centralizes authority, removes oversight and silences public input. We've seen a government that tells British Columbians they're making the system faster when, in reality, they're just making it harder to challenge, harder to question and harder to see.

We've seen a troubling pattern, one that has unfolded across multiple pieces of legislation, where legislative power is being shifted behind closed doors into the hands of cabinet, regulators and appointed officials with virtually no checks, no balances and no guarantees.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can absolutely achieve the goal of faster project approvals. We can reduce red tape. We can provide clarity for investors. We can still do all of that without sacrificing the principles that define good governance. So what should happen instead?

First, and most critically, we must restore the role of this Legislature. There is simply no justification for giving cabinet the authority to rewrite the rules of energy regulation by decree. The powers to redefine project eligibility impose retroactive levies, exempt assessments and modify safety or environmental protections. Those powers must be subject to debate, to scrutiny and to vote in this House.

If the government believes a project warrants special treatment, then let them make that case publicly. Let them bring that case here, where every MLA can review it, ques-

tion it and speak to the people that they represent. That is how democracy works. That is how trust is earned.

Second, this bill must include firm guardrails on retroactive authority. It is one thing to charge fees or impose conditions on future developments. That's expected. That's reasonable. But to reach back in time and penalize project proponents under rules that didn't even exist when decisions were made? That is unfair, and it is unprofessional.

Let me say this plainly. Retroactivity is not a tool for responsible government. It's a warning sign, a warning that the government does not value certainty, that it does not respect its own legislative timelines, that it will change the terms of engagement after the fact and expect businesses to bear the cost without recourse. That's not how you encourage investment. That's how you scare it away.

If this bill is to proceed, it must include clear limits on what can be applied retroactively and include a requirement on any new levies, fees or regulatory changes and how they are communicated in advance and applied prospectively, not punitively.

Third, this bill must reinstate mechanisms for public input and accountability. This means ensuring that key oversight processes like the environmental assessment, the public request for investigation mechanisms under the Energy Resource Activities Act and community consultations are not simply waived by regulation.

British Columbians have a right to know what's happening in their backyards. They have a right to ask questions. They have a right to understand how decisions are being made and by whom. This government, any government, has a duty to respect those rights. When we involve communities in the process, we allow for dialogue instead of dictation, and we build stronger projects and stronger public support for those projects.

Fourth, we need transparency in delegation. Bill 14 allows the B.C. Energy Regulator to delegate core authorities to individuals or groups with no clarity on who those people are, what their qualifications are or what criteria they'll use to make decisions. If we're going to allow delegation of regulatory powers, then that process must be fully transparent and subject to reporting requirements.

[5:15 p.m.]

British Columbians deserve to know who's making decisions that affect them and how those decisions are being monitored. We can't afford to create a shadow system of energy permitting, one that operates outside of public view without recourse or oversight.

Finally, I want to speak briefly to the broader tone of this legislation and this government's approach in recent months. We are now seeing bill after bill that appear to be less about solving real problems and more about concentrating control. Bill 7 tried to give this cabinet the power to override local governments. Bill 15 will let them bypass legislative approvals for infrastructure. Bill 14 hands them the keys to energy regulation while closing the door to transparency, accountability and the public interest.

This is not just a policy trend. It's a governance shift, one that every member of this House, regardless of party, should view with serious concern. If we allow this shift to continue unchallenged, we risk turning the Legislature into little more than a ceremonial venue, a place where decisions are announced, not debated. Let me say directly: that is not why I ran for office. That is not why any of us are here.

We are here to represent, to question and to challenge, to give voice to the people who entrusted us with their vote and their future. That means insisting on laws that are debated in the open, applied fairly and built to last.

I will close with this. The Conservative caucus stands ready to support the streamlining of energy approvals in this province. We want to see projects move forward. We want to see B.C. grow, invest and lead. But we will not support a process that strips away oversight, silences the public and gives unelected officials the power to rewrite our laws behind the scenes.

There is a better path forward, one that respects both the need for efficiency and the need for accountability. Until this government is willing to take that path, until they're willing to amend this legislation to reflect the values of democratic governance, we must oppose this bill as it's written.

When the stakes are this high, when the powers are this broad and when the consequences are this far-reaching, we cannot afford to get it wrong. We owe British Columbians better than that.

Deputy Speaker: Member, could I ask that you adjourn debate just for a moment? We've got one of the other Houses that needs to report.

Kristina Loewen: I'd like to adjourn debate.

Kristina Loewen moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Reporting of Bills

BILL 11 — EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

Nina Krieger: Section C reports Bill 11 complete without amendment.

Deputy Speaker: When shall the bill be read a third time?

Hon. Adrian Dix: Now, hon. Speaker.

Third Reading of Bills

BILL 11 — EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

Deputy Speaker: Members, the question is third reading of Bill 11.

A division has been called.

[5:20 p.m. - 5:25 p.m.]

[The Speaker in the chair.]

The Speaker: Members, the motion before the House is the third reading of Bill 11, intituled Employment Standards Amendment Act, 2025.

Motion approved unanimously on a division. [See *Votes and Proceedings*.]

[5:30 p.m.]

The Speaker: Bill 11, Employment Standards Amendment Act, has been read a third time and has passed.

Hon. Mike Farnworth: In this chamber, I call continued debate, second reading, Bill 14.

In the Douglas Fir Room, Section A, the estimates for the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

In the Birch Room, Section C, committee stage, Bill 13.

[Lorne Doerkson in the chair.]

Second Reading of Bills

BILL 14 — RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS (STREAMLINED PERMITTING) ACT, 2025
(continued)

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. We'll bring the House back to order now.

Harman Bhangu: Today I rise not only to speak to Bill 14, the so-called Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, but to stand on behalf of countless British Columbians who believe that environmental progress must go hand in hand with democratic integrity. This NDP government has framed this bill as a forward-looking reform, an effort to modernize, to reduce red tape, to accelerate the green energy transition. They see it as a step towards climate leadership, a necessary pivot, a pragmatic fix. They've called it a streamlining measure, a red-tape cutter, a fast track for progress.

But let's not confuse slogans with substance. The reality is far less noble and far more dangerous. Bill 14 is not about efficiency; it's about control. It grants sweeping and unprecedented authority to provincial cabinet, powers that can override existing rules, skip environmental review and bypass meaningful consultation both with Indigenous nations and with local communities. All of this is justified under the guise of urgency and streamlining.

Let me be clear. We all understand the need for renewable energy. We all want to see a cleaner, more sustainable British Columbia. That's not up for debate. But what is up for debate is how we get there. And this bill takes us in the wrong direction. This bill does not build trust; it breaks it. It does not modernize governance; it centralizes it. And it does not strengthen the environmental protection; it weakens it.

Let's unpack this bill and its implications, because buried within the technical language is a significant and dangerous shift in how major decisions will be made in this province.

One, the cabinet override. At the heart of Bill 14 is a provision that allows cabinet to declare any renewable energy project as a prescribed undertaking. Once that declaration is made, the rules change — not some of them. all of them. Environmental assessments? Waived. Permitting reviews? Optional. Public consultation? Skipped. Local bylaws? Overridden. Indigenous consultation obligations? Severely diluted or avoided entirely. This is not a tweak or a minor adjustment. This is a blank cheque for the cabinet to approve projects with near-total discretion.

[5:35 p.m.]

While the government insists this is about accelerating renewables, the mechanisms being created here are not limited. They are not confined to emergencies. They are broad. They are open-ended powers that will become baked into the norm of decision-making. Today it's solar, wind. Tomorrow it could be highways, mines or ports. The scope is broad, and the cabinet wants it to be. This bill effectively turns the provincial cabinet into a one-stop shop of green-lighting major infrastructure — no independent review, no third-party assessment, no grassroots input, just a rubber stamp from the top.

Two, the red tape is an essential safeguard. The government has tried to sell this bill with one of its oldest tricks in the playbook, by demonizing red tape. They say British Columbia is burdened with bureaucracy, that the regulations are obstacles, that consultations are a delay tactic, that transparency is inefficient. But let's be honest. Not all red tape is bad. Much of what this government calls red tape is, in fact, critical oversight.

These are rules that exist to ensure transparency in large-scale developments; protect delicate ecosystems and endangered species; enforce consultation with Indigenous Peoples, as required under section 35 of the constitution; and give local residents a voice in decisions that affect their water, land and way of life. These aren't nuisances; they're democratic protections.

What this government sees as barriers, I see as protection — protection against abuse, mismanagement, irreversible environmental damage. When you cut corners

in the name of speed, you don't just fast-track progress. You fast-track mistakes.

Three, a pattern of centralization. This bill is not an isolated incident. It fits into a larger, troubled trend we've observed over the past several years, a pattern where this NDP government consolidates power at the top while eroding the voices of those on the ground.

We saw it in housing, where provincial legislation gave the minister sweeping authority to override local zoning rules and development processes. In many communities, residents and councils were blindsided by the mandates they had no opportunity to shape. The message was clear. Your local context is secondary to provincial objectives.

We saw it in education, where the autonomy of school boards was dismissed, diminished. Local trustees, people elected by parents and community members, found themselves cut out of key decisions. Curriculum changes, funding allocations and policy shifts were dictated from Victoria with little consultation.

And now, in the realm of renewable energy, we're watching the same blueprint unfold. Decisions that should involve collaboration, consensus and careful scrutiny are instead being pushed through with a top-down model. This is not how you build trust. This is how you build resentment, especially in rural areas already skeptical of centralized governance.

What we are witnessing is not leadership. It's overreach. It's a government that seems more comfortable ruling by fiat than fostering open, democratic dialogue. That should alarm us all.

Four, trust is a fragile thing. Public trust is not something governments are entitled to. It's something they must earn. And it is a gift that can be broken with a single misstep. Once broken, it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to restore. Trust, once lost, doesn't just fade away. It fractures, erodes and takes years, even decades, to rebuild, if it can be rebuilt at all.

Trust isn't built on good intentions alone. It is built through actions that are transparent, accountable and participatory. When people see decisions being made behind closed doors, without consultation, without genuine dialogue, they feel abandoned. They feel sidelined. That is when they begin to disengage.

[5:40 p.m.]

What we're dealing with here is not just a permitting issue; it's a democratic issue. This is about the very foundation of governance and relationship between the governing and the governed.

The moment people feel that they are no longer part of the process, when they feel that their voices do not matter, they begin to withdraw. They stop showing up to public consultation. They stop participating in civic processes. They stop believing that their opinion can make a difference. That is the real danger here. When people disengage from our democratic process, the legitimacy of the government itself begins to erode. The consequences are far-reaching.

We see it already in communities, where people are no longer involved in consultations, believing that outcomes are already decided by a distant, centralized government. We see it in municipalities, where local leaders feel powerless in the face of provincial mandates. We see it in Indigenous communities, where consultation becomes nothing more than a token gesture and afterthought rather than meaningful partnership.

What happens when trust erodes? It leads to a climate of cynicism. It breeds suspicion and conspiracy. It erodes the social fabric. People start questioning the motives of their elected leaders. They become skeptical of every new policy, every new proposal and every new initiative. Eventually, that mistrust manifests in unrest, in protests, in litigation. We have seen it before. It's the price we pay when the people feel unheard and unrepresented.

Ultimately, the irony is this. The very changes this government claims to fast-tracking, whether in energy, housing, or health, will slow to a crawl when people stop believing that they have a voice in the process. You don't accelerate change by bulldozing those who have questions. You accelerate resistance. You invite further division and opposition. The true cost of this bill is not just in legal shortcuts or regulatory simplification. It is in the trust that will be lost. And that is something no government can afford to sacrifice.

Five, real solutions ignored. Now let me ask the obvious: if the permitting process is truly too slow, why hasn't this government taken the necessary steps to fix it? Why hasn't there been a significant investment in the staffing or permitting agencies? These agencies are responsible for ensuring that projects are reviewed thoroughly and responsibly, yet we've seen a chronic shortage of personnel, leading to delays, backlogs.

Where is the funding to hire more experts to expedite these reviews without sacrificing quality or accountability? Where is the investment in digital upgrades and improved coordination systems that could streamline communication between agencies, reduce redundant paperwork and make the permitting process more effective for all involved? We live in a digital age where technology can be leveraged to make processes faster and more transparent, yet there is no effort to modernize the system to keep pace with the demands of a growing and evolving industry.

Where is the training for environmental analysts, who must evaluate the potential impacts of these projects on the ecosystem, wildlife and local communities? They need ongoing education and resources to adapt to new challenges, technologies and environmental considerations.

Where are the resources for Indigenous liaison offices, to ensure that the rights and concerns of Indigenous communities are not only heard but fully respected?

The government has promised reconciliation, but where is the concrete support for those offices to carry out their mandate effectively?

And where is the capacity building for local governments? They're the ones who know their communities the best and should have the support they need to engage in decision-making processes. Yet we see municipalities struggling to meet the demands of complex projects with limited resources.

[5:45 p.m.]

None of these critical steps are being addressed in this bill. Why? Because this government is not actually interested in strengthening and improving the existing system. What this bill represents is an attempt to bypass the very checks and balances that are there to protect us all. By taking away the power of local authorities and independent agencies, this government is not cutting red tape. It's dismantling the safeguards that keep our environment, our communities and our democracy intact. That's not streamlining. That's surrendering to convenience.

It is about removing obstacles, yes, but not to achieve progress. Instead, it's about avoiding accountability, reducing scrutiny and cutting the brakes because you don't want to fix the engine. By ignoring real solutions, this government is choosing the easier path. The path? Expediency and the cost of long-term trust, transparency and good governance.

Six, renewable energy deserves better. Let's also talk about the irony in this all. Renewable energy is often presented as more than just an energy source. It's held up as a moral imperative. We are told that it's the path to a cleaner, more ethical and sustainable future. For many British Columbians, that vision resonates deeply.

But there is the contradiction: while we preach the values of clean energy, the bill proposes to launch those very projects through a dirty process, one that sidesteps scrutiny, silences communities and undermines trust. If renewable energy is truly the future, shouldn't we hold it to the highest standards? Shouldn't solar, wind, hydro and geothermal projects reflect our best values, not our worst habits? Shouldn't they be the models of integrity, transparency and collaboration?

We cannot afford to undermine the credibility of the renewable sector by linking it to executive overreach. That will only undercut public buy-in and fuel opposition, especially in regions where trust is already fragile. Clean energy must mean more than clean emissions; it must mean clean governance.

Seven, the dangerous precedent set. Finally, let me issue a warning. Once you grant extraordinary authority, once you normalize the bypassing of oversight, it is extremely difficult to put that genie back in the bottle. What starts as an expectation now becomes the new norm. This bill sets a precedent that when things are politically inconvenient, due process can be suspended. Today it's for renewables. Tomorrow it could be used for resource extraction, infrastructure expansion or land expropriation. We must not build the future on shortcuts. We must not sacrifice democracy at the altar of expedience.

In closing, we must choose better. British Columbians want action on climate. They want renewable energy. They want clean air, sustainable jobs and a better future for their children. They also want and deserve good governance. They want leadership that respects the rule of law, strengthens our institutions and brings people along through dialogue and transparency.

Bill 14 is not that. It is not bold climate action. It is not democratic innovation. It is not reconciliation in practice. It is a retreat from accountability, a concentration of power and a slap in the face of those who believe process and participation matter.

[5:50 p.m.]

We can do better, and we must do better. Let us not confuse urgency with recklessness. Let us not mistake control for competence. Let us not trade our democratic values for speed. Once we lose public trust, once we give up the checks and balances that protect us, it's not just the environment at risk. It's the very foundation of our province's democracy.

I will be voting against Bill 14. I urge my colleagues to do the same. Let's build a future that is not only green but just, inclusive and governed with integrity.

Bryan Tepper: I rise today to speak against Bill 14, the so-called Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

Let me start by saying that I'm all for renewable energy. Wind farms, solar panels, geothermal — let's bring it on. Who doesn't want clean energy powering our homes, businesses and maybe even the odd electric skateboard zipping down Government Street?

But here's the thing. This bill isn't just about making it easier to build a few wind turbines. It's a Trojan Horse stuffed to the brim with unchecked power, sneaky exemptions and a whole lot of, "Trust us; we've got this" from the NDP government.

Spoiler alert: I don't trust them, and neither should you.

Let's unpack this. Bill 14 is being sold as a shiny new tool to streamline approvals for nine wind farms and the North Coast transmission line. Streamlining sounds great, right? Cutting red tape, getting projects moving, creating jobs — sign me up. But when you dig into the fine print, you realize this isn't just about trimming bureaucratic fat, the very fat this NDP government put in place. It's about giving the NDP and the B.C. Energy Regulator a blank cheque to do whatever they want, whenever they want, with barely a nod to the Legislature or the people we represent.

The government claims this bill simplifies the approval process for renewable energy projects. Currently, develop-

ers must navigate multiple ministries to get the green light. Fair enough. Nobody loves a bureaucratic maze. Or wait, I thought the NDP might have, because they're the government that built that maze.

Instead of creating a clear, transparent process, Bill 14 hands the keys to the kingdom to the B.C. Energy Regulator and the NDP cabinet. They get to decide what counts as a renewable resource project — wind, solar, biomass, biogas, geothermal, you name it — and if they want to add something new to the list, no problem. An order in council, a quick scribble behind closed doors and — poof! — it's included. No debate, no oversight, no pesky elected officials asking questions.

Now, I'm no conspiracy theorist, but this kind of unchecked power makes me nervous. The bill allows the regulator to write its own rules under the Energy Resource Activities Act. That's right. The regulator gets to regulate itself. It's like letting the fox guard the henhouse, except the fox also gets to redesign the henhouse, cancel the security cameras and declare itself vegan for good measure. This isn't streamlining. It's a power grab dressed up in green wrapping paper.

Let's talk about the exemptions to this bill, because they're a doozy. Bill 14 lets certain projects, starting with those nine wind farms and the transmission line, skip the Environmental Assessment Act entirely — no environmental review, no public consultation, no accountability. The government says they'll fix this later with changes to the Environmental Assessment Act, but they can't tell us when. "Trust us," they say. "It's coming."

[5:55 p.m.]

I've heard better promises from my son when he swears he'll clean his room later. I think he might be watching and not cleaning his room right now, as he's supposed to be.

It gets worse. The bill lets the regulator decide whether a piece of land qualifies as heritage under the Heritage Conservation Act. That's right. One person, handpicked by the regulator, gets to say: "Now, that culturally significant site — not significant enough." No appeal. No oversight. Just a single person with a clipboard and a god complex. This isn't just bad policy. It's a recipe for disaster.

Then there's the agricultural land reserve. Bill 14 allows renewable energy projects to carve up ALR land, subdivide it and bypass rules about soil and fill use. Our farmland is precious. It feeds our communities, supports our farmers and keeps our province resilient. But this bill treats it like a blank canvas for wind turbines and transmission lines. I can just imagine the pitch. Why grow food when you can grow power lines?

Here's the kicker. For the highest level of streamlined projects, level 3, the bill waives the Safety Standards Act. That's right. Safety standards, those pesky rules that keep workers and communities safe, can be tossed out the window.

I don't know about you, but when I think of renewable energy, I'd like to know the wind turbine isn't going to topple over because someone decided safety was optional. We've seen what happens when corners are cut. We've mourned workplace accidents, grieved preventable tragedies. We had a member speak of the Ironworkers Memorial Bridge just today. Why would we gamble with safety for the sake of expediency?

Now, let's talk about the bill's more authoritarian flourishes. Bill 14 gives the B.C. Energy Regulator the power to cancel hunting, angling and trapping permits on a whim. No explanation needed. No appeal process. Just a snap of the fingers, and your permit is gone.

I can picture it now. You're out in the woods, ready to cast your line, and a regulator official rolls up in a golf cart and shouts: "Sorry, Bob, your fishing trip has been vetoed by the wind farm." It's absurd, but it's also deeply troubling. These activities aren't just hobbies. They're part of a way of life in British Columbia. They sustain families, connect us to our land and deserve better than arbitrary cancellation.

Then there's the retroactive power grab. Clause 12 allows the regulator to impose fees and levies, essentially taxes, on projects dating back to 2024. That's right. They can reach into the past and slap a bill on someone's desk for a project that's already underway. It's like getting a parking ticket for a car you parked perfectly last year.

This retroactive taxation isn't just unfair; it's a deterrent to investment. The NDP claims they want to attract renewable energy projects. But who is going to invest in B.C. when the rules can change after the game has already started?

The bill also creates a separate orphan fund for renewable energy projects, distinct from the existing orphan well fund. On the surface, this sounds responsible: set aside money to clean up abandoned projects. But here's the catch. There's no clarity on how this fund will be managed, who pays into it or how it's enforced. It's like promising to save for a rainy day but forgetting where you put the piggy bank.

[6:00 p.m.]

Without transparency and accountability, this fund risks becoming a slush fund for the regulator to dip into whenever it feels like it.

I want to take a moment to reflect on what's at stake here. British Columbia is blessed with breathtaking landscapes, vibrant communities and a rich cultural heritage. We have responsibilities to protect these treasures for future generations. Bill 14 puts that legacy at risk.

By bypassing environmental assessments, sidelining safety standards and undermining our agricultural land, this bill prioritizes short-term gains over long-term stewardship. We've seen the cost of hasty decisions before: eroded trust, damaged ecosystems, fractured communities. We cannot afford to repeat those mistakes.

This bill also erodes the democratic process. By handing sweeping powers to the B.C. Energy Regulator and the NDP cabinet, it sidelines this Legislature and the people we serve.

We are the voice of British Columbians. We debate. We scrutinize. We hold the government to account. But Bill 14 says: "Don't worry. We'll handle it." That's not just an insult to us. It's an insult to every voter who sent us here.

Let's talk about the NDP's track record for a moment. For years, they've piled on regulations, making it harder and more expensive to get projects off the ground. They've scared off investment, leaving B.C. lagging behind in renewable energy development.

Now they're suddenly champions of streamlining? Forgive me if I'm skeptical. This isn't a road-to-Damascus moment. It's a political pivot. Bill 14 is their attempt to have it both ways, look green while consolidating power.

They claim it's about nine wind farms and a transmission line. But the bill's scope is far broader. Any project can be added later, no questions asked. It's like ordering a coffee and getting a five-course meal you didn't ask for, except the meal comes with a side of authoritarianism.

We can do better. We can streamline renewable energy projects without sacrificing oversight, safety or democracy.

Interjection.

Bryan Tepper: I am glad the minister agrees.

We can attract investment without retroactive taxes or arbitrary permit cancellations. We can protect our environment, our farmland and our heritage while building a clean energy future.

Bill 14 isn't the answer. It's a shortcut that takes us down a dangerous road. I urge this House to reject Bill 14 and send it back to the drawing board. Let's work together, across party lines, to craft legislation that truly serves British Columbians, legislation with clear rules, robust oversight and respect for the land and the people we represent.

[6:05 p.m.]

We have a chance to get this right, to build a renewable energy sector that's sustainable, accountable and inclusive. Let's not squander it on a bill that puts power in the hands of a few at the expense of many.

In closing, I ask my colleagues to think about the legacy we want to leave. Do we want to be remembered as the Legislature that rubber-stamped a power grab disguised as progress, or do we want to be the ones who stood up for democracy, for accountability, for the future of our province? I know which side I'm on.

We need to fix the bureaucratic maze that has been created. This is the House in which we can do that. We don't need ultimate power placed in the hands of a regulator.

I'm voting against Bill 14, and I urge every member of this House to do the same.

Anna Kindy: Cutting red tape and fast-tracking and streamlining — it all sounds great, doesn't it? You might think so, but this government managed to debase those concepts and instead just repackage their continued desire for authoritarian power in the form of the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

This legislation gives all the authority to the government and the Energy Regulator, including the changing of rules that govern the regulator, and all without the approval of the Legislature for those changes. The government claims that with this legislation they are simply advancing nine wind farms and transmission lines, but in reality, they are giving themselves unlimited power over any project they choose.

The Renewable Energy Projects Act is the government's attempt to appear like they're streamlining wind farms in B.C., but the clauses of this legislation dig much deeper than that. Allow me to illustrate.

In my riding of North Island, and in many more rural ridings in general, hunting and fishing are part of people's everyday lives, of subsistence, recreation, and a huge part of their livelihoods. This has been that way for many, many generations. If implemented, Bill 14 could put detrimental restrictions on hunting and fishing in B.C. The government would be enabled to cancel guide-outfitting, hunting, angling and trapping permits as it sees fit.

I echo the concerns of my colleague the member for Cariboo-Chilcotin, who has been voicing that under Bill 14, unelected bureaucrats will be empowered to indefinitely suspend or cancel guide-outfitters, hunting, angling and other Wildlife Act licences without hearings, without appeal, without compensation.

[6:10 p.m.]

British Columbia guide-outfitters, hunters, anglers and others need protection against government overreach. Thousands of jobs in family-owned businesses across B.C. depend on these licences. Now they are facing a climate of uncertainty. Jobs, businesses and communities as a whole are now at risk, and the British Columbians who work in these professions are stewards of the land.

When we speak of guide-outfitting, we are talking about a $160 million-per-year industry, which sustains 2,000 jobs and attracts 5,000 visitors annually. I wonder. Is there any limit on the number of guide-outfitter, hunting or angling licences that can be permanently cancelled without a hearing under this bill? This sounds very familiar, with this government and this minister.

Does the ministry have an estimate of how many licences or permits may need to be suspended or cancelled to implement and move forward just the main projects, like transmission lines, in this bill? I guess we'll just have to wait and see how many people become losers as the government picks their winners and losers.

This government announced many months ago that they would be approving nine wind farms, and those wind

farms would bypass environmental impact assessments because they are economically important. After years — I repeat, years — of driving investments out of British Columbia, out of my riding of North Island, this government now seems to have realized what we've known all along: encouraging investments creates jobs, builds communities and benefits everyone in this province.

Their realization comes after years of heaping on regulation after regulation, complicating people's lives, making it nearly impossible and prohibitively expensive for many projects to get off the ground. I will repeat the words of the member for Richmond Centre. This bill is not so much about streamlining as being a rush job, a last-minute attempt to expedite projects, only after realizing it's far too late, that we are on the verge of an energy shortfall.

To me, this seems to be a trend with this government. They avoid issues and are idle until the moment they decide to do something as an emergency, an emergency like the tariffs. Then they use their cooked-up urgency to try to quickly push through their agenda. The agenda is simple: it's to gain more power so that they don't have to debate legislation among all 93 elected officials in this House.

This is called a democracy. They want to erase the voices of some of the members in this House, thus erasing the voices of those who elected each member. Each of those 93 elected officials represents voters of British Columbia.

As a refresher, the location of these recently announced wind farms are as follows. There's one in Merritt, one in Kelowna, one near Campbell River, two near Logan Lake and four in the North and the Peace. We saw B.C.'s cattle ranchers and guide-outfitters link arms with environmentalists in urging the province to reconsider the environmental impact assessment exemptions for new wind farms.

[6:15 p.m.]

Something we haven't seen very often is cattle ranchers and eco-activists alike and many other British Columbians warning about unforeseen impacts to wildlife, land and water from these wind farms. As my colleague the member for Delta South said: "What do cattle know that this Premier doesn't?"

This is because cows are spooked by wind turbines, whether it's the sound, the vibrations or what have you. Let's imagine you have a grazing lease where you have a cattle operation. If the government decides to build a wind farm where your cattle graze, you're out of business with a snap of some fingers. There's no recourse for you. This government has decided.

If this government wanted to reform the environmental assessment process to make it more efficient, then that would be a different story, but this is not about reform. This is straight up about removing oversight, and it really displays a lack of care for wildlife, water systems and land. It displays a lack of care for people — cattle ranchers, guide-outfitters and all those making their living from the land with small family-sized operations.

I really want to emphasize that it's in rural and northern B.C. that the brunt of these decisions will be felt. When we're talking about wide-open spaces where fishermen fish, hunters hunt and ranchers ranch, we're not talking about urban zones. However, this bill sets a troubling precedent with far-reaching consequences for every British Columbian. Many people in cities fish and hunt. This model of governing, unfortunately, could become a blueprint for future governance. Again, we live in a democracy.

With regard to ALR land, it is currently very difficult to remove land from this designation, but suddenly the government is singing a very different tune. The ALR land, which is connected to food security, will become vulnerable under this bill. This bill allows the regulator to single-handedly make changes to the agricultural land reserve.

The agricultural land reserve, our ALR, exists to protect lands that feed us. It was established to safeguard food security, not as a convenient location for energy infrastructure. But Bill 14 opens the door for renewable projects to be sited on protected farmland, without any clear requirement for local consultation or even a full evaluation of how food production could be impacted.

That land isn't just empty space waiting for a wind turbine or a solar panel. It's where families have farmed for generations. Once the land is gone, we don't get it back. That's a legacy we cannot afford to lose in the name of expedience.

Something very important to me is heritage land. Under this bill, the Energy Regulator will be enabled to single-handedly decide what land is heritage and what land is not. Yes, this means heritage designation that was previously given can be taken away.

[6:20 p.m.]

When you think of heritage land, you think of it as something long-lasting, something meaningful for future generations to enjoy, not something that can be given or taken away on a whim because a government, at one point in time, decided they wanted to boost their image by building one more wind farm. We don't even know yet to what extent this legislation will be impacting culturally significant Indigenous lands.

I also want to register my concern about how Bill 14 will change the role of the Energy Regulator. This bill will allow the regulator to change its own regulations as it sees fit, once again without any approval from the Legislature. Let me remind this government that we live in a democracy.

This legislation also enables the regulator to introduce fees and levies and costs that can be implemented retroactively. All of this is being done with little oversight, little accountability and insufficient reporting requirement. It all, once again, sounds very familiar to me with this government.

This is also being done with little regard for safety. This bill creates three levels of streamlining of renewable energy projects and removes the application of the safety act when it comes to a level 3 streamlined project. What does that mean? Little regard for safety.

British Columbians support renewables, but they also expect transparency and fairness. This bill overrides environmental assessments, safety standards and local decision-making, handing sweeping powers — I repeat, sweeping powers — to a government with little oversight. As my colleague the member for Surrey–White Rock said so succinctly: "It's not streamlining; it's steamrolling."

No one should have the authority to, and I'll use this term as I'm watching the member in front of me, flippantly bypass environmental laws, waive safety rules or cancel livelihoods without accountability. In my riding, these are multi-generational livelihoods. But this bill does exactly that, and it leaves the door wide open to political favouritism and corruption. When you have no oversight, it leads to corruption.

My constituents roundly rejected Bill 7. Many came to my office and talked to me about this government overreach. Like me, they repeated: "Why is this government doing this? We live in a democracy."

[6:25 p.m.]

I must voice my opposition to Bill 14, which is simply the same power grab rewritten to apply to energy. Let me remind this House about the Bill 7 debacle and why I am comparing Bill 14 to part 4 of Bill 7, which so many of my constituents could not believe that a democracy in British Columbia could try to pass such a bill.

It was just in March that the Premier had to very publicly backtrack on Bill 7, the Economic Stabilization Act, after he got called out by former Premiers, policy professionals, professional organizations, the entire opposition and tens of thousands of B.C. residents for trying to grant himself and his cabinet two years of total power. The Premier tried to pass this legislation so that he wouldn't need to run anything further by the Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Deputy Speaker: Member, just to remind you that we are discussing Bill 14. I appreciate the history, but if we could get back to Bill 14, it would be appreciated.

Anna Kindy: Bill 14 has very many similarities. It is autocratic, dictatorial and undemocratic. At the heart of Bill 14 is a dangerous philosophy that centralization is the path to progress; that a small group of insiders can make better decisions than the people who actually live off the land and know the land; that democracy is too slow, too messy and too burdensome to deal with when you're in a hurry to score political points and play political games.

There is a right way to approve energy projects. It involves listening. It involves balancing priorities. It involves rules that are consistent, processes that are fair and decisions that can withstand public scrutiny. This bill fails on every one of those counts, and it doesn't empower communities. It empowers cabinet at the expense of everyone else. British Columbians know when something is rammed through. They know when words like "streamlining" are just a mask for stripping away protections and shutting down debate.

I have to ask: did municipal councils even cross the mind of this government when they wrote this bill? How do municipal councils factor in here? Where are their decision-making powers? Let's call this what it is: a grab for power dressed up as progress.

Like many who have spoken before me, I support renewable energy. I believe it has an essential role to play in a province's future. But support for renewables should not mean endorsing an unchecked expansion of government authority, and that's what Bill 14 represents.

We're not debating here whether renewables are important. What we are debating is how we get there, and Bill 14 is the wrong way. It is not democratic.

[6:30 p.m.]

I want to see British Columbia succeed. I want to see energy projects move forward. I want to see investments come to this province, bringing innovations, good jobs and a brighter future for our children, but this is not the way to do it.

In summary, I don't support this bill, not because I'm opposed to clean energy, not because I don't want faster approvals but because I believe deeply and sincerely and unshakably that the people of the north Island and the people of this province deserve better. They deserve a voice in a democracy.

Claire Rattée: I appreciate the opportunity today to rise and speak to Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

While this bill is presented as a step forward in modernizing and streamlining renewable energy development in British Columbia, what we have before us is not simply a bill about wind farms or clean energy. This is a sweeping piece of legislation that fundamentally alters how energy projects are approved, regulated and monitored in this province. It raises serious questions about accountability, transparency, regulatory overreach and democratic oversight.

We all support the development of renewable energy. We support reducing red tape where it makes sense. We support investments that bring economic opportunity, environmental sustainability and energy resilience to our communities. But we cannot support a Trojan Horse that delivers authoritarian powers under the guise of climate action.

Make no mistake. This bill may carry the language of climate urgency, but what it delivers is political conven-

ience. It grants cabinet and the B.C. Energy Regulator sweeping discretion to decide what counts as renewable, who gets fast-tracked and which laws apply or don't. It does this without returning to this Legislature for debate, without clear criteria and without safeguards for the public or the land.

The government claims that this is about clean energy, but when you strip away the branding, what you see is a deliberate move to centralize power. When that power comes at the cost of community voices, environmental review, Indigenous consultation and local autonomy, it's not progress. It's a step backward.

British Columbians want more clean energy, but they also want it built with care, consultation and consent. They want to know that their rivers, their traplines, their farmland and their heritage are protected. They want a say in what gets built in their backyards. This bill cuts them out of the process, and that should concern every one of us in this House.

Let's start with the basic premise of this bill. British Columbia's energy sector has long faced regulatory gridlock, requiring project proponents to navigate a tangled web of ministries and approval processes. This has discouraged investment and driven clean energy developers out of our province. The government now acknowledges that reality after years of making the situation worse through overregulation and policy uncertainty.

For years, developers have faced a gauntlet of conflicting requirements, unclear timelines and inconsistent rules between ministries. Projects stall not because communities oppose them but because the system itself is disjointed and dysfunctional. Multiple permitting bodies, contradictory mandates and bureaucratic backlogs have slowed down even the most straightforward proposals.

I know about this better than most, because my community that I represent has dealt with this time and again. We've seen a number of different energy projects proposed and fail in my region because of the difficulty of dealing with government and dealing with all of these systems. We've also seen some that have come to fruition, but it has taken years beyond what it should have if this process had actually been properly streamlined.

[6:35 p.m.]

Now the very government that contributed to this gridlock is using it as justification to sidestep oversight altogether. Instead of fixing the system through meaningful reform, Bill 14 throws the rule book out. This isn't about solving the root problem. It's about sweeping it under the rug and giving cabinet a blank cheque to push through what they want, when they want.

If the government was serious about addressing regulatory delays, it would have brought forward focused reforms, targeted timelines or a streamlined, interministerial framework. Instead, we're being asked to accept a bill that replaces complexity not with clarity but with unchecked authority, which seems to be the norm with this government.

Is streamlining necessary? Absolutely. But streamlining should not mean sidelining oversight. It should not mean giving one regulator unilateral power to rewrite the rules, to cancel permits, to override heritage protections and to change land designations, all without returning to this House for approval.

Streamlining should mean improving efficiency, not dismantling transparency. It should mean making processes faster, not less fair. British Columbians deserve a system that is responsive and coordinated but not one that places absolute discretion in the hands of a few, behind closed doors and without recourse. We should never accept streamlining as code for bypassing democratic checks. A faster process is only worth it if it still respects the public interest and community voices that we are all here to protect.

Bill 14 creates a centralized permitting regime that may, at first glance, appear efficient. But in reality, it transfers unchecked authority to the B.C. Energy Regulator and to cabinet, bypassing the democratic institutions that are supposed to protect the public interest. This isn't coordination; it's consolidation. One regulator will now control everything and do so with minimal public input or oversight. What once required debate, evidence and community involvement can now be rewritten through regulation.

This centralization doesn't just streamline processes. It steamrolls local governments, Indigenous voices and the checks and balances that keep decision-making grounded in public accountability. What this bill sets up is a system where the rules can be changed on the fly without legislative debate and where major decisions about land, water, heritage and safety are made unilaterally by bureaucrats that are empowered by cabinet.

A truly modern regulatory system would still involve transparency, independent review and democratic safeguards. But this bill goes in the opposite direction, closing doors instead of opening them, shrinking the space for public participation and pushing power further away from the communities that are most affected.

The government is touting this bill as a way to advance nine wind farms and the North Coast transmission line. However, the legislation goes far beyond that. Clause 2 allows cabinet to designate any prescribed renewable project as streamlined by regulation. There is no requirement to return to this Legislature to debate what projects are added in the future.

The definition of renewable resource in clause 1 is expansive — biomass, biogas, geothermal, solar, wind, ocean and even any other resource that cabinet chooses to include. This is not narrow legislation. It is broad and ambiguous. Because cabinet alone defines what qualifies as renewable, there is nothing in this bill stopping them from

including questionable projects under the guise of green energy.

British Columbians deserve clarity, not ambiguity. They deserve to know exactly what's being authorized, why, how the decision was made and with what level of scrutiny.

This means any energy project, except for those involving a hydro dam, for now, can be fast-tracked with limited oversight. All cabinet has to do is file an order in council. The scope is potentially unlimited.

Let's understand what fast-tracking really means in this context. It means cutting out local voices, skipping environmental review and concentrating decision-making. It means taking massive projects that could fundamentally alter ecosystems, agricultural land and entire regions and rushing them through without the usual checks and balances that exist to protect the public interest.

[6:40 p.m.]

Fast-tracking shouldn't mean removing every guardrail that protects communities from harm. It should not mean eliminating obligations to consult or listen to those who will be most affected. It certainly shouldn't mean replacing transparent legislative oversight.

We should make attempts to cut bureaucratic red tape, but it must be done right. We must be careful because fast-tracking, when rushed and done incorrectly, silences voices and sacrifices transparency, all in the name of expediency.

Perhaps the most alarming element of this bill is the way it guts the environmental assessment process. Clause 14 disapplies the Environmental Assessment Act for selected wind energy projects, the North Coast transmission line and any other project that cabinet designates. This means no comprehensive public review, no analysis of cumulative impacts, no duty to consult affected communities in a meaningful way. The government has said changes to the Environmental Assessment Act will come later to cover wind, but has provided no timeline. Meanwhile, projects are exempted now.

This is not responsible governance. It is rule by regulation. This legislation demonstrates that this government believes it is best to move forward first and figure out oversight later, which means projects can be built with minimal scrutiny while the legal and environmental standards are left undefined. That, to me, is a reckless way to govern and a dangerous precedent to set for future projects, renewable or otherwise.

We know what happens when corners are cut. It starts small — a regulation skipped here, a consultation delayed there — but the consequences accumulate fast. Projects move ahead without proper safeguards, communities are left in the dark, and when something goes wrong, no one can be held accountable.

The cost isn't just environmental degradation. It's the erosion of public trust — trust in government, in consultation processes and in the integrity of our institutions. That trust is hard-earned and easily lost. Once you abandon transparent decision-making, you can't just snap it back into place.

It is often the public who pays the price, and more importantly, it is the vulnerable communities that pay the highest price. Cutting corners doesn't just leave ecosystems vulnerable. It leaves governments vulnerable, too, because when people no longer believe that their voices matter, when they see decisions made behind closed doors with no recourse or explanation, they disengage, and that can threaten democracy.

If this government truly believes in responsible renewable energy development, then it should lead with consultation and oversight, not gut them as a precondition for progress. Streamlining should mean making things more efficient, not making them less accountable.

Bill 14 goes even further still. It overrides key safeguards in multiple pieces of legislation. Clause 15 weakens protections under the Agricultural Land Commission Act, allowing non-farm use and subdivision of ALR land. This means farmland meant to protect long-term food security can be reclassified and built over for industrial projects, with no community consultation or agricultural review. There is no assurance that this land will be restored, preserved or compensated for if a project fails. This is particularly concerning for my riding, where we struggle immensely with food security challenges. The potential implications of this could be massive.

Clause 16 grants the regulator discretion over heritage designations, including cultural sites significant to First Nations. The regulator even gets to pick the person who decides whether land has heritage value. This, again, is very important for my riding. We have a very large Indigenous population, and I know that the people in my riding don't want to see legislation like this passed, because they know what this could potentially mean for them.

Clause 17 removes the application of the Safety Standards Act for certain projects. That means that critical safety protections for workers, engineers and emergency responders can be removed entirely.

Clause 18 allows the regulator to suspend or cancel hunting, trapping and angling permits at its discretion. These activities are not just recreational. They're cultural traditions and economic lifelines in rural B.C.

[6:45 p.m.]

There are also no guarantees of hearing, notice period or appeal process if your permit is revoked. Again, the implications that this can have for my riding are very significant. A lot of people in my riding rely on fishing, on trapping and on hunting as a way to feed their families. These are not small administrative tweaks. These are fundamental shifts in how we balance industrial development with safety, food security and cultural preservation.

Bill 14 allows the B.C. Energy Regulator to change key

sections of its own governing legislation, the Energy Resource Activities Act, without approval from this House. Clauses 13, 20 and 25 give cabinet and the regulator sweeping powers to amend, disapply or apply parts of the act as they see fit. This includes retroactive levies and fees, suspension of safety and environmental requirements, cancellation of hunting and fishing permits and redefining what qualifies as a streamlined project or a renewable resource.

In addition, clause 21 validates any actions taken by the regulator since April 1, 2024, even though this bill is not yet law. This is an incredibly dangerous precedent that undermines the rule of law. This is retroactive immunity. It means that the regulator can take actions outside the current legal framework, and this legislation will cover their tracks after the fact. This is not just bad policy. It's an affront to legislative accountability and the principle that no one is above the law.

The bill establishes three levels of streamlined permitting. Level 1 projects are granted the fewest exemptions but still bypass multiple steps. Level 2 and level 3 projects receive far greater leeway, exempting them from large portions of the Energy Resource Activities Act.

For level 2, even basic requirements like permit expiration rules, ownership verification, reporting obligations, dormant site monitoring and environmental protections are removed.

Level 3 is even more concerning. It exempts projects from public requests for investigation and further reduces transparency. These streamlined tracks do not just cut red tape. They sever public accountability entirely.

Despite claims of reconciliation, this legislation empowers the regulator to decide whether a project is exempt from heritage or environmental laws, with no requirement to engage Indigenous communities unless it is convenient. This raises serious questions about consent, consultation and respect for Indigenous rights and title.

Rural communities, often the host sites for these projects, may find themselves cut out of decision-making altogether. With no requirement for local consultation or community benefits agreements, the people most affected by these projects may have no voice in how they unfold.

My community has been in this situation many times before, where a project is proposed and the residents, as the people most affected by it, have had the opportunity to make their voices heard on whether the benefits outweigh the potentially negative impacts. We have seen the results. Some projects, such as LNG Canada, have received overwhelming support and community buy-in, while others, such as Enbridge northern gateway, received a clear and resounding no.

These processes are instrumental in encouraging public engagement and consultation and ensuring that the people living in the affected communities can see more positive impacts rather than negative ones. It also encourages faith amongst British Columbians in our fair and democratic system. But this bill achieves the opposite.

Bill 14 sets a dangerous precedent by undermining the very mechanisms that allow rural communities to participate in decisions that directly affect their land, livelihoods and futures.

[6:50 p.m.]

There's no commitment in this bill to local jobs, local hiring or even revenue sharing with rural municipalities; no requirement for impact assessments that consider how a new transmission corridor could affect hunting grounds, traplines or traditional gathering areas; no plan for how to handle conflicts when Crown land is reallocated for energy infrastructure without community approval.

This bill creates a two-tiered system where urban voices still benefit from organized planning and accountability while rural voices are overridden by distant decisions made in Victoria. The message it sends is that rural concerns are expendable, collateral damage in the race to check off political priorities. We know better than that in the North. We know that you can build projects with strong public support when you include the public in the process. We also know the harm that's caused when people are cut out completely.

As for the environment, Bill 14 opens the door to development without any guarantee of ecological protection or restoration, especially if orphaned sites are left behind with no enforceable obligations on project proponents.

One positive aspect of this legislation is the creation of a separate orphan fund for renewable energy projects. This recognizes that not all projects succeed and that cleanup costs should not fall to taxpayers. However, Bill 14 does not specify how much must be contributed, when contributions are required or how the fund will be managed. It enables the regulator to issue certificates requiring payment but offers no guarantees of sufficiency or transparency. Without strict financial rules and public reporting, this provision risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

To further illustrate the dangers of this bill, let me walk through just a few of the most troubling clauses. Clause 13 allows cabinet to override sections of the Energy Resource Activities Act, effectively letting them rewrite the rules on a whim. Clause 18 gives the regulator authority to cancel hunting and trapping permits with no clear standards or appeal process.

Clause 21 validates any potentially unlawful actions already taken by the regulator since April 1, 2024. Clause 23 allows the government to cancel existing environmental assessment certificates and deem those projects fully approved with no conditions. This is retroactive deregulation. It is policy by fiat, not by democratic debate.

Let me be clear. If the government had brought forward a narrowly tailored bill to streamline permitting for a few key projects while retaining environmental safeguards

and legislative oversight, I would have supported it. We need clean energy, we need investment, and we need to move fast. But this bill is not just about speed; it is about control. It consolidates power in cabinet and a single regulator. It undermines this Legislature and cuts out the very communities that we are supposed to represent.

British Columbia deserves better. We can build renewable energy responsibly. We can streamline without steamrolling. We cannot let the urgency of climate action be used as a justification to dismantle democratic accountability. We have a duty to build a sustainable energy future, but we also have a duty to uphold the integrity of our laws, protect our environment and respect Indigenous rights. Bill 14 fails on too many of these fronts.

Representing a rural riding like Skeena means carrying the voices of communities that are often overlooked, communities where people rely directly on the land for their livelihoods, food, culture and identity. In the North, we don't have the luxury of abstraction. We see and feel the impacts of industrial development in our backyards, in our rivers, on our traplines and on the forests that sustain us.

Bill 14 poses a unique and serious threat to regions like mine because it strips away the very checks and balances designed to protect rural communities. It allows projects to move forward without proper environmental assessments, without meaningful consultation and without respecting heritage or agricultural land protections. That means decisions about massive wind farms, transmission corridors or other developments could be made behind closed doors, without any input from the people who will live with the consequences.

When a regulator can cancel hunting permits, override cultural protections or subdivide farmland with no accountability, it's rural communities that pay the price. Our way of life isn't a line item in a policy document. It's something real, something fragile and something that deserves to be protected, not sacrificed in the name of expediency.

[6:55 p.m.]

The hypocrisy of this government's approach to energy development is both glaring and troubling. When in opposition, the NDP vehemently opposed LNG projects, yet upon forming government, they reversed their stance, not only approving LNG projects but also attempting to claim credit for initiatives they had previously fought against.

Obviously, I am grateful for this change in attitude, but it presents a puzzling realization. If the NDP can change their minds so frequently about which energy projects they do or don't support, what does this bill mean for British Columbians? This pattern of opposition followed by appropriation raises serious questions about their consistency and reliability. Now, with Bill 14, they seek to grant themselves unchecked authority to approve projects at their discretion without the safeguards of environmental assessments or public consultation.

Given their history of shifting positions, how can British Columbians trust that future decisions will be made in the public's best interest rather than for political expediency? This legislation doesn't just streamline processes; it streamlines power into the hands of a government whose track record on energy policy is anything but steady.

We vehemently support industry in this province. We want to see more projects built, more jobs created and more investment flowing into our communities, especially in rural and northern B.C. We've seen how responsible development, like LNG Canada, can bring real opportunity when it's done right, when it's guided by clear rules, meaningful consultation and respect for the land and the people.

Bill 14 misses the mark entirely. Instead of fixing the broken permitting system with transparency and accountability, it concentrates power in the hands of cabinet and a single regulator. It sidesteps environmental oversight and opens the door to decisions that could be made without public input or community buy-in.

Fast-tracking development shouldn't mean bulldozing safeguards. We can build more in B.C., but we have to do it the right way. I urge this House to reject this overreaching legislation and send it back for a full, public and transparent process.

British Columbians deserve clean energy, but they also deserve clean government. We all want to see more projects built. We want to see jobs created and red tape slashed. But none of that can come at the expense of public trust, local democracy or meaningful oversight. Streamlining cannot be used as a smokescreen for centralizing power.

This bill, in its current form, does not reflect the values of fairness, transparency or respect for communities in B.C. It reflects a government that has grown too comfortable with bypassing scrutiny, too comfortable making massive decisions behind closed doors.

We cannot allow urgency, whether economic or environmental, to become an excuse for encroaching closer to authoritarianism tendencies. British Columbians deserve to have a voice in what gets built in their backyards. They deserve to know that their safety, their land, their culture and their laws won't be cast aside.

Gavin Dew: The notional purpose of Bill 14 is to streamline approvals for energy projects in B.C. That purpose is a laudable goal, and I agree with that goal. Why? Because on this side of the House, we are the party of yes and because it takes too damn long to get to yes in Canada.

We seem to be in a crisis of indecision, the land of the slow, maybe, where we lack conditions for investment. We don't get stuff done as fast as we could. That is creating serious challenges in terms of investment in this province and in this country, because delay and indecision drive up costs.

People don't build things for fun in business. They don't build them for political ribbon cutting. They don't build them for the side benefits. They don't build them for photo ops for politicians. They build them because they serve a commercial function and because the numbers pencil, because the project works. Too often, risk, delay and uncertainty make those numbers not work, or they make those numbers harder to make work.

[7:00 p.m.]

At the end of the day, it comes down to return on investment and risk-adjusted return. That is the cold, hard, brutal reality of making investment decisions. Indecision, delay, the inability to get decisions and Kafkaesque bureaucracy, where we never know quite what the basis for a decision is going to be, are all things that deter investment in this country and in this province.

Too often we make things take too long and be too high-risk, and then we subsidize them back to life. To quote Ronald Reagan: "If it moves, tax it; if it keeps moving, regulate it; and if it stops moving, subsidize it."

I've spent a lot of time dealing with major projects both in my academic research and in my applied business life. I can say that in Canada, we tend to conflate safety and risk. We imagine that because we don't typically have armed militias, we don't typically have kleptocratic regimes, that we are a low-risk jurisdiction. No, we're a safe jurisdiction.

We're actually quite a high-risk jurisdiction in many instances: because we have arbitrary changes to the nature of the very processes that drive the way that we do or do not get to yes; because you can suddenly have a new, nine-month process imposed midstream in the middle of a project process; because the conditions you're expected to meet can arbitrarily change; and because there can be new, informal demands that are required of you in order to get to yes.

We have a problem in B.C. and in Canada when it comes to actually building things, a real problem. Yes, I support the streamlining of major projects. Our party certainly supports the importance of getting major projects to yes, and there are parts of Bill 14 that reflect priorities that are overdue, like a simplified single-window approach to permitting.

For far too long, project proponents all over B.C. and all over this country, at all different levels of government, in trying to build all different things, have faced a confusing array of overlapping processes requiring a lot of lawyers, a lot of permitting specialists and a lot of costs that, in some instances, are not directly contributing to the safety or effectiveness of the project.

That doesn't mean we should have no regulation; it means we should have smart regulation. It means we should have well-designed, well-constructed processes that are clear, that are predictable and that are forward-looking. Uncertainty and changes increase costs on major projects that have significant capital backing, that have significant regulated tolling outcomes, things of that nature. But that kind of complexity can kill smaller projects in their infancy, before they even begin.

We have challenges; we have problems. We have a system that isn't just inefficient; it's a barrier to investment. Far too many good projects have died on the vine not because they were inherently flawed and not because they didn't make commercial sense but because the system built around them was too slow, too convoluted or too uncertain to navigate. It created conditions where either investors could not make them pencil or investors simply were not willing to wade through an ocean of complexity and red tape to get to yes.

The move toward consolidating permitting under a more unified framework is a good thing. It's a good conversation to be happening. If done properly, with proper oversight, proper transparency and a desire to make a long-term, functional process, it can absolutely help to get important energy infrastructure, as well as other major projects, moving again.

The problem is that this bill doesn't do that. This bill picks winners and losers. This bill hands arbitrary power to government in an effort to paper over its own years of failure and years of anemic economic growth that it has presided over, contributed to and created.

[7:05 p.m.]

The reality is that this bill has been brought forward in the height of hypocrisy. This government has decided in recent months that it wants to be the party of yes, the party of trade diversification, the party of major projects, the party of the resource sector. Now, I may be new to this House, but I've been around this province long enough to know how wildly hypocritical that is. Picking and choosing winners and losers and then arbitrarily deciding whether and how to enforce rules is not how government should operate.

Let's cast our mind back to how this government has, in fact, operated on a subject that has raised its head again in this House in recent days, a project that this government picked not as a winner but as a loser: the Trans Mountain expansion project. It was primarily a federally regulated project, but this government decided to use every tool in its provincial toolkit to obstruct that project because of its arbitrary political direction.

On the basis of ideological, partisan preference, of polling and of a snap decision in the middle of an election, this government, both in opposition and in government, picked a loser. It used its arbitrary power to obstruct that project that it had decided it knew better on.

Now, the Minister of Energy has in recent days tried to shrug off the years his party spent going out of its way, pushing the very boundaries of its powers, legal and democratic, and using every tool in the toolkit to oppose the Trans Mountain expansion project. It's a project where he now stands in this House, shrugs and says, "Hey, we've

got to make the most of it, now that it's built" — a project he can't remember the capital cost of.

It's a project that he now wants us to shrug and say that this government has completely changed its position on, has gone from being avowed opponents of this project to being totally on board with dredging Burrard Inlet to allow fully loaded Aframax tankers to get Canadian oil from Westridge marine terminal, at the terminus of that pipeline, to international markets, to diversify us away from a monopsony with the American market.

Political direction changes, the moment changes, and this government arbitrarily changes what it's for and what it's against. It wants to have the arbitrary power to do that in a way that creates tremendous uncertainty for anybody operating in this marketplace.

Now, I know that story of what happened with this government on Trans Mountain well, because I worked on it for three years. We saw delay after delay, obstruction after obstruction from this government and their allies, who had decided, on a political basis, that they were against a project and that the process as it was supposed to work wasn't good enough for them, because they had picked a loser.

The people of Canada and the people of British Columbia paid for their political preference, expressed through their arbitrary weaponization of the toolkit available to them in order to stop something they were politically opposed to. That's not right.

What did that cost us as Canadians? Let me tell you. This is important, because it speaks to the arbitrary powers in this bill and to how, if used improperly, they can have tremendous consequences because government picks a winner or a loser on the basis of arbitrary political preference or of friends of government rather than on an appropriate, rigorous and predictable process.

If we look at that project, a study conducted by the Canadian Energy Research Institute in 2020 looked at the actual cost for the Trans Mountain expansion project and the Coastal GasLink pipeline and found that the estimated capital expenditure as a result of a one-year regulatory delay is $344 million for a natural gas pipeline and $812 million for a crude oil pipeline. That same project found that pipeline projects take, on average, 13 months longer in the U.S. than Canada.

[7:10 p.m.]

Again, going back to the arbitrary use of power by government on the basis of its political preference, Trans Mountain was delayed by at least three years by regulatory and judicial delays driven by this government and its allies. That is literally billions of dollars in added cost because of the arbitrary utilization of power by a government driven by ideology.

If you look at the bottom line on that project, which I think is a very good example here, the original Trans Mountain pipeline was built in 1953. It took 18 months. It cost $93 million. That's $1 billion in today's dollars. By the time this government and their arbitrary power, the kind of arbitrary power they want to claim for themselves with this bill, were done with it, along with other factors, it took ten years, and it cost $34 billion.

It wasn't just the initial capital cost that was significant; it was the fact that that capital cost will be expressed in perpetuity, in tolls on that pipeline asset that are based on capital cost. Forevermore, shippers moving Canadian oil through that pipeline will pay three, four times as much as they otherwise would have because this government drove up the cost through their arbitrary use of their powers to obstruct a project.

The years in which it wasn't built also led to opportunity costs, in which Canada was not able to tighten the spread between West Texas Intermediate and west coast select. We could go on about that forever and ever, but let's not. The bottom line is this: when this government, or any government, decides that it knows best and that it should exercise arbitrary power, we should be very wary.

What worries us on this side of the House is not what this bill claims to do but how it goes about doing it — not its intent. This government is always all about intent, but when you ask them about effect, they shut down quickly. They don't want to talk about what a bill actually might do with its unintended, or fully intended, consequences.

This bill doesn't just cut the red tape; it cuts out the Legislature and the appropriate oversight. It gives sweeping, unchecked authority to the cabinet and to the B.C. Energy Regulator. It gives cabinet the power to fundamentally change how energy projects are reviewed and approved without ever coming back to this House. It gives government the power to pick winners and losers on an arbitrary basis.

It leaves open the possibility of real or perceived influence peddling and cash-for-access. Who decides, and who influences the people who decide? We have appropriate, rigorous, arm's-length regulatory structures in this province, in this country and in democracies for a reason. They are intended to be safeguards against the arbitrary use of power by governments to prioritize politics, to prioritize friends and insiders and to prioritize ideology over economic fundamentals.

While this government is positioning this bill as some breakthrough for energy permitting, what I see is a deeply concerning and precedent-setting expansion of executive authority with almost no accountability, not enough safeguards and, frankly, not enough trust by the public in this government to grant that kind of a blank-cheque authority to do whatever they think is right.

Under Bill 14, cabinet can declare, by regulation, what constitutes a streamlined project. They can define, add, remove, decide exactly what that means, however they want, behind closed doors. If cabinet says it's exempt, it's exempt. What happens when the Premier wakes up one

day, reads a book on something and decides: "Hey, that's exempt now"? There you go. It doesn't come back to this Legislature. No public hearings, no public submissions, no independent evaluation — arbitrary power.

[7:15 p.m.]

So when this Premier decides he's done being Premier and there's a leadership race, and it has the character of the last leadership race that the NDP had, and there are, all of a sudden, dramatic new potential directions in terms of where this province could go based on who wins that next NDP leadership race, whenever it comes, whether it's this fall, a year from now or two years from now…. Whoever that is, they inherit those unchecked powers. They inherit the ability to decide what constitutes a streamlined project. They inherit the ability to exercise unchecked power with little oversight. That's not right.

Fundamentally, who will influence those decisions about the application of unchecked and unaccountable power by this government? What factors will guide them? Will it be politics, timing, location, labour model? Will it matter whether it's in a swing riding, whether it's conveniently timed relative to an election or if the proponent voluntarily agrees to a labour model that is the ideological preference of this government?

Who knows? We won't know. It'll come down to the political flavours of the moment, not long-term economic fundamentals. That's very worrisome because this creates a black box within which cabinet can arbitrarily decide what constitutes a priority project. Instead of fixing the broken conditions for investment in this province, this government, instead, is trying to bypass them for their chosen political priorities. Whether those priorities are partisan, ideological, transactional or whatever they are, those are going to bypass process. Everything else can wait.

This is a government that thinks it can legislate prosperity instead of trying to legislate opportunity by creating stable, predictable, forward-looking conditions for investment in which a wide range of different project applicants can look at this province and say: "I see what I have to do in order to build something here."

Today the signal this government is sending is: "What you have to do in order to build a project here is that you have to curry favour with this government. You have to hire the right people. You have to know the right people. You have to make sure you frame your project in such a way that this government will deem it to be a priority."

Do we fundamentally believe that communications staff in the Premier's office have a better understanding of what constitutes an economically viable or economically significant project for this province than companies, project proponents, individuals trying to move forward projects on the basis of sound economics and sound decision analysis? That's very worrisome.

Picking winners and losers doesn't encourage a funnel of new projects. When proponents know that it's arbitrary government decisions and not stable, predictable conditions for them that will affect their ability to move forward, they have to make decisions very differently.

Companies that want to be able to understand the basis for decision-making are going to think twice about this province. They're going to know that these arbitrary powers belong to this government today, but when there's a change of government, will those priorities still be the priorities? Will my project still be in the same process, or does it depend? If there's a change in the leadership of the government, if there's a change in government, do I actually know what I'm signing up for?

That's why we don't have these kinds of arbitrary decision-making powers vested in the political heart of governments, as this government is trying to do.

One of the most frustrating challenges we constantly hear from project proponents — whether they're in construction, infrastructure or energy — is not just the amount of regulation they face. It's the uncertainty. Bill 14 does not solve that problem; it deepens it. It creates a situation in which the uncertainty of regulation is exacerbated by the political uncertainty of if, when, how and on what basis this government will make arbitrary decisions that can make a project viable or not viable.

This bill is being sold as a way of bringing clarity and speed when it really just adds a whole additional level of unpredictability, in some very troubling ways. That includes retroactivity.

[7:20 p.m.]

Clause 12 of the bill allows the B.C. Energy Regulator, or individuals it delegates authority to, to impose fees, levies or other financial obligations retroactively. So you're mid-streaming a project, and your fundamental project economics are changing because the regulator decides to impose arbitrary retroactive fees. Is that because government has decided they don't like your project? Is that because the rules have changed? Again, more unpredictability.

Capital thrives on stability, predictability, being able to look forward and to know what's ahead. How do you attract investment into this province when businesses can't rely on the rules staying consistent? You don't.

This bill is not just poor planning. It's a signal to every potential investor that B.C.'s regulatory system is unstable, unreliable and subject to political whim. That's in a tricky swing riding. Subject to: "Nah, we don't like those guys." Subject to: "They're not really playing ball." Subject to the implicit expectation that there's a quid pro quo and that the right hiring will happen, the right consultants will be on the project, the right photo ops will be delivered and the right political messages will be framed around a project.

That's not how capital investment and major projects

are supposed to work in any jurisdiction, and it sure as heck is not how it should work here.

The kinds of decisions that are outlined under clause 20 include what qualifies as a renewable resource, whether that gets changed, whether a project is subject to environmental assessment or not, whether a project is eligible for streamlining and what level of streamlining it receives, and whether safety or reporting requirements should apply. These are really, really important things, and they're decisions that used to be predictable, debated and codified in law. Under Bill 14, they're all turning into moving targets, and that is the exact opposite of regulatory certainty.

Let's put this a different way. This bill trades transparency for flexibility — flexibility for government, flexibility to politicize, flexibility for arbitrary decisions to be traded transactionally by well-connected NDP insiders.

I don't mean to suggest anything nefarious has happened. What I mean is that the risk of even the slightest perception that currying political favour or hiring the right consultant, hiring the right lobbyist, means that you'll be at the front of the line…. That is a dangerous, dangerous situation for this government to create, with the potential for immense consequences not only on the political front, the legal front, the investability front…. It's a very, very dangerous situation to be floated out there, but that's exactly what this bill does. It creates the possibility. It creates the concern that the goalposts might move.

Well, how do you move the goalposts? How do the goalposts get moved on you? There will be endless speculation as to how different projects were brought to the front of the line. That is not healthy for creating a sound, competitive, well-regulated, stable, predictable market in which you want people to explore, advance and invest in major projects.

Oversight is a huge issue here. Who watches the superpowered watchers created under this bill, the NDP-appointed authorities? Who makes sure that none of that arbitrary decision-making is happening in a way that is untoward or inappropriate? What are the consequences if, in fact, there is politicization of the process?

Big void in terms of those elements. In fact, it appears as if this bill is pushing in the opposite direction, removing accountability rather than adding accountability. That's very problematic in terms of the signal that it sends.

This bill eliminates nearly every meaningful mechanism for public oversight. It chooses a broad range of projects, applies a wide exemption, takes away all that oversight and does so on a basis that is not transparent, that is not accountable.

[7:25 p.m.]

Under normal democratic process, when governments exercise authority, there are checks and balances. There are public hearings. There are published reports, standing committees and appeal mechanisms. Bill 14 offers none of those. Instead, it removes them and gives power on an arbitrary basis to government.

We've seen this movie before. We saw it with Bill 4, the consumer protection act, where government was uninterested in actually hearing from business. It wanted to talk a big game about what it was doing, but it actually ignored completely the input that it received from small businesses affected by the unintended consequences of the bill. We've seen it with Bill 7, which was a massive power grab. We've seen it with parts of Bill 15. Now with Bill 14, we're seeing it with the added danger of regulatory and financial discretion being placed in the hands of unelected officials.

This government is eroding democracy, eroding oversight, eroding transparency and asserting itself as the ultimate arbitrary authority. On this side of the House, we did not seek office and we were not elected to be spectators. In the name of good intentions and getting stuff done, this bill erodes basic democracy. It centralizes authority, removes oversight and silences public input. That's not okay.

Our Conservative caucus stands ready to support moving major projects forward faster in this province. We want to see investment move ahead. We want to see B.C. grow, invest and lead. We are a party of yes.

We need to get stuff done again in this province, but there is a better way than what is being put forward in this bill. We can get stuff done without compromising democracy. We need to actually fix things in long-term, structural ways, not just spray paint over the cracks, not just make arbitrary declarations in order to solve a problem of our own making, like this government has done.

Eight years in, they've decided they want to be for economic development. Eight years in, they've decided they want to get stuff done. Now they want arbitrary power to bypass their own broken processes. That's not how this is supposed to work.

Let's get things done again in this province, but let's do it the right way — a way that works for the long term and a way that works for the people of British Columbia.

Reann Gasper: Oh, here we are. Let us call this bill what it truly is: not a clean energy initiative but a sweeping administrative restructuring of how power is held and exercised in this province. Bill 14 proposes to consolidate decision-making authority for renewable energy projects — projects that span hundreds of millions of dollars, entire geographic regions and decades of environmental and economic consequence — into the hands of a single regulator, with virtually no direct oversight from this Legislature.

For the public to understand this bill, there is a clause…. Clause 13 explicitly empowers cabinet to modify, apply or disapply portions of the Energy Resource Activities Act without returning to this House. This is not an administrative detail. This is a structural shift in how British Columbia governs itself.

Clause 21 goes further. It retroactively deems any action taken by the B.C. Energy Regulator since April 1, 2024, to have to be lawful, even if those actions had no legal footing at the time. Let me be plain. This bill doesn't just set a precedent; it rewrites the past.

[7:30 p.m.]

Why does this matter? Because when we allow this government to legalize decisions after the fact, we are not practising transparent governance. We are authorizing power without accountability. We are telling the people of British Columbia that what happens behind closed doors can be made right not by process, not by ethics, not by standards but by rewriting the rules after the play is over.

For every British Columbian watching, imagine you were issued a fine or you had your land impacted by a regulator acting without legal authority, and then you were told later: "We passed a bill. It's legal now." Would you call that justice, or would you call that a breach of trust?

This House must never become a rubber stamp for retroactive authority. We are the safeguard, the final checkpoint. If we relinquish that role, who holds the pen when the next set of powers is granted, and who stops it?

The members opposite will argue that this is about efficiency and that streamlining is necessary to build urgently needed infrastructure. But efficiency without boundaries is not innovation. Streamlining does not require bypassing democracy. You can't fast-track climate goals by slow-walking accountability. This bill's structure not only weakens our checks and balances; it erodes them.

If the government insists on calling this a renewable energy bill, then let the public see clearly. What is being renewed here is not just our power grid. It is the power structure itself, and not in the people's favour. Can I ask: how can any member of this House look their constituents in the eyes and tell them that a vote for Bill 14 is a vote for fairness?

What this bill proposes is not renewable energy oversight. It is renewable authority, authority that renews itself without input, without review and without consent. Without consent, it is not the hallmark of a free and democratic society.

We are not just lawmakers; we are stewards. When it comes to the stewardship of British Columbia's natural environment, the stakes could not be higher. Clause 14 of Bill 14 removes the application of the Environmental Assessment Act for nine selected wind energy projects, the North Coast transmission line and, critically, any future project that cabinet prescribes by regulation. This includes transmission infrastructure and renewable energy developments tied to wind, solar, ocean, geothermal and more.

In short, virtually any major energy project in British Columbia, save those involving a dam, can be exempt from environmental oversight with the stroke of a pen. This should stop us cold, because the environmental assessment process is not an inconvenience; it is a cornerstone. It is the due diligence we owe to the land, to wildlife, to the communities whose health, safety and cultural heritage depend on more than promises. It is the space where concerns can be raised, data can be tested and consequences can be anticipated, not just discovered after the fact.

Ask any British Columbian, from the Kootenays to Kitimat, whether they think less transparency is what this province needs right now. Ask them if they want fewer checks on projects that cut through their forests, cross their rivers and alter the view from their windows and the future of their watersheds. They will tell you that environmental oversight is not red tape; it is red flags, and this government is rolling them up.

We are told that these projects are low impact and that assessments will be addressed later under a reformed environmental assessment act. But where is that reform? Where is the framework that replaces what we are eliminating? It's not in this bill, it's not on the table, and it's certainly not before us in this House today.

[7:35 p.m.]

What are we being asked to do? We're being asked to approve permanent exemptions with the promise of temporary solutions. We're being asked to green-light the removal of one of the most important accountability mechanisms in our province's toolbox, on the basis of urgency.

This province knows too well what happens when we move too fast and consult too little. We have lived the consequences of projects that didn't fully account for landslides, habitat destruction, groundwater loss, Indigenous title and local health effects. The bill doesn't account for these, because it refuses to ask the questions.

If this is what streamlining looks like, what else are we willing to overlook? For the residents of British Columbia, this matters more than they might realize. When they lose the right to a public environmental assessment, they lose their right to have a say in what happens on their doorstep. They lose the ability to ask: "What will this do to our farmland, to our fisheries?" They lose the power to ask, "Why?" and that is the beginning of losing the power to say no.

This government tells us that this is about unlocking clean energy, but there's nothing clean about silencing the public. There's nothing clean about building without consent. There's nothing clean about cutting down trees you claim to protect so that you can install the infrastructure you refuse to regulate. If you think that sounds harsh, then read the bill. The harshness isn't in my tone. It's in the text.

Again I ask: how can we call this a climate solution if the cost is the environment itself? If this bill passes unchallenged, we are not just setting a precedent for renewable energy. We are setting a precedent for renewable eva-

sion — evasion of oversight, evasion of transparency, evasion of responsibility — and British Columbians deserve better than that.

There are some things in this province that, once lost, cannot be recovered, and farmland is one of them. Clause 15 of Bill 14 allows the B.C. Energy Regulator to authorize non-farm use and subdivision of land within the agricultural land reserve, land that was set aside by visionary leaders to ensure that British Columbians would always have access to local food, local farming and local sovereignty over the soil we depend on.

Under this bill, the regulator — an appointed body, not an elected one — may permit industrial energy projects to take precedence over food production. Clause 24 of this same legislation goes so far as to amend the Agricultural Land Commission Act itself, stripping its authority away from any project designated under Bill 14.

Let's be clear. This is not streamlining. This is land reclassification through the back door. This cabinet, through regulation, is deciding that farmland can be carved up without full public oversight.

Why does this matter? Once farmland is reclassified and industrialized, it's rare if it ever returns to its original use. If you pave it, wire it and fragment it, you don't just lose an acreage; you lose generations of agricultural future.

[7:40 p.m.]

British Columbians are already watching the costs of groceries skyrocket. They are already watching local farmers struggle to survive. Now, under Bill 14, they are being asked to protect agricultural land to power projects that they had no meaningful say in, for returns that they may never directly see, and under a system that can change the rules at any time.

We are told these impacts are minimal, but if they are so minimal, why is the government writing legislation to override the ALC entirely? Why amend the law if the effect is negligible?

This isn't about whether renewable energy is important. It is, but so is food security, so is responsible land use and so is the fundamental belief that some lands should be protected from political convenience, no matter how green the excuse.

This bill asks us to weigh wind turbines against wheat fields. In doing so, it sets a precedent that farmland is optional, that food can be sacrificed for infrastructure, that energy trumps agriculture every time. I reject that logic, because the people of British Columbia know climate policy that ignores food policy is not sustainable. It is shortsighted. It is a temporary fix dressed as a long-term solution.

More than that, it sends the wrong message to the next generation of farmers, our sons and our daughters who are asking to stay on the land, to build their lives in rural B.C., to feed our cities, while climate volatility grows. What are we telling them when we say this land is protected unless we decide otherwise?

I ask the members opposite, without accusation but with full seriousness: is this ambiguity by design? Are we leaving the language open so we don't have to be accountable for what we take?

Make no mistake. This bill does not just allow development on farmland; it pre-clears it. It tells developers they don't need to worry about the Agricultural Land Commission standing in their way because government already has their back. That's not just a shift in process; it's a shift in values. I believe this House and this province is still capable of better than that.

There are threads in the fabric of British Columbia that run deeper than roads, power lines or politics; threads that carry the stories of this land, its culture, its ancestors, its truth. These threads are protected, in part, by the Heritage Conservation Act — until now. Clause 16 of Bill 14 rewrites that act not to clarify it and not to improve it but to transfer authority.

Specifically, it allows the minister responsible to delegate heritage powers to the B.C. Energy Regulator. Once delegated, the regulator may authorize any of its own staff to decide whether something qualifies as heritage. Not a historian, not a cultural leader, not an Indigenous elder, no — an employee of the Energy Regulator, appointed, internal, lacking independence. This is not a technical adjustment. It is a profound degradation of what we protect and how we protect it and who gets to decide.

Why does this matter to British Columbians? Because our history, our true history, is not something that can be rubber-stamped. It can't be appraised by project managers under time constraints. It most certainly cannot be delegated to entities whose mandate is to improve, expedite and streamline energy infrastructure.

[7:45 p.m.]

This clause removes a layer of independent assessment, of accountability, of cultural-informed judgment, and for the people of British Columbia, especially our Indigenous communities, this is not hypothetical.

You know what it feels like to have sacred sites paved, burial grounds ignored and traditional territories reclassified as development zones. You know what it's like to be consulted after the plans are drawn and the equipment is staged and the timeline is set.

This bill puts the decision of whether something is heritage, whether it's sacred, whether it's worth preserving into the hands of those tasked with getting projects approved quickly. This is a conflict of interest enshrined in legislation. We are told again and again this is about streamlining, but streamlining heritage protections is not efficiency. It's saying in legal language: "We'll protect what we choose to see, and the rest can be cleared."

Let me be very clear to the members opposite. I'm not suggesting bad intent. I'm not suggesting wilful disrespect.

But I am highlighting what the law allows. If a law allows harm through inaction, through omission, through unchecked authority, then we are complicit if we let it pass.

This is not a rejection of renewable energy. It is a demand that we build the future without bulldozing the past.

[Mable Elmore in the chair.]

We cannot afford to get this wrong. Once a sacred site is disturbed, it cannot be restored. Once a history is ignored, it cannot speak for itself.

If we as legislators are willing to give up the independence of heritage protection in the name of administrative convenience, then I ask you: what does that say about the value we place on truth, on reconciliation and on legacy? If the story of our land is written by those who build on it and not those who live on it, then we haven't just lost the plot; we've rewritten it. The future generations will wonder why we stood in silence.

There is a reason we have laws that govern safety, standards and the stewardship of wildlife. These are not ceremonial laws. They are structural — quiet, perhaps, but essential. Yet within the machinery of Bill 14, entire sections of protective legislation are quietly switched off.

Clause 17 treats the Safety Standards Act as optional when it comes to level 3 streamlined projects. Projects, by definition, are prescribed at the discretion of cabinet. The law is rewritten as though a renewable energy facility does not need the same safety and scrutiny as other energy infrastructure. The implication is not argued; it is assumed.

Clause 18 goes further, allowing the minister responsible for the Wildlife Act to delegate broad powers to the B.C. Energy Regulator. Those powers include the authority to issue, suspend or cancel permits relating to hunting, angling, trapping and even bonding requirements for environmental responsibility. This is not an administrative note. This is a shift in balance between resource development and the natural world we are charged with protecting.

Not so long ago British Columbians were reassured that no corner of policy would override conservation. We were told that clean energy would be pursued with integrity, that progress would not mean compromising core protections.

[7:50 p.m.]

This legislation edges us towards a different reality — a reality where safety is conditional, where wildlife protections are granted or withheld not through a public process but through private delegation, and where regulated zones and responsible access are no longer governed through long-standing legislation but through a process that is not subject to appeal.

I feel like I'm just talking on the same thing.

In saying it, when I think of leadership…. You cannot lead without hearing the entire picture. The opposite of leadership in this moment, what's coming to me, is dictatorship, a one-sided process. Even the words on the paper, everything that I'm talking about, about process, about due diligence, about making sure we consult and the changes in this bill that offer no consultation to the different sectors that will be greatly affected — I cannot help but think that is not leadership.

Madam Speaker, I feel like to get my point across, I keep saying the same thing. You can understand, and I hope the public understands.

So many people that may see this may not take the time to read an entire bill. The wording may get confusing, and they won't go clause by clause to understand: what is this actually saying? But the ones on this side of the House who have gone through this bill have picked out the clauses that seem so detrimental to good governance.

I hope the members opposite can actually vote in a way that says, "We want to be the leaders you voted for," when it comes to governing the people with integrity, when it comes to governing the people without making something feel so dictatorial.

When people elected this government, there was an element of building on trust. They were expecting certain things to happen, because certain things were promised. Like I just read, there were things promised — "Oh, this is not going to change" — and we have a bill before us that's changing literally everything that was promised to the people of British Columbia. I don't know how, in good conscience, you could vote for this. You're going to lose the people's trust.

The residents of British Columbia are not just asking for clean energy. They are asking for clarity, for confidence, for a government that doesn't force them to choose between progress and participation. If this House passes Bill 14 as it stands, we are telling them that their say is secondary, that decisions affecting their land, their water, their safety and their future can be made by regulation, exemption and delegation and that accountability is negotiable when the project is big enough.

[7:55 p.m.]

Clean energy deserves clean government. A clean government demands more speed. It demands scrutiny, it demands structure, and it demands laws that can be trusted not just to deliver outcomes but to reflect the values we promised when we ran for office in the first place.

Today we can choose to stand for something deeper than efficiency. We can stand for balance. We can stand for transparency. We can stand for the long view, for the idea that how we build matters as much as what we build.

Heather Maahs: Today I rise in this House not only as an MLA but as a voice for the community I serve — people who believe in fairness, accountability and a future built on democratic integrity — to speak against Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

Bill 14 may seem like a measure to achieve progress on clean energy, but it is far more troubling. It is a dangerous expansion of unchecked power, buried in technical language and bureaucratic authority. Here we are thinking that Bill 7 would be put to rest; instead, this bill builds on the same troubling foundation that Bill 7 laid.

British Columbians support renewable energy and responsible management of the province's resources, and this bill seemingly carries that forward. However, it grants unprecedented power to this government, again without accountability or any proper oversight. We can't seem to catch a break over here.

This bill hands sweeping power to the B.C. Energy Regulator and essentially gives the ability to override environmental assessments, to remove safety standards that have been previously put in place for very good reason and to silence the voices of our constituents who have elected us into this Legislature. It's almost like cutting the power and then expecting praise for lighting a candle.

This government frames the proposal as a focus on nine wind farms and a transmission line, but when we dig into the details, that claim falls short. There are no firm limits, and this gives cabinet the authority to tack on more projects at will without having to bring them back to the House for debate. I don't know about you, but I don't see any accountability here. These additions would most definitely carry real consequences for our local governments and communities and for the broader economy.

This isn't actually about efficiency; it's about exclusion by removing vital decisions from public oversight and shifting them into closed-door meetings that are constrained to their small circle. Giving cabinet the power to eliminate key safeguards that are put in specifically to protect people doesn't make sense.

The dangers don't end there. Even basic safety protocols under the Safety Standards Act could be brushed aside. Now the government is no longer required to demonstrate the safety of these projects and doesn't have to justify their actions, period, to those who may be affected.

It is now incredibly clear what this government strategy has become: expanding authority and reducing accountability. That most definitely sets off alarm bells, and the consequences on actual British Columbians are just as serious. Not only does this type of approach, as demonstrated in Bill 14, undermine trust in our government, but it also sets a dangerous precedent, going forward, for how much power the government can concentrate and get away with.

[8:00 p.m.]

We, as opposition, believe strongly in the values of transparency, fairness and accountability in governance. Unfortunately, this bill disregards all three. I will specify concerns about the implications of this bill.

Bill 14 isn't just a matter of administrative housekeeping. Instead, it poses a direct threat to employment, small enterprise and regional economies, especially in rural parts of British Columbia. All the concerns that have been raised by guide-outfitters, hunters and anglers are valid and urgent. And they're right. This bill hands sweeping authority to unelected bureaucrats, allowing them to revoke or suspend licences at will, without notice, without hearings or any semblance of due process.

In addition, these licences are far more than regulatory documents. They implicitly represent generations of work. They implicitly represent vital incomes for families, economic lifelines for many rural communities. Picture a family-run guiding operation that has hosted visitors for decades, contributing to both the local economy and sustainable wildlife stewardship. Under this bill, their livelihood could vanish overnight — no warning, no justification, no compensation and no recourse.

The legislation does not include any binding provision to ensure financial compensation when a licence is suspended indefinitely. That means hard-working British Columbians could be left with nothing but losses, whether it be financial, personal or cultural. This isn't some hypothetical scenario. Rather, it is a real and immediate risk, exacerbated by Bill 14, to businesses and communities that have built their way of life around these permits.

Here's the kicker. Under the bill, the power to dismantle all of that rests with individuals who face no requirement to answer to those affected or provide any justification or explanation at all. The government may talk about improving efficiency, but in reality, it's not as clear as it seems. There is a complete lack of boundaries, oversight and protections.

This bill has been introduced with implications on licence holders, all across the province, who don't just face uncertainty as a result but are exposed to unchecked administrative decisions with no recourse. That is why, as opposition, we are demanding meaningful changes to Bill 15, changes that allow for clear criterion guidelines, enforceable rights to hearings and appeals and some sort of guaranteed compensation for those who have had their licences unfairly suspended or revoked.

An increase in power cannot be done without an increase in accountability. Bypassing democratic norms isn't what our constituents deserve.

Let's be clear. The implications of this bill don't stop at rural communities. It sets a dangerous precedent that could always be replicated in the future, which would then affect every British Columbian.

We cannot allow for unchecked authority to become a model for future governance. This type of leadership only works to undermine public confidence and discourage future investment. This is simply a step backwards for democratic governance, and we are determined to speak up against it on this side of the House.

In fact, British Columbians expect more from their government. The values I mentioned earlier of fairness, transparency and accountability aren't just words to throw

around rhetorically. They represent pillars of democratic governance, and as it stands, Bill 14 puts it all at risk.

[8:05 p.m.]

To take a closer look at the troubling details of Bill 14, because the real issue lies beneath the surface…. At first glance, one of the most glaring issues is the potential harm this bill poses to our agricultural land, the ALR. This bill allows projects to bypass the usual protective measures on ALR land, which has been carefully preserved for food security and agriculture sustainability. What once stood as a safeguard for farmland can now be repurposed, yet again with minimal oversight, all under the guise of progress.

In Chilliwack North, this is a very big deal and reality, and it's very serious.

If we actually take a moment to consider the implications, we uncover the fact that this isn't about a routine administrative change. It's actually about dismantling the protections for some of British Columbians' most vital agricultural land.

Those who best know how to manage and preserve these lands, including local farmers and local councils, are most affected. Instead of input that is thoughtful and driven by leaders in the community who are elected by the community, with experience, bureaucratic decisions that no one asked for now have all the decisions and authority.

Moreover, Bill 14 opens the door to potentially ignoring essential environmental safeguards. Regulations designed to prevent spills or protect communities from hazardous materials — take, for example, oil or toxic chemicals — could be waived without justification. Again, this type of scenario isn't hypothetical. It's a real potential consequence that has now been allowed due to the vague and sweeping language of this bill, giving unrestrained authority with no clear criteria or transparency.

Another concern is how this bill also poses serious threats to our cultural and historical heritage. The legislation allows regulators to override established protections for heritage sites, including those that hold deep significance for Indigenous communities and different sites that hold historical significance.

Yet again, we see the fact that the decision-maker in these scenarios isn't some democratically accountable figure but, instead, is an appointee of the same regulator who has been given these sweeping powers. How is this not a fundamental erosion of what we commit to safeguarding — cultural, historical legacies found at heritage sites?

Our position has always been clear. We have constantly advocated for governance that strikes a fair balance between fostering economic growth and protecting our communities and environmental stewardship. Unfortunately, Bill 14 completely misses that mark. This isn't just about simplifying processes. It's about dismantling vital safeguards and accountability, leaving British Columbians vulnerable to decisions made in the dark.

This bill does more than just tweak regulations. It actually fundamentally changes how we approach decisions on land use, environmental protection, the preservation of cultural heritage and economic activity in our province. It does so without meaningful public input, transparency or proper oversight.

British Columbians simply deserve better. They don't deserve this repackaging of Bill 7. They expect fairness, transparency and actual consultation, not this Bill 14.

Here's another concerning aspect of Bill 14: the extensive power it grants unelected regulators to impose fees and levies with little oversight and almost no accountability, another cause for concern for us. In particular, section 22(2) allows the B.C. Energy Regulator commissioner to issue certificates that mandate projects' proponents to pay unspecified — unspecified — sums. Alarmingly, this bill places no limits on the size of these levies, nor does it provide any clear guidelines for determining the amounts. Again, more unchecked authority, this time to unelected officials.

[8:10 p.m.]

This lack of transparency sets the perfect stage for arbitrary decision-making, which again is concerning. Hypothetically speaking, two similar renewable energy projects could, under this bill, be charged vastly different fees without any explanation or standardized criteria.

Now, given that scenario, how can we expect our businesses or investors to feel secure in such an uncertain environment? Without clear boundaries or regulations, we risk creating a system prone to inconsistency, unfairness and the potential abuse of power.

Another troubling element that has now been introduced by this bill is the granting of retroactive powers. This government is seeking the ability to validate actions and decisions made before the bill was even debated or discussed, let alone passed. Retroactive validation directly goes against the values of fairness and good governance, and it's oddly unusual as well. It goes even further to disrupt an already complex regulatory framework and introduces uncertainty, undermining confidence for investors, which, in turn, undermines our province's economic stability as well.

Another hypothetical scenario to consider. If there was a business that had always followed the rules, complied with all the regulations, investing with certainty, they could now be at risk of changed rules after the fact, new levies or altered requirements now destabilizing the business. That's what Bill 14 has the power to do. Yes, it does.

This government can stand up and rhetorically suggest that that would never happen, but with the vague language and sweeping powers granted, there is always a risk when making decisions on legislation. Those risks need to be addressed and considered.

The issue is that the door has been left open for these types of scenarios to occur. That's the danger in Bill 14. These scenarios are not only unjust but massively destabil-

izing to businesses trying to make long-term decisions for themselves. This bill now sends a very clear and very discouraging message to those considering long-term investments and expansions in our province.

Beyond just economic consequences, this bill further erodes the democratic authority of our local governments. Bodies such as municipal councils and regional districts, those which interact closest to their own communities, could now find themselves in situations that render them powerless to oppose or even influence projects that this government deems streamlined.

Decisions that were once made with input from local residents are now increasingly centralized, stripping everyday British Columbians of a voice in the decisions that directly affect them. We've seen this clearly. City councils are not allowed to have public participation or comment on changes made in their own community and their own backyards.

Another specific section in Bill 14 that grants cabinet sweeping powers to amend primary legislation through regulations is section 13(1)(b). This section allows cabinet to modify provisions of the primary act for streamlined projects. Disturbingly, these changes could be delegated to any B.C. government employee or even the regulator itself, allowing them to rewrite the laws governing their own operations. This essentially makes the regulator both the banker who deals the cards and the player, with the ability to change the rules mid-hand.

We must ask ourselves this question, then: are we comfortable handing over such far-reaching legislative power to unelected officials? Are we prepared to accept a system where bureaucrats can alter the framework without scrutiny or oversight from this elected Legislature? This is completely unacceptable, in my opinion.

Provisions like these in Bill 14 show a troubling concentration of power, free from democratic oversight and accountability. British Columbians deserve transparency, fairness and a decision-making process that is clear and open, not one based on opaque actions and unchecked discretion.

[8:15 p.m.]

Again, as lawmakers it is our duty to challenge such overreaches of power and ensure that the rights and interests of our citizens are protected. When decisions are made in back rooms and local communities are left out of the conversation, it's no surprise that public faith in government starts to crumble. People don't want symbolic gestures after the fact. They want a real seat at the table when the decisions that shape their futures are being made. Bill 14 shuts that door.

British Columbians aren't opposed to development. They support clear, effective regulation when it's done right, but speeding things up by cutting out fairness, transparency and local government isn't reform; it's recklessness. You can't call it progress if it leaves people behind and shuts them out. This legislation doesn't just tweak the rules; it undermines trust, dismisses the voices of those on the ground and opens the door to retroactive decisions that create chaos instead of clarity.

British Columbians expect better. They expect leadership that respects process, protects rights and earns trust. Bill 14, as it stands, misses the mark by a wide margin. Efficiency should never come at the expense of accountability, yet that's exactly what this bill proposes. We've learned time and time again that when too much authority is placed in too few hands, the result isn't streamlined governance. It's confusion, inefficiency and sometimes even misconduct. Decisions made out of public view rarely prioritize the people they're meant to serve.

Here's another concerning aspect of this legislation. Under Bill 15, safety is treated as optional, as core protection under the Safety Standards Act can be waived for certain projects. This means critical safeguards meant to protect workers and emergency personnel could simply be ignored. The government hasn't explained why these standards should be compromised or why people's safety should be treated as negotiable. No project, no matter how urgent, justifies exposing lives to unnecessary risks.

The bill also threatens to roll back environmental oversight. Environmental assessments are not bureaucratic speed bumps; they are foundational to sustainable development. Stripping them away removes one of the few tools we have to weigh long-term impact on biodiversity and ecosystems before the damage is done, and costly cleanups are left for future generations.

Worse still, Bill 14 centralizes control in a way that shuts out the very people who will feel its consequences. It gives unelected administrators the power to suspend or cancel permits without due process or accountability. For small businesses, this kind of arbitrary authority creates deep uncertainty. How can anyone plan for the future if the rules can change without warning and without recourse?

This legislation does more than speed things up. It reshapes who gets a say, who gets prioritized and how much scrutiny decisions receive. It strips local governments of influence, weakens safety and environmental protections and concentrates decision-making power away from elected representatives and the public. British Columbians expect more than efficiency for efficiency's sake. They expect thoughtful, transparent leadership that values safety, fairness and long-term planning. This bill falls far short of that standard.

We should not allow haste to replace responsibility or openness to be sacrificed in the name of convenience. Our constituents deserve laws built to protect them, not to bypass them. At the heart of Bill 14 lies a quiet but deeply dangerous proposition: that government decision-making doesn't need to be consistent, transparent or accountable.

[8:20 p.m.]

Under this bill, the rules surrounding project approvals, fees and exemptions are so loosely defined that they can be twisted to favour some while disadvantaging others, with no clear justification required. The channels this bill opens for political favouritism and potential corruption are very concerning for this reason.

How can two projects of the same size and scope be treated entirely differently not because of merit or public interest but because of who's backing them and who's lobbying for them? That simply isn't efficiency. Instead, it's a prime example of opportunism. It paves the way for favouritism, opens the door to backroom influence and invites political interference where fairness should rule.

In this vague and unbalanced framework, well-connected developers or corporations with the right political allies could find themselves breezing through approvals, while their competitors are stuck navigating red tape, delays and unexpected costs. This is how trust erodes, when outcomes begin to look less like policy and more like politics.

There are no guardrails in this legislation to ensure that decisions are based on clear standards or even made public, no requirement for fairness in how levies are imposed, no obligation to explain why one project is fast-tracked while another is stalled. It raises a troubling question: who really benefits from this system?

Bill 14 also grants the government the ability to sidestep environmental safeguards and retroactively revise regulatory conditions. That kind of power exercised without public visibility or legislative oversight doesn't just weaken accountability; it invites favouritism and overreaches of authority. How are communities expected to have confidence in environmental protections when they can be changed behind closed doors?

Let's not pretend this concern is hypothetical. British Columbians have seen the revolving door between government and lobbying firms. They've watched major donors get access and attention that ordinarily citizens never receive. In this context, the sweeping powers granted by Bill 14 are not just problematic; they're dangerous.

If the government wants to assure the public that this bill won't be used for political convenience, then it should welcome full transparency. Publish who meets with whom. Disclose why certain projects are prioritized. Set clear public criteria for decisions. But none of that is in legislation.

Without clear boundaries, without consistent rules, without meaningful oversight, we are inviting a governance model where influence matters more than integrity. British Columbians deserve a system where all players are treated fairly; where outcomes are based on facts, not favouritism; and where decisions that shape our communities are made in daylight, not in the shadows of political convenience. Bill 14, as written, fails the test, and we cannot let it pass unchecked.

To conclude, after examining the full scope of what Bill 14 entails, it has become too clear that this legislation really poses a serious risk to the integrity of our governance and, as a result, the well-being of British Columbians. While it may claim to streamline processes and encourage renewable energy, the devil is in the details. Details show that there are vague provisions, unchecked powers and an overall lack of accountability, which accumulates to make it a very dangerous precedent for future governments to be modelled after.

This bill strips away transparency, bypasses public oversight and accountability and grants unprecedented authority to unelected bureaucrats, without clear criteria or any justification. It opens up these processes to be tainted by political favouritism, where decisions are ultimately influenced by connections rather than merit, where key safeguards, which are there to protect public safety, the environment and local communities, can be waived at will.

[8:25 p.m.]

The key point is that British Columbians deserve better than this. They expect a government that respects the democratic process, that listens to their concerns, that ensures fairness in all decisions affecting their lives. This bill, as it stands, does the opposite. It erodes trust, undermines local input and concentrates power in the hands of a few, with no checks or balances.

Deputy Speaker: Recognizing the member for Kamloops Centre and noting the hour.

Peter Milobar: Don't we have to go right until half-past? I'm just checking.

The Speaker: Noting the hour, so we have to have another vote at 8:30.

Peter Milobar: Oh, okay. Sorry. I wasn't sure if the vote had to happen at 8:30, or if we note the hour ahead of that.

I will reserve my right and, noting the hour, adjourn debate.

Peter Milobar moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

[The Speaker in the chair.]

Jessie Sunner: Committee of Supply, Section A, reports progress on the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development and asks leave to sit again.

Leave granted.

George Anderson: Section C reports progress on Bill 13 and requests leave to sit again.

Leave granted.

Reporting of Bills

BILL M202 — ELIGIBILITY TO HOLD PUBLIC OFFICE ACT
(continued)

The Speaker: Members, earlier today during private members' time, a division was requested that Bill M202, intituled Eligibility to Hold Public Office Act, be concurred in at report stage. Pursuant to Standing Order 25, the deferred division will take place now.

[8:30 p.m. - 8:35 p.m.]

Members, the question before the House is that Bill M202, intituled Eligibility to Hold Public Office Act, be concurred at report stage.

[8:40 p.m.]

Motion approved on the following division:

YEAS — 46		
G. Anderson	Blatherwick	Elmore
Sunner	Toporowski	B. Anderson
Neill	Osborne	Brar
Davidson	Kahlon	Parmar
Gibson	Beare	Chandra Herbert
Wickens	Kang	Morissette
Sandhu	Krieger	Chant
Lajeunesse	Choi	Rotchford
Higginson	Routledge	Popham
Dix	Sharma	Farnworth
Eby	Bailey	Begg
Greene	Whiteside	Boyle
Ma	Yung	Malcolmson
Chow	Glumac	Arora
Shah	Phillip	Dhir
	Lore	

NAYS — 42		
Sturko	Kindy	Milobar
Warbus	Rustad	Banman
Wat	Kooner	Halford
Hartwell	L. Neufeld	Dew
Gasper	Day	Block
Bhangu	Paton	Boultbee
Chan	Toor	Hepner
Giddens	Rattée	Davis
McInnis	Bird	Luck
Stamer	Maahs	Tepper
Mok	Wilson	Clare
Williams	Loewen	Dhaliwal
Doerkson	Chapman	McCall
Valeriote	Botterell	Kealy

Hon. Mike Farnworth moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

The Speaker: This House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

The House adjourned at 8:41 p.m.

Proceedings in the Douglas Fir Room

The House in Committee, Section A.

The committee met at 2:54 p.m.

[George Anderson in the chair.]

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

The Chair: Good afternoon, Members. I call Committee of Supply, Section A, to order. We are meeting today to consider the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

On Vote 18: ministry operations, $2,442,836,000.

The Chair: Minister, do you have any opening remarks?

[2:55 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I do, Chair. Thank you.

It is an incredible honour for me to be here today to have discussions about the budget for the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I want to start by making an introduction of ministry staff that are here to support us through the coming hours.

First and foremost, I have our deputy minister, Keith Godin. We also have available and working with us today our ADM of Indigenous child welfare, Jeremy Y'in Neduklhchulh Williams. We have Denise Devenny, ADM of partnerships and Indigenous engagement.

We have ADM of finance and corporate services, Fisnik Preniqi. We have ADM of strategic services, Marnie Mayhew. We have ADM of policy, legislation and litigation, Emily Horton. We have ADM of service delivery division, Kelly Durand. We have ADM of practice and quality assurance, Cory Heavener.

We also have joining us executive director of service, provincial priorities, Dayna Long; chief human resources officer, Soji Bryant; chief financial officer, Nicole Andersen; deputy director of child welfare, James Wale; and executive director of quality assurance, Jackie Lee.

I want to give a special thanks to the staff that are here, for supporting me in the last couple of months and getting us ready for budget estimates.

I also want to thank my critics, the member for Penticton-Summerland and the member for Chilliwack North, for the work that they've done in preparation for these estimates.

I have incredible respect for the role of the opposition. I once stood in the opposition in this very room and asked questions to the Minister of Children and Family Development and the Minister of Education, so I hope that we can have a very fruitful, transparent conversation about how the ministry operates and how we look forward to the future and doing good things for children, youth and families in this province.

I just want to start by thanking you for being here today and the efforts and the work that you've done.

I want to quickly take the moment to say how unbelievably honoured I am to be the Minister of Children and Family Development. I love children. I have two children of my own. I always say that I've been a fighter for children since I was a child myself.

I believe, and I think that our government believes, that children are our most precious resource in this province. I think that this ministry is crucial in advancing our province in good ways and looking out for the future of all our children, particularly the most vulnerable.

Families come into contact with my ministry at some of the most difficult times, so this work is incredibly important to me, and it hits me in very personal ways. I, first and foremost, am a mom to a 15-year-old and a 19-year-old, both who haven't always fit into the normal box of how they need to be supported in life. So I have had both personal and professional experience with my ministry.

My very first job when I moved out to British Columbia when I was 17 years old was to care for a young girl with cerebral palsy. Megan and her family taught me about resiliency, about compassion and about challenges in accessing the right services and how early intervention can really change the trajectory of a child's life and a family's life.

I've been passionate about these services my entire adult career. I've had the opportunity to work with hundreds of families in our province, helping them advocate, helping them learn about programs and services. The fact that I have the opportunity to stand here in this position is an honour of a lifetime and something that I will adore for my entire life.

I want to quickly chat about the work that our government has done, because I am proud of a lot of the work our government has done. We have seen the largest increase in investment in this ministry this year of an additional $321 million.

We've also seen the number of children in government care decline. We have the lowest number of children in government care in over 20 years, and we are the first province to recognize Indigenous jurisdiction of child and family services in legislation.

[3:00 p.m.]

I think that those are really important steps in the right direction and things that I'm really proud that our government has done. I want to take a moment to thank our direct service staff, the thousands of staff that we have working in the Ministry of Children and Family Development delivering these crucial services. They go to work every day in very challenging circumstances and do their level best to ensure that children, youth and families are cared for.

To the social workers, to the team leads, to all of our staff: I just want to say that I am grateful for the work that you do. I know that it is difficult, and I will work every day to support you in those roles.

I also want to take a moment to thank the thousands of organizations that we also have delivering services in our province. We contract to thousands of organizations to deliver very important specialized care to children and youth, and they do that work incredibly well.

I know that there is more work to do, and I'm standing here in this role because I do think that we can do better. I do think that there are things that we can do to improve our services, to remove barriers for families. I know that we are going to do that work over the coming years.

In my mandate, central to everything is honouring our commitments to B.C.'s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. We are working with First Nations to support their resumption of jurisdiction over their children and families. I know that children belong with their parents, with their grandparents, with their aunties, with their uncles and in community. The best outcomes that children can have is when that happens.

We have signed six community agreements and five coordination agreements, and we have 14 other negotiations underway. This work is transformational and will be transformational to our child welfare system. It is work that across the country.... We are being looked at and what we are doing here in British Columbia.

We are also leading work across government on a comprehensive child and youth well-being plan and outcomes framework. We know that we need to do things differently. We know we need to meet children and families before they get to a place of crisis. This work will really look at getting children, youth, their families and their extended families the support they need prior to being in a crisis.

Finally, working to strengthen and realign our services and supports for children and youth with mental health and support needs. We have engaged in exhaustive consultation with families. We have heard that families want us to remove barriers to increase access to some of our most vulnerable, and I'm excited about the work that we have ahead of us on that.

I look forward to canvassing a wide variety of topics and providing the opposition with the information that they're looking for. I look forward to the next couple of hours, and I'm just really proud to be here today.

With that, I will hand it over to the opposition.

The Chair: Would you like to make any opening remarks?

Heather Maahs: Well, I'd like to acknowledge the huge responsibility of this department and the work of this ministry and the individuals who care deeply for children and youth and families who require assistance and support of the services provided through MCFD.

Thank you, Minister Wickens, to your staff and the vast array of service providers supporting this work.

Without further ado, I'm just going to jump in here. My first question to you today is: has MCFD had an external financial audit? If so, when and by whom, and how often are these conducted?

The Chair: Before we continue, I'd just like to remind members that questions are through the Chair.

[3:05 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Every year, as a standard process, as a part of Public Accounts, the Auditor General audits my ministry and all ministries in government. That happens annually.

Heather Maahs: Was this an external financial audit?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The Auditor General is an independent body of the B.C. Legislature, so that would be considered an external audit.

Heather Maahs: The March 29, 2022, news release from RCY said that MCFD's system for allocating funding is so broken that it is not possible to link ministry funding with the commitments to reconciliation government has made or to outcomes for children. This is a sobering and terrifying admission.

Recognizing that there are approximately 4,900 contracted social service agencies in B.C. besides the 4,500 full-time staff, and considering the complexities of this ministry and the challenges in monitoring and providing oversight for such a vast, multifaceted ministry, what has MCFD done to streamline the relationship between the federal government and the province to provide a more comprehensive and consistent ability to hold people, agencies and contractors accountable for funding regarding their roles and responsibilities associated with this ministry?

[3:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would say that we have multiple fiscal arrangements with the federal government. All are typically multi-year agreements. They're established. They have tracking and outcome agreements that we have with the federal government. They're on par with other ministries, across our government, with how we interact with the federal government and have to account for those agreements and report on those agreements.

MCFD has a very robust public portal that you can go into and look at our outcome measurements in a variety of places. We track the number of kids in care. We track the number of Indigenous kids in care. We track a number of things that any member of the public, opposition or otherwise, can go and look at. There are rigorous practices in place for our relationship with the federal government.

Heather Maahs: As of 2021, Stats Canada census said 68 percent of the children in care are Indigenous, yet Indigenous are only 5.9 percent of the population. How does $821 million allocated over three years for children in care specifically target the needs of the Indigenous children and youth?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to start by saying how transformational the work is that we are doing in the Ministry of Children and Family Development with respect to recognizing the inherent rights of Indigenous communities, Indigenous governing bodies, around jurisdiction of child and family services.

[3:15 p.m.]

Firstly, we, importantly, provide funding to Indigenous child-and-family-serving agencies across this province to provide direct services, child welfare services, to Indigenous communities. That's one way that we provide services for Indigenous children and families.

We also have taken a generational shift. Indigenous leaders, communities, Indigenous governing bodies have done generational work to work with MCFD to sign a number of historic agreements. We have signed a number of community agreements, a number of coordination agreements. That ensures that those Indigenous governing bodies that strike their own laws provide child welfare services as they determine for their community.

In our budget for child welfare services, there is a number…. Much of that budget goes directly to Indigenous governing bodies, to Indigenous child-and-family-serving agencies. I think that we have seen some of the results of that. We are seeing a lower number of children come into care. We have far more, particularly, Indigenous children in out-of-care agreements, being cared for by family members, community members. We're seeing a shift in the right direction because of the work that's happening in this ministry.

Heather Maahs: In my question, I was asking for

specific targets for the needs of the children. The minister is telling me that hiring contractors…. I think the question that I was asking was more about the specific needs of these Indigenous children and youth, not the hiring of people.

I'm looking for a more concrete example of how that is helping the Indigenous children and youth, if that makes sense.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to clarify that our Indigenous child and family service agencies aren't…. That's not us contracting. Our work with Indigenous governing bodies is not us contracting. That is Indigenous communities reclaiming their right to provide services for their children, their youth and their families.

The services that are required for child protection and child welfare are outlined in our Child, Family and Community Service Act. Any of those services that are required are delivered by MCFD. They're also delivered by Indigenous child-and-family-serving agencies, and they're delivered by Indigenous governing bodies and Indigenous communities.

Heather Maahs: All right. I'm going to move on here.

What amount of the MCFD budget is targeted for Indigenous children and youth?

[3:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I think it's important to recognize that no matter who you are as a child, a youth or a family, or where you are, you have access to services through MCFD. There are a couple of things that I'm just going to talk about.

Firstly, if you are an Indigenous family that wants to access MCFD services through, let's say, a child development centre in a community, that Indigenous child and that family has access to those services. If an Indigenous child requires access to child and youth mental health services or any number of services that we provide in the Ministry of Children and Family Development, all of it is available to any child or any youth.

Beyond that, we also have specific line amounts of budgets that we provide to Indigenous child and family community-servicing agencies. We also have specific amounts that we provide with respect to the signing of community agreements and coordination agreements specifically for Indigenous governing bodies and Indigenous communities that want to resume jurisdiction.

Trevor Halford: The minister just moments ago talked about early child development. Is the minister familiar with Semiahmoo Family Place?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Yes, I am.

Trevor Halford: Does the minister know how many families are served by Semiahmoo Family Place?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I don't know the specifics of the number of families that are served by Semiahmoo Family Place, but I am very familiar with family resource centres. I'm very familiar with the work that family resource centres do across our province and the numbers of families that they serve.

In previous roles, I was directly responsible for overseeing the services that family resource centres delivered. I'm very familiar with the work, and I'm happy to chat with the member on this very specific case. I'm aware of it and can likely provide some information to the member.

Trevor Halford: Really glad the minister is familiar with Semiahmoo Family Place. Actually, there are hundreds of families that they provide services for, whether it's single moms, new immigrants, parents or moms that have fled domestic violence.

It's a great, great place. I visited there a lot. They're reducing their hours now. They're actually looking at closing their doors.

[3:25 p.m.]

Can the minister confirm in this fiscal, previous fiscal, how much MCFD has provided specifically to Semiahmoo Family Place?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: To the member, I can provide him with the specific numbers after, at a later time, later today or tomorrow.

What I can say, though, in general, around these particular services is that they are typically procured at the local level. The local community organizations come together to decide how an array of services in the community are delivered in partnership with local ministry offices like the director of operations and the contractor.

There are a number of reasons why services may change or adapt. It could be that local operators have come together to look at the needs in different parts of the community or there's been a change of need in the community. There are all kinds of reasons why, when a contract is delivered, it may change over time.

I can certainly work with the member on what has happened in this situation, get the numbers and sort out things further. For sure.

Trevor Halford: Okay, I think it should be a pretty simple question to the minister. Can the minister confirm that the number is zero?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would say that we are happy to look it up. There are thousands of contracts in the Ministry of Children and Family Development — thousands. Just for the member opposite, a contract for a family re-

source centre would be one very small contract, out of all of those thousands of contracts we are delivering.

Again, there would have been a comprehensive procurement process that happened at the local level, that was a decision made with the local organizations on how they wanted to deliver services for children and families. I can assure the member, however, that there have been no cuts to services, and there have been no cuts to family resource centres.

Trevor Halford: I think the minister and I have a different definition of what the word "cut" means. Semiahmoo Family Place was receiving funding to keep their doors open. It's a small contract. We're talking about a couple hundred thousand dollars. They're serving hundreds of families — hundreds. Their funding has been cut. The minister can try and find out what the numbers are. The number is zero. Whatever it is, they're not able to keep their doors open.

To me, if you're funding something and you're no longer funding it, I define that as a cut. The minister can try and say whatever they want, but right now this place is looking at closing its doors because it was getting funding from MCFD that it's no longer getting. That to me is a definition of what a cut is. If you are funding something and then you no longer fund it, you have cut it.

[3:30 p.m.]

I don't understand. The minister said she's familiar with Semiahmoo Family Place, not familiar with the fact that they are getting zero dollars from MCFD right now, not familiar with the fact that they are actually having to close their doors on certain days and turn families away.

We're talking about a fairly small contract. Again to the minister…. Like, I define that as a cut. When you're turning families away and no longer providing services, no longer funding important programs, that, to me, is a cut. Again, I'm going to be a huge advocate because I see the work that they do every day. I see what they do for families that are coming in there. It's very, very important.

The fact is that for the last number of years, this organization has done almost everything they can to try and secure funding, and it's fallen on deaf ears. Again to the minister, can she please commit today to take a look at Semiahmoo Family Place? I can assure her that it's an adequate program, with great people running it, but this government has left them out in the cold.

I think, again to the minister…. This is exactly what people are expecting MCFD to be funding, but right now they are absolutely struggling to keep their doors open. That means that moms that are on the brink that are trying to find those few hours to interact with other parents and have their kids interact with other kids, that new immigrants that are coming in that have language barriers and that are finding this a safe place even to get healthy meals…. This government has gone completely cold on this group, and I find that completely unacceptable.

I'm hoping, through this process, the minister will commit to give this another second look, because this is very, very important not just to me but to Surrey and White Rock, and I find it unacceptable. The fact is that they're not even giving any funding to such an important organization.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I really appreciate the member's advocacy for this organization and the care and compassion and advocacy for the programs and services that are delivered through crucial programs like family resource centres. What I would like the member…. I will offer to follow up with the member, but I would encourage the member to understand that family resource programs are a part of a suite of services that are delivered in community with respect to early childhood development and early-years services.

Those contracts are delivered through organizations. Semiahmoo may have a contractual relationship with another organization. There are decisions that are made at local levels on how to best support the community. MCFD in general leaves those decisions up to the local organizations.

I understand this because I was responsible for contracting many of those programs and services, and I had to make decisions on what programs and services…. I sometimes would have to close a program because of a variety of issues that may not be clear to the member opposite. There are right now leasing issues. There are challenges with space. There's a whole wide array of reasons why the local community may make a decision.

I will look into the specifics of this particular family resource centre and work with the member opposite to provide the information that he needs on why the decisions have been made that have been made.

Heather Maahs: My next question is: how is the $821 million allocated over three years for children in care distributed to alternative care contractors, specifically those involving Indigenous child and family services?

Would you please give us a budget breakdown for, for example, foster care, specialized homes, independent living programs or Indigenous-led care homes?

[3:35 p.m. – 3:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to first start by answering this question by saying that the numbers that we spend on children who are in care in a variety of placements are not static. They change, and they are based on what the need of that child might be. Children — when they come into contact with the ministry, there needs to be an assessment of what that need is and what type of care is going to be arranged or that they are going to go into.

That care arrangement can also change over time. What I can say is that the priority that we have, and the expectation, is always that, wherever possible, we ensure that children stay in the care of their family or in kinship care arrangements.

We've done work to harmonize the rates for kinship care with rates for foster care to ensure that family care givers are being provided at the same rates that foster care givers are provided. Our budget really is driven by the number of care in each of those placements. It changes.

I would also say that our specialized care is very complex and costs far more. So if, for whatever reason, a child needs to come into one of those specialized homes, we do have to be dynamic in how we are providing funding, because it is based on that child and that need.

Heather Maahs: So I'm not getting a budget breakdown is what that boils down to.

I understand the complexity that this ministry is dealing with. However, I would have thought that there would be certain amounts of money in different buckets that are centralized for each of the individual categories. Anyways, we'll move on.

Does MCFD transfer all responsibility of Indigenous children and youth in care through the Child, Family and Service Act, CFCSA, to the Indigenous…?

[3:45 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to talk about the uniqueness of this work. It really is work that the ministry, MCFD, does in collaboration, in partnership and with Indigenous communities. It's a gradient of how we work with Indigenous communities and Indigenous governing bodies.

We support Indigenous communities to increase their involvement and authority and resume jurisdiction over child welfare through a number of pathways that they can choose.

First is through community agreements. These are under section 92.1 of the CFCSA, which pertains to consultation and cooperation with an Indigenous community on child safety work with their families, such as assessments, investigations, development of care plans and placement decisions when Indigenous children come into care. That's one pathway.

We have delegation-enabling agreements under section 92 of the CFCSA where a director enters into an agreement that delegates any or all of the director's powers, duties or functions to an Indigenous child and family service agency to deliver family support services and child protection of Indigenous communities. Those delegation agreements are varying based on the Indigenous child and family community service agency, the community they're in and what has been agreed on between that agency and MCFD.

There are joint and consent-based decision-making agreements setting out how the province and Indigenous governing bodies share decision-making about child and family services under the CFCSA and sections 6 and 7 of the Declaration Act.

There's also exercising jurisdiction through processes set out in the federal act, including those under section 20, where the Indigenous governing body provides notice of its intention to exercise its legislative authority without a coordination agreement to the Minister of Indigenous Services Canada and the province or territory in which the community is located.

Under section 20.2, the Indigenous governing body submits notice to the Minister of Indigenous Services Canada and each province or territory in which the Indigenous community wishes to exercise jurisdiction to enter into a tripartite coordination agreement in relation to child and family services.

Once an agreement is reached or after a year of reasonable efforts, the Indigenous law will have the force of federal law.

Self-governing agreements negotiated with the First Nation, B.C.'s Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation and Canada, such as treaties or reconciliation agreements…. These agreements may also be bilateral between the First Nation and Canada only.

There are a number of different agreements that we are working with and can certainly provide sort of a breakdown of the Indigenous communities, Indigenous governing bodies, where we have Indigenous child-and-family-serving agencies, where we have coordination agreements and where that work is currently at.

Heather Maahs: I'm just going to preface this next question. With all of the agencies and different organizations and responsibilities that the minister has mentioned, I'm going to hearken back to the report called *Don't Look Away*. One of the complaints that the director stated was that it didn't seem like the right hand knew what the left hand was doing, which led ultimately to the death of this ten-year-old boy, in that report.

[3:50 p.m.]

There are so many moving parts and so many players in this ministry. From the moment I received this portfolio, I began a quest for a flow chart, and it's impossible. There is no means for a flow chart — or none that has been provided to me.

Ultimately, my question, then, is: what responsibility does the MCFD retain, in this big web of people, where these Indigenous children, who are at great risk, are concerned?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would start by saying that we have a collective responsibility with respect to the safety and well-being of children and youth in this province.

[3:55 p.m.]

The Representative for Children and Youth would say — I've often heard her say this — that we need to take a cross-government approach in the way that we ensure their safety and well-being. That includes our education system, our health care system and MCFD.

To the member's question around accountability, you know, I gave a long list of the varying ways that First Nations, Indigenous governing bodies and Indigenous child and family service agencies may provide services to Indigenous children. It's varying, and wherever the Indigenous governing body or agency does not provide service, it is MCFD's responsibility to ensure that that service be provided.

Just to give an example, the co-development of our work with First Nations was really about ensuring that there is a seamless system of support. If an Indigenous child were in need of protection or support through interaction with a social worker, once that social worker concluded that there was involvement from a First Nation, that social worker doesn't just step away. They also coordinate, communicate and work with that nation to ensure that all the services required for that child are provided.

Really, it is a collective responsibility, one that can be complex, for sure. I have had the opportunity to meet with Indigenous child and family service agencies, to meet at our local offices with local social workers who talk about the very important, collaborative work that they do together.

Certainly, I think there is a lot of work being done right now, in partnership, to discuss roles, responsibilities and ways of communicating so that children don't fall through the cracks.

Heather Maahs: What means of accountability are provided to MCFD — the government, the public — regarding follow-up data and accountability for the Indigenous children?

[4:00 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I think that I've understood the question, but I'm going to ask the member to just clarify the question again, please.

Heather Maahs: I'll just read the question again. What means of accountability is provided to MCFD, the government and the public regarding follow-up data and accountability from the agents, from the providers, for the money?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The answer to this question really depends on what domain we are talking about with respect to delivery of services. If we are talking about Indigenous child and family serving agencies, those agencies have Aboriginal operation practice standards and indicators that they are required to abide by and to work with the ministry to provide reports and outcomes and data with respect to those agencies.

[4:05 p.m.]

If we're talking about Indigenous governing bodies, where they have exercised their own laws…. I just want to be very clear that I believe in the inherent right of Indigenous jurisdiction, that First Nations have every right to care for, to raise and to love their own children in accordance with their laws. When a First Nation has struck their own laws, MCFD would not have oversight.

With respect to MCFD agencies and organizations and data and accountability, there are a number of things. We have oversight bodies that are independent from this Legislature. We've talked about the Representative for Children and Youth, the Ombudsperson and the OAG.

We also have our public portal that reports on numbers of children and youth served, outcomes. There are rigorous reporting standards for contractors across MCFD that report on the number of children served, their outcomes, service hours, so it is dependent on the service. It is dependent on what the relationship is with MCFD and the contracted agency or in the situation of a First Nation exercising their inherent rights.

Heather Maahs: First of all, just a point of clarification, what is OAG?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The Office of the Auditor General.

Heather Maahs: Thank you so much.

We know we have MCFD. We have nations. Through the MCFD, nations have contractors. I guess what I'm asking is: if there is a contractor who has a really bad track record, where is the accountability? Who is ultimately responsible, especially if it's through nations?

I concur with the minister in that the ultimate goal is to have the Indigenous families looking after their own. Obviously, that is what we all want. However, when there are contractors who are hired who have a bad track record, at what point is there data? Is there follow-up? Does MCFD step in and say: "Okay. Hold on a second. Timeout. We are seeing that we're not getting good results here."

Where does the buck stop? Basically, that is what I'm asking.

[4:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Firstly, any child, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, that receives services under the Child, Family and Community Service Act…. Ultimately, MCFD is accountable and responsible for those services, whether that is ICFSA or a ministry-contracted organization that isn't ICFSA. I'm going to get tired of using acronyms: Indigenous child-and-family serving agency. Ultimately, MCFD is responsible for that.

There are practice audits that occur, and where there are needed adjustments to practice or any sort of quality assurance or things that need to be changed, MCFD would work closely with that Indigenous child-and-family serving agency. Where services are delivered under Indigenous law, we would not intervene in any sort of contractor.

[4:15 p.m.]

I would say that we also have, like I mentioned before, the standards and indicators that Indigenous child-and-family serving agencies are responsible for. Also, when those agencies contract with another provider to provide a home, the contract overseeing those contracts is in the purview of the delegated agency. So there are times where those contracts are discontinued or other contractors are used.

Heather Maahs: The RCY stated in *No Time to Wait, Part Two* that a review of the workforce capacity of the Indigenous child and family service agencies would require a separate and distinct approach.

In light of the fact that approximately two-thirds of all children in care are Indigenous, when can we expect the minister to address the concerns coming out of the *Don't Look Away* report?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want some clarification from the member opposite. Is she inquiring about the *Don't Look Away* report or the *No Time to Wait* report?

Heather Maahs: It was the *No Time to Wait* report that I was referring to.

[4:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would say…. In respect to *No Time to Wait*, the *No Time to Wait, Part Two* was released in February. There are a number of actions that are underway. Within weeks of the *No Time to Wait, Part Two* report the ministry released a comprehensive workforce plan that addresses a number of the recommendations by the Representative for Children and Youth. I can certainly provide that workforce plan to the member opposite.

We also undertook rigorous health and safety planning based on some of the feedback with ministry staff. We have increased our direct workforce by up to 20 percent. The two-year staffing levels have increased, year over year, since the pandemic, so that was really comprehensive work that the ministry has done, really important work to ensure that we're supporting a wide range of work that our social workers do and the recommendations of the Representative for Children and Youth.

[4:25 p.m.]

We know that there is quite a bit more work to be done with respect to our direct service staff. I've had the opportunity over the last number of months to go around the province — the Lower Mainland, Kelowna — to visit social workers, protection social workers, resource social workers, CYSN social workers, team leads, to hear directly from them about the important work that they do, to hear about the challenges they're facing and the supports that they need, going forward.

We've been able to talk about the things that are going well, the investments that they are seeing happening in the workforce, training opportunities, incentives to recruit more social workers, things that we need to do to retain our workforce. This is vitally important work as we move forward, and it's ongoing. I can provide the workforce data to the member opposite.

Heather Maahs: To the minister: thank you. I would appreciate any and all data that you have. That would be great.

I'm just going to circle back to the last question that I asked about responsibility. For clarification, if nations had hired a contractor who, under their watch or jurisdiction, continually had children die, abuse take place — generally speaking, a very bad reputation — is it your contention that MCFD has no jurisdiction and would not take any jurisdiction in that situation?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to clarify for the member that Indigenous communities do love their children and have the right to care for their children and to raise their children. And where a First Nation has struck their law, that law is paramount.

I think we all have a collective responsibility to the well-being of children and youth in this province. Any time a child or youth is at risk, where the children are receiving services under the Child, Family and Community Services Act, my ministry has a responsibility.

First Nations laws are paramount in this province. I just want to clarify that.

The Chair: Members, we shall take a ten-minute break and return at 4:38 p.m. This committee is in recess.

The committee recessed from 4:28 p.m. to 4:37 p.m.

[Susie Chant in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. We are currently considering the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Heather Maahs: I just have to go back to the question that we were discussing. I didn't ever contend that people didn't love their own children. That is obviously…. They are precious to them. But I'm just wondering….

Again, this is not a matter of law. This is a matter of responsibility. If a known contractor is not providing good care and actually jeopardizing lives, whose responsibility,

ultimately, is it when children's lives are lost, as has been the case?

[4:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I need to correct the member opposite, because this is a matter of law.

The responsibility that we have as the ministry.... We are responsible under the Child, Family and Community Service Act to provide services to all children in the province with respect to their safety and well-being.

Where a First Nation or Indigenous governing body has struck their own law, we do not have oversight, and that is crucially important to understand. We have a government-to-government relationship with First Nations who have struck their own law. So it absolutely is a matter of law.

With respect to concerns about care providers providing services contracted by Indigenous community–serving agencies or an organization contracted by MCFD to provide a service, there are.... First and foremost, anytime there is a concern, the expectation is that that concern is reported. That is also written into our child, family and community services law.

Where there is a concern about the service delivery or a contractor, we have protocol investigations. Those investigations happen in real time. When an investigation occurs, there are recommendations that are made out of that investigation. Where there are contractors contracted by a delegated agency, that delegated agency is a part of that investigation and makes a decision about that contractor. We take these concerns very seriously.

Then, as far as oversight and accountability go, MCFD is accountable to our oversight bodies, to the Representative for Children and Youth, to the Ombudsperson, to the Auditor General and to the public.

[4:45 p.m.]

I think we've seen in this session so far that when there is a concern, when there is something that happens to a child or a youth that is heartbreaking and concerning, I, as the minister, have to answer questions about that. Our ministry is held accountable to that. I think that happens on a regular basis.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you to the minister for that answer.

If I could just clarify what the question is. In this case, we're talking about a hypothetical scenario where there's full jurisdiction, so the delegated Indigenous agency has their own laws. According to what I'm understanding from the minister, it's no longer under the CFCSA. It's under their laws — full jurisdiction. In that case, if there's a problem after there has been an investigation.... If I'm understanding what the minister just said, it would be reportable. An investigation would take place.

Should no changes occur to the quality of the outcomes after that investigation, what, if any, mechanism does MCFD have to either (a) intervene and assure the quality of outcomes, if any, or (b) remove funding?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to specifically answer the member's question about an Indigenous governing body and a First Nation striking its own law. That would be a government-to-government relationship, like a relationship between B.C. and Alberta.

The jurisdiction of child and family services, when an Indigenous governing body and a First Nation have struck their own law, is government-to-government. We do not have jurisdiction over their children and their families when they have struck their own law.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you for that answer. I think I'm starting to understand.

In other words, once jurisdiction is fully vested in the Indigenous governing body, it is lost forever vis-à-vis MCFD and the government of British Columbia, correct?

[4:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: It's a little bit more nuanced than how the member has described it. Where an Indigenous governing body, a First Nation, has struck their own laws with respect to child and family services and the delivery of those services pursuant to those laws, they are accountable for those services.

We have a situation where we have a multi-jurisdictional approach to jurisdiction that is different in every single situation. Where we have coordination agreements with First Nations, we work closely with them as they exercise their own laws and jurisdiction. We work collaboratively with those nations to ensure that there is an ongoing understanding of how services will be delivered and how we will work in partnership or alongside.

It really is up to the First Nation to determine what they want that to look like.

Heather Maahs: What you're telling us is that the story of the boy in *Don't Look Away*, which was written about July 2024....

The Chair: Member, if I can remind you to refer to "the minister," rather than "you" — "What the minister is telling us...."

Heather Maahs: Oh, sorry. Yes.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I do appreciate your help on that.

Heather Maahs: Yes, thank you, certainly.

The minister's contention, then, would be that this report is nobody's fault. The boy was in a home under a

nation's jurisdiction, yet he was tortured and murdered. MCFD says, "Well, nations have their own laws, and we don't interfere," but ultimately, this boy falls under MCFD jurisdiction.

The Chair: If I may interrupt for just a minute, Member. Please, no props in the room. That's considered a prop. Waving the report around is considered a prop.

Heather Maahs: Oh, okay. Certainly, no problem.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Heather Maahs: Yep, thank you.

I don't know how much further I want to go on this line of questioning. It seems preposterous to me.

I'll ask another question. What role do Indigenous communities play in the decision-making process regarding placement of Indigenous children in care?

[4:55 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I disagree completely with the premise of the member's question and have to clarify a couple of things. I think the member has missed what happened, in the *Don't Look Away* report, in the case of Colby, and has misunderstood what jurisdiction actually is.

The First Nation did not have jurisdiction with respect to the services provided to the child in that report. For the services that were being provided in that situation, MCFD was responsible. Those were services that were delivered under the Child, Family and Community Service Act.

I think the line of questioning is concerning and can do incredible damage to First Nations communities, which have an inherent right to care for their own children. The *Don't Look Away* report was a collective failure of multiple different places in government, in community. There were multiple times — the Representative for Children and Youth, rightly, points out multiple touchpoints — where we could have done better for Colby and his family. It is a devastating outcome, something that should have never happened.

However, I need to underscore that that was absolutely not a failure of jurisdiction or of First Nations' inherent right to care for their own children and to deliver services the way they deem that those services should be delivered in their community. That is exactly one of the recommendations that the Representative for Children and Youth made in that report. One of the recommendations that she made was to ensure that MCFD did the work necessary with nations, with Indigenous governing bodies, to ensure that we did a better job of looking at communications, information-sharing, roles and responsibilities, and how we work with nations.

We've canvassed the various agreements that nations can pursue, but I really have to underscore that the *Don't Look Away* report was a collective responsibility of everybody, and those services were being delivered under the Child, Family and Community Service Act.

Heather Maahs: That was my preamble, and then I asked the question: what role do Indigenous communities play in the decision-making process regarding the placement of Indigenous children in care?

[5:00 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: There are multiple different scenarios and multiple different roles that a First Nation, Indigenous community and the ministry play in the placement of a child, in a variety of different ways. The process can be very complex.

When a report gets made, when there's a concern for protection, the first step is always that a social worker investigates that report. Wherever possible, they will do safety planning with that family to ensure that the child can stay connected to their family and then work with that family on the potential supports or services that they may need.

When a child is needed to come into care because of safety concerns, the social worker needs to let the nation involved know that that child has come into care. Then there is a hearing, where there is a process where the feedback from the family, the nation and, if the child is old enough and appropriate…. That feedback comes into place on the placement of that child and where it is best suited for that child to go.

[5:05 p.m.]

My expectation is, wherever possible, that child is placed connected to their community, their culture and their family.

With respect to the placements, there are home studies that are done for providers. There are criminal record checks. Placement families, individuals, are screened and assessed for the appropriateness of the placement.

Like I said, wherever possible, we try to ensure that child is kept connected to their family and their community.

Heather Maahs: Okay, maybe this is an easy one. How many Indigenous children in care are being cared for in and/or by their community?

[5:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: For the member, the number…. We had 3,277 Indigenous children in care. Of those 3,277 children, 1,603 were in out-of-care agreements, meaning in kinship care or in community.

Of important note is that 87 percent of Indigenous children in care were able to reunite with their families. Also, the numbers of children in care are broken down between Indigenous and non-Indigenous on our public portal that is available to members opposite and the general public.

Heather Maahs: Thank you for that answer; 87 percent is an encouraging number. Absolutely.

How many Indigenous children are missing right now?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Of the Indigenous children who are under care of the director through the Child, Family and Community Service Act, there are currently no missing children in care that do not have contact with a caregiver or guardianship worker in some form.

Heather Maahs: Thank you for that answer. I may come back to that.

What safety and precautionary measures have been implemented to ensure the health and safety of Indigenous children in care so that injuries and deaths are reduced or, better yet, no longer occur at all?

[5:15 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I'm going to talk about Indigenous children and, by extension, all children. MCFD is responsible through the….

[The bells were rung.]

The Chair: I'll draw the committee's attention to the fact that division has been called in the chamber, so we will take a recess at this time and reconvene immediately after the chamber finishes the vote.

Thank you so much. See you soon.

The committee recessed from 5:19 p.m. to 5:32 p.m.

[Susie Chant in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. We are currently considering the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Heather Maahs: In the early years of Colby's life — this is the fictitious name of the person from *Don't Look Away* — one of the difficulties identified was the hardship for his parents, who could not afford specialized formula, costing $200 a month, which forced them to water down the formula that he was being given.

What actions have been taken to ensure that financial hardship in circumstances such as this are addressed today?

I'm going to add two more parts to this. What is the ministry doing to help struggling families with early intervention and prevention strategies with, of course, the Indigenous nations?

[5:35 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to start by just saying that our budget for child safety, family supports…. The historical budget…. When we came into government in 2017, the budget was $603 million. This year our budget is $1.327 billion. We have made incredible investments in supports for children and families.

There are a couple of things in response to the question. Medically complex children in our province are eligible for our at-home program, where specialized formula would be paid for, for the family. One of the things that we know from the *Don't Look Away* report is that even when services and supports are available, those services and supports are hard to navigate, and families don't always know what they have access to. We need to do a better job of ensuring that navigation and coordination of services is available.

Our direct workforce, our social workers, also have access to discretionary funding. When they are working with a family that has financial hardships or needs additional support, there is discretionary funding available. We haven't always clearly communicated that policy in a way that social workers all understand, so we have done work to address that issue from the *Don't Look Away* report. That recommendation will be complete by June.

I would also just say that there are a number of support programs and preventative programs that are delivered in our communities. There are family preservation and reunification programs in community. When there is a concern that a child may need protection, a social worker can refer to some of these programs in the community. Those family support workers can work with families to refer them to other programs.

As an example, in my community, when we have a preservation and reunification program, those family support workers can work with a family directly and refer them to parenting programs — things like Nobody's Perfect, Mother Goose programs. They can connect them with tenant support or look at their housing situation.

[5:40 p.m.]

We talked a little bit earlier about the family resource programs, where families come together and can access various things, get connected to the local food bank. There are so many programs and services that are delivered in our communities, and I know from experience that sometimes it's incredibly difficult to navigate or access, or we don't do the best job of supporting families to know how to get what they need. We are working consistently in the ministry to ensure that we do a better job of providing support to families early on so they don't end up in crisis.

The example that the member gives of a family not having access to formula is an example of just a heart-wrenching thing that didn't need to happen. I think that that's a part of a number of the things that I mentioned when we began estimates today on my mandate and the different direction that we need to take in this ministry. It's all a part of what the member speaks of.

Heather Maahs: I appreciate the frank answer from the minister.

Also from the report *Don't Look Away*, one senior staffer shared the possibility that MCFD social workers might have had concerns but didn't feel safe to speak up for fear of being labelled racist.

Are there whistleblower safety measures in place so that information is shared regarding children's best interests and ensuring that the needs of the children come first?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Firstly, it's important to outline that every single British Columbian has a responsibility under the Child, Family and Community Service Act to report when they feel a child is unsafe, whether that be a social worker, an MLA in this House or a teacher. Anybody that feels that there are concerns is required by law to report that concern, and contravention of that law can come with a fine. It's taken incredibly seriously.

[5:45 p.m.]

We also have what is called our provincial centralized screening. There is a large team in place around our provincial centralized screening, where social workers can report, where community members can report, and that is all anonymous. Even if you identify yourself through that report, you stay anonymous through that reporting process.

I am actually incredibly impressed with our provincial centralized screening. It is an incredibly important tool that we have in this province and receives hundreds of thousands of calls a year. I have personal experience using the screening myself. That is just the responsibility that people have in the province.

With respect to whistleblower policy, our Public Service Agency has a governmentwide whistleblower policy, and every ministry has an ethics adviser for all staff to access. These are robust policies that staff are aware of, and there should not be a concern for any sort of reprisal or reprimand for reporting a concern.

Heather Maahs: These policies were in place during the time frame of the *Don't Look Away* report. This comes right out of *Don't Look Away*, so obviously, it is a problem.

I'm well acquainted with the whistleblower policy that came into place through this government, being on the board of education, and the changes that were made. I guess it's there, and that's great, but monitoring, perhaps, might be something that this government might want to be interested in, if there is confidence, because this was in place when *Don't Look Away* was written.

I'm just going to move to a different question. What type of safeguards have been put in place to prevent those with sexual abuse charges from being contractors for MCFD?

[5:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Firstly, it's the ministry's policy that staff — MCFD direct staff or contracted staff — have vulnerable person criminal record checks. Those are of higher intensity and look into individuals more deeply, with respect to criminality, than a regular community criminal record check.

Those criminal record checks are centrally done. Each person that has that criminal record check…. It follows the person. It isn't about the contracted agency. If there's a person that works at one contracted agency and then moves, their criminal record check follows them. MCFD has access to that centrally.

We also have regular audits of criminal record checks. Contracted agencies that are contracted for over $500,000 with MCFD are required to go through an accreditation process. That accreditation process would include ensuring that all employees of that contracted agency have criminal records on file. If an agency didn't have criminal records on file, that could jeopardize their continued contract.

Heather Maahs: In *Don't Look Away*, the couple fictitiously named Staci and Graham were being recommended for permanent custody, and they actually had…. There was a record of sexual assault in, I believe it was, Graham's records. What action has this ministry taken to ensure that there are adequate processes in place to be followed to prevent such an atrocity from happening again?

Now, I know the minister has just stated that there is a process, but that process was in place when this situation happened as well. What further actions can the ministry take to prevent this from happening again and hold all accountable?

[5:55 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to acknowledge, and we've acknowledged, that what happened to Colby shouldn't happen to any child and that the things that were missed for him and his family were devastating. I share with the member that when I read the report, I was horrified. It's just a horrific situation.

There are a couple of things that we have done to ensure that oversight happens in a better and different way. One of the things is establishing a caregiver registry where there is one central place where there's provincial oversight for caregivers that includes all of the screening and the prevention things that I mentioned. I think that there are lots of examples where we have that in other service delivery, where it does really provide a tool and an ability for service providers to look someone up and ensure that they are qualified and credentialed.

We have the ECE registry. In the autism community, we have the autism service provider registry, where people can go on that registry and look up a service provider and ensure that they have what they say they have. Ensuring

that we have this caregiver registry is one piece of provincial oversight that will help with respect to this.

We also are now able to audit in real time, ensuring all contracted care has what I mentioned by way of criminal record checks and standards.

[6:00 p.m.]

We implemented a standardized electronic tool for documenting and tracking visits for children and youth in and out of care. At any point in time, staff can go into the system and pull up a child's file and look at when a visit occurred, what happened at the visit and whether we are ensuring that that is happening in the timelines, to prevent the unfortunate tragedy that was outlined in the *Don't Look Away* report.

Heather Maahs: I'm going to now turn it over to my colleague MLA Boultbee, who will take some additional time.

Amelia Boultbee: Could we just have a two-minute recess?

The Chair: We will have a short recess. If everybody could be back in their seats, I'm going to say, in five minutes. I can't work with two minutes. A short recess.

The committee recessed from 6:01 p.m. to 6:07 p.m.

[Susie Chant in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. We are currently considering the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Amelia Boultbee: Just to cap off my friend's line of questioning before I get into a different topic, can the minister please provide how much provincial funding is allocated to delegated Indigenous agencies or Indigenous governing bodies? Whether it's full jurisdiction, and they have control over their own affairs, or it's the half delegation, please let us know, expressed as a number, what the funding annually is.

[6:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to just express that the numbers that I'm providing for child, family and community serving agencies are for 2023-2024. The reason that we're using that number is because we provide funding in real time, as well, based on caseload. That number would be reported out, and I would be able to get you access to that number once we know what we're providing based on the caseload in Indigenous-serving agencies.

For that year, we spent $247 million on child-and-family safety services, children-in-care services.

We provide other sources of funding to Indigenous child and family serving agencies for programming that wouldn't be included in that line item. Those might be different types of programming related to children and youth with support needs, family support types of programming that's not included in that number.

With respect to Indigenous governing bodies, it's $13 million for coordination and community agreements.

Amelia Boultbee: I appreciate that answer. Taking a look at the voted appropriations, a lot of them in the description say that it also includes transfers to Indigenous governing bodies.

[6:15 p.m.]

Based on the minister's answer, in addition to those numbers that I was just provided, it sounds like there are, embedded in other line items, other transfers as well. I would appreciate a follow-up after estimates with the total number up till today's date, please.

Since the Premier was sworn in, in November 2022, the Ministry of Children and Family Development has issued approximately 127 contracts over $10,000, totalling more than $35.5 million. While some contracts may have supported aspects of service delivery, nearly half that total, approximately $15 million, has been spent on five high-priced consultants.

These funds were not used to directly hire front-line staff or expand access to care. Instead, they were spent on external firms, often with little public visibility. This reflects a pattern of choices that favour bureaucracy and consultants over front-line services and the children who rely on them.

While families across the province wait months for mental health supports, while social workers report crushing caseloads and while children with support needs remain stuck in limbo, this government is quietly spending millions on consultants to develop strategy documents, internal evaluations and frameworks — not to deliver direct care.

I had a series of questions seeking to elicit numbers associated with particular contracts, but I was informed at the break that that level of granularity is not available to us. So with the Chair's discretion, I'll give a small overview.

The numbers speak for themselves. Deloitte, one of the largest global consulting firms, secured $2.3 million across five contracts. KPMG received $1.37 million through just two contracts. MNP, a frequent fixture in NDP outsourcing, was paid nearly $600,000 for three contracts. Elevate Consulting was issued nine separate contracts, totalling $1.85 million. But the largest share, over $9 million, or approximately one-quarter of all contracted amounts, went to one firm alone, Deetken Enterprises, through 15 separate contracts.

While this unfolds, the ministry continues to sign off on contract after contract with external consultants. Meanwhile, this year's budget quietly cuts $4.1 million from adoption services.

This raises a fundamental question. If the government has $15 million to spend on five high-priced consultants, why isn't that money being used to hire more clinicians, fund more respite care, support the front-line workers holding the system together or reverse the cuts to adoption services? The priority should be getting services to children, not getting invoices to consultants.

With that, what specific services has Deetken Enterprises been contracted to provide under its contracts with the ministry, and why was this particular vendor selected so frequently over others?

[6:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to start by just saying that, wherever possible, we use in-house support for a wide variety of things.

When we are looking at large systems changes and transforming how we deliver programs and services — I'll get to the list of things that we have done — it is important for us to look at how we can do that most effectively and efficiently and as least costly as possible. We have a stringent and robust procurement process that looks at those very things and has criteria whenever we are going to use a third party or contract with a provider or a consultant.

I want to talk about adoption services. There have been no cuts to adoption services. In general, there haven't been any cuts at all to any services in MCFD. We saw a $321 million increase to this ministry this year. Since we formed government, we have invested year over year more than, I think, probably, the decades before.

The way that adoption services happen in this province, the landscape of adoption services, has changed. There are fewer children being adopted because more children are staying with their families. We have seen the biggest decrease to children in care in over a decade, so we are spending less on adoption. It doesn't mean we are cutting services. The landscape has changed, and how we deliver services in our province changes over time.

I also just want to say that we have had big policy shifts in this ministry since forming government. One example is our SAJE program, our strengthening adults and journeys of empowerment. When we formed government, there were very few young adults that were getting services into adulthood when they turned 19.

[6:25 p.m.]

We went from seeing approximately 600 young adults being supported to almost 4,000 young adults. We transformed that program. Those types of project management and change management take resources to be able to implement and deliver.

Like I said, wherever possible, we do things in-house. Actually, there are times where contracting is a cost-saving exercise, because we need temporary support. We don't need to add staffing internally. These are projects that happen over a period of time. The project is done, the change management is done, and then we no longer need those services.

I just want to reiterate that we have not had any cuts to my ministry or any services in the ministry.

Amelia Boultbee: With all due respect, I didn't hear an answer to my question. My question was: what specific services has Deetken Enterprises been contracted to provide? Why was this particular vendor selected so frequently over others?

[6:30 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: A couple things. The contracting out that the member is pointing to is $8.4 million this year, out of a $2.4 billion budget. With respect to the particular provider, we have core policies and procedures in government with respect to procurement and contracting.

The Deetken Enterprises that the member mentions went through an open procurement and selection process. There is criteria in that process that any vendor can bid for a contract, and there is evaluation of that. If there was someone that got a contract, it was because of that open and clear process.

I would also say, with respect to some of the things that Deetken Enterprises has supported the ministry with, we have implemented a specialized home and support services. We contracted the same way for these services for over 30 years. A transformation of how we do that work is a massive undertaking. It's massive change management. It involves many different contracted agencies, so they did some work around that.

We are doing quite a bit of work on co-development of a funding model with respect to jurisdiction and First Nations.

Just a couple things, as a part of some of the recommendations out of the *No Time to Wait* workload modelling tool, and looking at how we're looking at workload. There are a number of tools, engagements that need to happen. Those are just a couple of the things that Deetken Enterprises was engaged on.

Amelia Boultbee: Listening to what the minister has just given us of a few examples that Deetken does…. With respect to developing a model of funding for Indigenous jurisdiction, my understanding is that there was a report done on this quite some time ago and that the funding model chosen was block funding — in other words, lump sums of funding passed along without specific line items. Do I have that wrong?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Yes, that's incorrect. The funding model is currently being co-developed with First Nations. It's a commitment that we made under our DRIPA action plan.

It would be premature to talk about what that funding model includes, and it's under development.

[Jessie Sunner in the chair.]

Amelia Boultbee: I'm going to return to my line of questioning on Deetken and contracts. But since the minister brought up staffing modelling…. I believe she said it's something Deetken was doing. I'd like to ask about the workforce modelling tool that the ministry developed and was fully developed in 2019. In fact, I would like to know what in particular that tool cost.

On April 16, at the meeting of the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth, Alan Markwart, executive lead for legislation and special initiatives at the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth, shared deeply concerning information about the ministry's longstanding workforce challenges.

[6:35 p.m.]

He confirmed that in 2019, MCFD developed and implemented a workload measurement tool that found the ministry needed 636 additional full-time positions to achieve 85 percent compliance with practice standards. That's not full compliance; that's 85 percent. Yet between 2019 and 2024, the workforce grew by only 3 percent, and despite this well-documented need, the ministry abandoned the tool.

My question is: what did that tool cost, and why was it abandoned in 2019, necessitating Deetken to do that work apparently over again?

[6:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to just express that some of the numbers that were read with respect to the select standing committee are not in alignment with some of the numbers that the ministry has with respect to workforce. I'm happy to loop back with the Representative for Children and Youth and the member opposite on some of those numbers.

I would say in response to the workload tool…. The workload tool that was mentioned was a tool that was developed in 2016. Since that time, social work has changed fundamentally. The profession has evolved fundamentally.

[6:45 p.m.]

How we are working with Indigenous governing bodies and how we have to do our work in coordination with First Nations have drastically changed. So the tool itself from 2016 has been stood down.

The work with Deetken is to look at what things, as a recommendation of the *Don't Look Away* report or the *No Time to Wait* report, we can use from that and learn from that. How do we move forward better?

But since the tool that the member opposite was talking about, things have changed drastically.

Amelia Boultbee: We can loop back on the matter of 85 percent versus 100 percent compliance. But as it relates to the workload management tool, somebody in this meeting asked Alan Markwart, who was the witness, why MCFD stopped using the tool and whether it was because it was creating an administrative burden or was no longer useful.

He responded: "No, I don't think that was the reason it stopped. It's a bit of a mystery as to why it stopped. I don't know if this is true, but I used to be an ADM at MCFD. I suspect they didn't want it documented how short they were."

So with respect to the work that Deetken is now doing — since according to the minister, this workload tool has been abandoned for some years now — what is Deetken forecasting that MCFD requires in terms of FTEs?

[6:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: It would be premature for us to identify the number of FTEs required currently, particularly before we implement the recommendations of the *No Time to Wait* report. We are in the early stages of looking at the workload tool and, to that end, looking at the lessons learned, what needs to be changed, what needs to be adapted.

What I can say is that we are doing a number of pieces of work to address *No Time to Wait*. We've seen an almost 20 percent increase, as I've mentioned before, in ministry staffing levels, with year-over-year increases. The exit rates for staff totalled 1,300 employees in 2022. That decreased to 792 employees in 2024.

I think there is work to be done, absolutely, in looking historically at what has worked or what hasn't worked in development of what we need in the future. But I think it's premature to give a number, when we have to implement recommendations, consult with our front-line staff and do a lot of very large pieces of work before we can get to that place.

Amelia Boultbee: With all due respect to the minister, it doesn't make sense to me that the recommendations would have to be implemented, and then you'd figure out how many FTEs you need. That seems very like the cart before the horse. You're going to have to figure out how many FTEs you need in order to implement those recommendations.

I'm assuming that this deliverable is somewhere in the contractual relationship with Deetken. What is the timeline? When can the public expect to have that report back from Deetken telling us how many FTEs we need in the ministry?

[6:55 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to say that we aren't waiting for a new tool or a report from Deetken at this

time. Our consultation with Deetken has been about the tool that was stood down, the learnings from that, how the workforce has changed significantly since 2016 and to that time.

I would also say that our ministry's workforce plan addresses many of the recommendations. Work is underway to look at our onboarding processes to see where opportunities exist and to expand new-hire training, completing a feasibility analysis around regulation of social workers and expanding the cumulative stress management program to be available in all program areas. Our health and safety action plan has been developed and will be fully implemented.

Looking at the Guarding Minds at Work survey, administered every two years, to gain feedback from staff.

Revise the incentive strategy and submit to the Public Service Agency as bargaining.

Increase emphasis on ensuring cultural events and invitations are distributed to staff, encouraging participation and developing mentorship positions.

These are all things that are underway and are a comprehensive part of the workforce strategy. Yes, there are increases to direct service staff, but there were a number of recommendations made that our ministry is implementing and committed to.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you for that answer.

I find it very surprising that social work has changed so much in those ensuing years. You would think, if that were the case, that there would be a slew of people leaving social work because they no longer fit the job description for which they were hired and that we would be seeing a total, radical change in job descriptions being put out for social workers. To my knowledge, that hasn't happened.

Before I move on, I would just like to note that I have not yet received an answer as to what the original workload tool cost. If that information is not available, I would appreciate it in a follow-up.

[7:00 p.m.]

Of the five major consulting firms — Deetken Enterprises, Deloitte, KPMG, MNP and Elevate Consulting — how many of these contracts were awarded through a sole-source or limited competitive process? If so, what justification was provided for not opening those contracts to public competition?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We're going to have to go back and look and provide the information once we have a chance to take a look at that.

What I will say is that, again, we follow all of the policies and procedures around procurement. We proactively disclose any time that situation might occur with respect to what the member is meaning with respect to sole source. Anyone, once they see that proactive disclosure, can challenge that.

There are processes that we use in the ministry that are calls for response where providers are prequalified, based on their qualifications. In situations where there is no other firm, organization, entity available to do the particular type of work that we are procuring, then there would be an award.

[7:05 p.m.]

Again, that would be proactively disclosed and can be challenged by the public or another organization or firm at any time.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you. I appreciate that answer, and I will follow up with the minister's office to get some further detail, in particular, what the timeline and procedure is for challenging such a contract.

I have a series of questions that I'll be following up with the minister's office regarding some details on how they decide when a project requires external consulting rather than being completed by internal public servants, especially for core policy and planning functions as she alluded to from the *Don't Look Away* report.

That being said, noting the hour, I'd like to turn to a little bit of a contracting matter, which is: what does MCFD pay monthly and annually in legal fees?

[7:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I'm going to provide the member opposite with the annual amount because it would fluctuate monthly in a way that would be difficult to break down.

This year, $30 million. More than half of that is spent on directors counsel. That would be for local legal matters, when there's a court hearing with respect to child safety, with respect to custody, things like that. We also fund independent legal advice for children who are in care, and we fund mediation services for families as well.

Amelia Boultbee: Would the minister be able to provide me with the number or proportion of that $30 million that is not directors counsel, not independent legal advice, not everyday corporate matters but, rather, ongoing litigation?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: So $4.5 million for litigation.

[7:15 p.m.]

Amelia Boultbee: Is that a pretty typical annual cost for litigation for MCFD, or does it vary over, say, the last five years to a great degree — more than $1 million, let's say?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We can get the member the numbers for the last five years. It fluctuates, and we don't have those numbers handy.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you, I would appreciate that.

My next question is: what has MCFD paid in either court-ordered or out-of-court settlements over the last five years?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The Ministry of Children and Family Development doesn't pay settlements. It's done through the Ministry of Finance, through the Crown Proceedings Act, and that question would be better directed towards that ministry.

Amelia Boultbee: Speaking of staffing, according to page 82 of the November 2024 ministry transition binder, approximately 77 percent of the ministry's 5,500 staff are classified as direct service employees. The remaining 23 are identified as administrative support, excluded management or other corporate roles. The transition binder further acknowledges that the average employee age is 43.5 years, with an average tenure of nearly ten years, an indicator that significant succession planning challenges are on the horizon in addition to lack of retention.

As outlined on page 85 of the transition binder, the ministry references a range of recruitment efforts and incentive programs, including incentive pay, regional support measures and staff wellness initiatives. But it does not present a measurable or fully developed strategy for rebuilding the front-line workforce at the scale required to meet the current demand, and external oversight bodies have validated these concerns.

In *No Time to Wait, Part One*, released in July 2024, the Representative for Children and Youth described MCFD's social worker workforce as being in a state of crisis, marked by persistent and substantial understaffing, unmanageable workloads, an inability to meet practice standards and an unhealthy work environment characterized by undue stress, burnout and fear.

No Time to Wait, Part Two, released in February 2025, echoed those findings, confirming that the same conditions still exist. On page 24, the report highlights supervision and mentorship gaps across the province, with front-line staff reporting inconsistent access to support and team leaders too overwhelmed to provide meaningful guidance.

Despite internal recognition and repeated external warnings, the ministry still lacks a measurable plan to stabilize, support and scale its workforce. Until that happens, service expansion efforts will continue to run aground, not because of ambition but because of capacity.

According to page 82 of the November 2024 transition binder, 77 percent of MCFD staff are working in front-line service roles. Can the minister explain why nearly one-quarter of the ministry's staffing resources are allocated to non-service delivery roles, given the large number of children who remain unserved?

[7:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I appreciate where the question comes from. I think that we can recognize the incredible importance of direct service staff in providing, particularly, the very important services for Children and Family Development. But I have to point out that there are a number of staff and there are a number of functions of the ministry that are required to actually support those direct service staff.

We have eight divisions of the ministry that directly also support service delivery in many different ways. I'm someone who comes from direct service delivery and from community where we had direct service staff, but we needed a ton of support around that with respect to finance and ensuring people get paid, with respect to human resources, with oversight and supervision.

We have thousands of direct service staff that need access to technology. Our provincial centralized screening is a really good example of the requirement for IT support. We have policy and litigation that we just overviewed the need for.

We have numbers of FTEs that are actually responsible for directly getting payments into the hands of families so that they can access supports and services. Those aren't considered direct service staff. When we have people that are approving invoices, for example, for autism funding or for the At Home program and medical benefits…. When we have people doing work that is around supporting families but not directly supporting families, that's a part of the entire workforce.

[7:25 p.m.]

I recognize that we need to ensure that we have the direct service staff required to deliver these services, but direct service staff can't actually do the important work that they need to do if we don't also have the entire complement of the workforce that needs to support them.

We have a whole department around partnerships and Indigenous engagement. Those staff are integral in ensuring that we are transforming our child welfare system and working in partnership with Indigenous community–serving agencies.

I believe in the importance of our entire workforce. Yes, we have more work to do to increase our direct workforce, but the important work that other members of the ministry do is crucial to ensure that that direct service staff can do their work as well.

Amelia Boultbee: Where I'm going with this is that I believe the RCY identified that the recommended number of case files for a front-line worker, either a child protection or social worker, was 17. The report identified individuals with cases over 80, 150.

My question is: what is the average number of case files per front-line worker, specifically child protection or social workers?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to recognize that we know that caseloads for a variety of direct service staff in the workforce are high, and this isn't just specific to British Columbia. It's across North America, and it's across varying jurisdictions. We have seen unprecedented population growth. An additional 550,000 people came to this province over the last number of years, so we absolutely are grappling with caseloads and needing to increase our workforce.

I just want to acknowledge that. Whether it is a front-line social worker, a speech and language pathologist, a family doctor, a clinical counsellor…. All of these very important professions in our province, in our country, are struggling with high caseloads. We are doing everything that we can to recruit regulated professionals in this province.

We've made gains, as we've canvassed quite a bit — an increase in the direct workforce and the increase in our workforce in general — and we will continue to do that work.

Amelia Boultbee: Does the minister have a number for me of the average number of case files per front-line worker?

[7:30 p.m. - 7:35 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: A couple of things. What I can offer to the member is that we can come back and provide a bit of a range of caseload in a service delivery area, for example.

The challenge with talking about caseload in a static way is that it is very varied and very dependent on the type of social worker or direct service staff and the situation and the complement of families that come in through intake. For example, there are guardianship social workers. There are resource social workers. There are family support social workers.

Those are all very different types of work that are happening. Then the types of families and children or youth would also be very different and need varying intensities of support. So in general, what I would say, because I had to oversee clinical staff, is you would look at caseload in a very holistic way.

One staff person may have, and these are just general numbers, a caseload of five. Someone else may have a caseload of 25, but it's very different based on the needs of those children and those families. It's not a static number, and it's not something that is easily available. But what we can do….

We track every single intake that we get through our provincial centralized screening and other areas. We are able to generally see what we will need based on that and able to provide a range to the member once staff has been able to go back and get that.

Amelia Boultbee: I appreciate what the minister is saying. I appreciate that there are different types of front-line workers and that it could be anywhere from five to 30 cases. However, all the reports that I have read indicate that without exception, across the board, front-line workers have far more cases than what they are recommended to handle.

In fact, the RCY examined in what proportion of cases front-line workers were actually able to meet their practice standards when it came to documentation. In the vast majority of cases, they were not able to meet it due to having too many cases.

If I wanted to save the ministry $9 million, we could go and figure out how many cases they're all supposed to have, how many they do have, figure out from there how many FTEs from front-line workers and save $9 million from Deetken.

My question is: how many current job openings are posted right now for front-line workers, including child protection and social workers, in British Columbia?

[7:40 p.m. - 7:45 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I can say that internally, the ministry moves a lot of staff around based on the needs of the ministry, as things change, as positions come up, or if there are things that we need to do for capacity.

What I can also say is that we currently have 45 postings open to the public for direct service staff.

Amelia Boultbee: I'm very surprised to hear that the number is 45. That sounds very low to me, given that six years ago, we know, we were 600 FTEs short.

That said, my question to the minister is: how many of the front-line staff are actually social workers, as opposed to child protection workers — expressed as a number or a percentage, please?

[7:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We have 3,800 direct service staff. Of those, 1,010 are child protection direct service staff. Of those 1,010 child protection service staff, 65 percent have a degree in social work, and the rest have preferred credentials.

Amelia Boultbee: I just want to make sure that I'm understanding this correctly. Are you saying that…? Out of the 3,800, 1,100 are child protection workers, so they're not social workers. I'm assuming, since the minister is saying 65 percent have a degree in social work, ostensibly a lot of them could, in theory, be eligible for registration.

Is the minister saying that the other 2,700 are social workers, or are they something else?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: To clarify, the roles include things like child protection, resource, adoption, children

and youth with support needs workers, as well as CYMH clinicians and youth justice roles.

Amelia Boultbee: I appreciate what the minister has said, but with respect, she has danced around answering my question.

In fact, MCFD does not track the number of employees who are registered with the college because it is not required for employment. The college also does not keep up-to-date records on the number of registrants who are MCFD employees.

[7:55 p.m.]

Anecdotally, it is believed that only a small proportion of MCFD child welfare workers are registered, again because it is not a requirement of employment.

In 1995, the Gove report — that's almost 30 years ago — had a strong recommendation, which has been repeated in several reports since then, that all child protection workers in British Columbia be social workers. In fact, this government has gone in the opposite direction of the Gove recommendations.

In 2019, the ministry moved in the opposite direction by expanding accepted educational qualifications for new social workers. I believe it's only two years of relevant experience at this time. Data provided by MCFD indicates that 82 percent of current child welfare staff have a preferred credential, with 72 percent of those having a bachelor of social work. This translates into 58 percent of the current complement of child welfare staff appearing to qualify for registration with the college.

I believe one of the last reports from RCY said that in order to close this gap and achieve the goal of having 100 percent social worker registrants, it would, even if all the resources were poured into it, take ten years.

My question to the minister is: where in this budget is funding to expand the number of seats in the college of social work and to attract additional applicants?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to say, firstly, that seats for post-secondary education wouldn't be in my ministry or my budget. That would be a question that would be more appropriate for the ministry of post-secondary and skills training.

I just want to also highlight that there's been a misunderstanding of the recommendation for the Representative for Children and Youth. The recommendation actually recognizes that mandating registration of all MCFD workers is a complex issue and that imposing the mandatory requirement according to the current criteria for registration with the college would be unfeasible and unsafe.

The representative does not agree that a degree in social work is necessary to perform the functions of a child welfare worker and certainly not necessary to carry out all of the broad range of roles and functions of these workers.

We have to very carefully contemplate our workforce to ensure that children and youth are kept safe. First and foremost, the safety and well-being of children is our top priority. Ensuring that we can recruit a front-line workforce and retain that workforce, and that children, youth and families have someone that can support them is the number one priority.

[8:00 p.m.]

We are working with partners to explore how we would have a regulatory body on child protection work in general.

Amelia Boultbee: With respect, I have not misunderstood the report. I do understand that the RCY has said that it would be dangerous to impose this overnight because, as we've seen, hundreds, if not the majority, of child protection workers would immediately not be eligible. So I agree that that would be unsafe to snap your fingers and mandate it, because there would be an even worse staffing shortage than the one that we're already facing.

However, it's very clear to me that it is important that child welfare, child protection workers have a four-year degree of relevant experience and that they're registered with an independent regulatory body. Anecdotally, when I get complaints that come across my desk, it's very difficult when they're not a social worker because there isn't anyone at arm's length to complain to.

It is anomalous that virtually all other professions across sectors — many of whom work with vulnerable children, youth and families — are subject to oversight by an independent regulatory body. Yet MCFD child welfare workers, who work with the most vulnerable children in the province, are largely not.

My next question is: does MCFD conduct exit interviews?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Yeah, we do. They are voluntary.

Amelia Boultbee: At what point did MCFD start conducting exit interviews? Has this always been a policy, or is it new? My understanding is that MCFD was not conducting exit interviews.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: There has always been an opportunity through the Public Service Agency to provide information through an exit interview for public servants.

With respect to MCFD specifically, it has been at the discretion of the local service agency. The ministry created a corporate policy around exit interviews beginning last year.

[8:05 p.m.]

Amelia Boultbee: Just so I have this right, according to the last two reports from RCY, the stress, burnout and lack of retention are leading this ministry to be at crisis levels. By the minister's own admission, 1,300 people

exited in 2022. And 792, if I heard her correctly, is the number given for 2024. Again, incredibly high numbers of turnover.

It seems to me only appropriate that there be an immediate implementation of exit interviews in all cases to try to get some feedback on what is needed to actually retain people in this profession. To that end, one of the pieces of feedback that I receive regularly from front-line workers, whether it's a social worker or a child protection worker, is that their wages are very low.

My question to the minister is, where in this budget will I see a salary increase for front-line workers such as social workers and child protection workers?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The Public Service Agency is the bargaining agency for government that would bargain wages. Our front-line staff receive their wages through a collective agreement, so those would be negotiated at the bargaining table.

MCFD has been consulted by the Public Service Agency. I will say that Budget 2023 saw a 17 percent wage increase through the shared recovery mandate, so front-line staff would have received that 17 percent wage increase over three years. We wouldn't see what is reflected in that, going forward, because it's currently going through a collective bargaining.

Amelia Boultbee: If I understand the minister correctly, they won't look at it again until 2027. Do I have that math right?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The terms and conditions are being bargained right now, so we won't know until that is completed.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Noting the time, I'm trying to move to a compact section, seeing as we only have a few minutes here before we're getting called to a vote. This might be a good time to talk about the integrated case management system.

[8:10 p.m.]

When I clerked on one of the longest-running child welfare cases in Canadian history, back in 2015, we heard a lot of evidence about ICM and how it was a very bad system. It wasn't user-friendly. In fact, it was so difficult to use that it created safety issues.

Imagine my surprise to become an MLA ten years later, and I'm reading reports that are saying the exact same thing. According to my research, it was launched in 2008 as a partnership between MSDSI, MCFD and Citizens' Services. It was completed in November 2014, at a total capital cost of $182 million. I've got about half a dozen reports in front of me here: an Auditor General report from 2015, an RCY ICM backgrounder 2012, B.C. ICM Privacy and Security, 2013.

The quite comprehensive BCGEU report from 2014 had an entire chapter dedicated to ICM, how it crashed, that it doesn't work, that it's not user-friendly. I myself receive a lot of those types of reports today, in 2025.

My question to the minister is: is there a level of awareness, at the ministerial level, of what a poor tool ICM is? If so, is there any funding allocated in this year's budget to actually do something about this non-functional tool?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I do want to recognize that $182 million is a significant investment in an IT system. It is a major IT system, which we are making regular updates and improvements to. It's very difficult to just throw a system to the side that costs $182 million and build an entirely new one.

[8:15 p.m.]

I've worked in community around case systems, IT systems, client-management systems, a variety of different ones. There are challenges across the board in having systems that work really well for everyone. I have yet to personally experience a system that does everything that every service user wants it to.

As far as our information management and technology investments that we have made, approval has been secured for almost $8 million of capital funding, over three years, to proceed with child safety information management and technology enablers. This investment will allow for social workers to electronically enter notes when they are in the field rather than making handwritten notes and uploading them later, which will free up time.

Social workers will be provided with access to centralized and consolidated information to inform decision-making. Then the process for teachers, counsellors, police and other professionals to report concerns has also been streamlined.

I also know that we have invested quite a bit in our system to ensure there's an applet for real-time reporting around child safety visits. We're able to track that in real time to ensure that we're meeting our desired standards of visits.

Amelia Boultbee: I'm satisfied with that answer. I do appreciate that $182 million is a lot of money to spend. So I'm really glad to hear that there's $8 million in funding and other recognition that some additional support for technology and streamlining is being done.

I've had the opportunity to just refer back to *No Time to Wait, Part Two*. I just want to state for the record, that there was a question mark about this. According to the report, the child protection workload model developed in 2019 found that there was a huge gap of 636 full-time-equivalent additional staff required to achieve 85 percent compliance with child protection practice standards — i.e., there is empirical validation of significant levels of understaffing and consequent excessive workload.

There has not been an appreciable increase in child welfare social worker staffing levels between the time of the measurement of the significant shortfall and as of March 31, 2024. The workload measurement tool was abandoned by the ministry in 2021. The average number of cases, at least for CYSN, as of 2024 is 186.

And 81 percent of social workers and team leaders responding to the representative's survey said that their workload does not permit them to effectively support the children, youth and families on their caseload. More than two-thirds, 68 percent, of MCFD managers shared the views of the social workers and team leaders.

My respectful request to the ministry would be: please don't wait any longer to implement further recommendations or to get a report from Deetken, or whatever it is. Clearly, there's a huge need for more front-line workers, and 45 people is nowhere near what's going to cut it.

Noting the hour, Madam Chair, it's 8:19. Am I correct in understanding that we are closing this House down at 8:20 in anticipation of the 8:30 vote in the main House?

The Chair: Yeah, we can adjourn at 8:20 or 8:25, whatever is suitable.

Amelia Boultbee: Madam Chair, if it means that I lose the time off my estimates, then I will continue. But if adjourning just means that we're not going to cut it off in the middle, then I would be fine to adjourn now in anticipation of the vote in the main House.

[8:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to respond that we have a net increase of front-line staff by about 502 FTEs. I think that we have done an incredible amount of work to increase our front-line staff. That work isn't waiting.

I would also just again say that with respect to caseload, particularly on the CYSN side of things, that is very nuanced and that not every child needs the same thing.

There's currently a lot of work underway in community to look at what is defined on that caseload. There would, on that 186 number, potentially be quite a number of children who are not required or in need of direct service. So caseload is not a static number, as we've canvassed in this House previously.

With that, I move that the committee rise and report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The Chair: Thank you, Members. This committee stands adjourned.

The committee rose at 8:21 p.m.

Proceedings in the Birch Room

Committee of the Whole

BILL 11 — EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

The House in Committee, Section C.

The committee met at 2:53 p.m.

[Darlene Rotchford in the chair.]

The Chair: Good afternoon, Members. I'll call Committee of the Whole on Bill 11, Employment Standards Amendment Act, 2025, to order.

On clause 1.

Kiel Giddens: Welcome, everyone, back to the Birch Room today. I'm very pleased to see the Labour Minister here in person. Last week we spent a lot of time together, but it was, of course, virtually. So this is great to have folks in the same room.

Welcome to the staff; I really appreciate your work. Also, thank you for the technical briefing that you provided on this bill prior to our discussion.

As we heard in second reading, myself and my colleagues did support that phase of the bill. But we do have a number of questions that I'm going to go through, and I've got a number of questions that stakeholders have provided as well. We'll have a chance to go through these parts of the bill.

[2:55 p.m.]

With that, maybe just to start off, I realize this was in the NDP government's platform last fall. I'm wondering, maybe just to give the minister a bit of an opportunity to start: when did discussions with Doctors of B.C., in particular, occur to inform these amendments going into it? What was the initial thinking there?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Thank you to the critic for the welcome. It's good to be back in person today.

I just wanted to acknowledge that I'm joined by staff from the Ministry of Labour: Lorie Hrycuik, the Deputy Minister of Labour; Michael Tanner, the executive director from labour policy and legislation; and Lydia Zucconi, the senior policy adviser from labour policy and legislation.

I guess just by way of background to the bill, as we've canvassed…. A number of organizations have been calling for this legislation. A number of health professional organizations have called for this provision for some time. I expect that we will have an opportunity to engage dir-

ectly with Doctors of B.C. during the consultation process on the regulation.

Kiel Giddens: I'm wondering if the minister could maybe describe a little bit when the drafting of the bill began. Part of the reason I'm asking is I just want to know… I'm trying to understand the thinking around saving the consultation to the later phase, I guess. Obviously, the regulations are going to be where some of that consulting, as I understand, comes forward. But when did that drafting begin, and why couldn't the consultation have happened a little bit sooner, I guess, before the bill was presented to the Legislature?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Maybe I can just, again, further illuminate the context for this particular change. We are, I think we recognize, since COVID, in a new period, since our experience with the pandemic. Frankly, we've experienced, over the last 25 years, a number of pandemics or epidemics. We had SARS in the early 2000s; we had H1N1 in 2009, 2010; and then, of course, the global pandemic, COVID-19. So we understand the necessity of changing our response to respiratory illness season.

We wanted to have the statutory framework in place in this session, so that we can do the consultation with a view to having the regulations in place for the respiratory season which we know will hit again later this year. So this is enabling legislation to allow for that process of consultation.

Kiel Giddens: I appreciate that this is enabling legislation, certainly. But I'm wondering still: has the government had requests for consultation prior?

Obviously, this was in the platform, and it was well known that this was going to be likely brought forward. So have there been any consultations that have happened prior to the legislation being introduced, and if so, who was that with?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I would just say that there have been calls from many organizations, many very public calls from the Canadian Medical Association, from Doctors of B.C., from family practitioners, from the B.C. Federation of Labour, many individual unions calling for relief of the administrative burden on physicians due to the burden of being requested by employers for employees to provide sick notes for short-term absences. This is a response to that very public call from many different organizations.

[3:00 p.m.]

Kiel Giddens: I'm just trying to understand how the process of drafting had started with the bill. But I appreciate, I guess, the…. We're not going to quite understand fully when that began.

But I guess I'm going to get into some of the definitions though. Under the definitions, I'm wondering why (a), (b) and (c) are specified separately in the bill. Could the minister maybe just describe what that definition of "health practitioner" means, if that can be described for the public benefit?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: It's necessary to have the different professionals who are implicated in this work identified separately. So (a) a medical practitioner speaks to, essentially, a physician; (b) covers individuals who are essentially in nursing occupations; (c) are other designated health professionals who may be designated through regulation at a later date; and (d) is all of the health professions who are concerned here but in a jurisdiction other than British Columbia.

Kiel Giddens: Thank you very much to the minister for that clarification.

Just a little bit more granular…. Under subsection (b), I just want to confirm that that includes RNs, nurse practitioners and licensed practical nurses. Is that all the nursing professions included?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Licensed practical nurses are not contemplated by section (b).

Kiel Giddens: A helpful clarification, just to understand for the nursing professions.

Under subsection (c), as the minister stated, these professions are added by regulation. I'm wondering if the minister could maybe just provide some examples of the types of health practitioners that could presumably be included under this section, just as examples. Is that possible in any way?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: It could technically be any occupation, any profession, that's designated under the Health Professions Act. The ones that I would suggest likely would be psychologists, for example, or potentially psychiatric nurses or dentists.

We will elicit, through the consultation process, whether there are other kinds of short-term conditions that might be connected to other practitioners other than doctors and nurses, wherein we may find it helpful to identify a different kind of health professional.

Kiel Giddens: Thank you to the minister for the response.

Under health-related leave, can the minister just clarify what is meant by prescribed individual and maybe why that is needed? Within that, is there a list that perhaps is already created of that entity?

[3:05 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: A prescribed individual would be an individual other than the person themselves who is ill. That reference is to the health and illness or injury of a prescribed person. That means that if the employee would miss work to take care of a prescribed person, for example a child, who is ill or injured, the employer could not request a sick note for that short-term leave or absence.

There are currently no prescribed persons. It will be determined through consultation whether or not there will be prescribed persons in the regulation.

Kiel Giddens: I do think that's an important one for stakeholders and interested groups to note for the consultation, so I appreciate that.

Under the same kind of lines, I do think that specified circumstances seems to be an important definition to maybe just expand on a little bit further so that the public has an idea. Can the minister please provide clarity on why "specified circumstances" is needed, and a little bit more about this definition?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: The specified circumstances is the way in which we are describing the particulars of the circumstances. These are what will be determined through regulation.

It's the instances, actually, that the critic enumerated very clearly in their second reading response, where in different jurisdictions across the province, there are varying numbers of days that are considered to constitute a short-term illness. As well, there are varying provisions in other jurisdictions around the number of instances that might be subject to a prohibition on sick notes.

In some jurisdictions, it's after two instances of a certain short-term absence or after a total number of cumulative days. So those are the specifics that we will canvass during the consultation on the regulation to determine the total number of days that should constitute a short-term illness and what we should be saying with respect to number of instances throughout a period of time.

Kiel Giddens: I do think, yeah, there will be lots of, probably, helpful feedback during that consultation on what those circumstances are. I guess, as the province is looking at it, if the minister can indulge this, are there any provinces that are doing things well that could be a model for stakeholders to look at that the province had contemplated when looking at this?

[3:10 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think, as is well known, there is quite a variety of specified circumstances in different jurisdictions across the country, and there isn't one particular regime that was in our minds in drafting the legislation.

We'll really want to hear from stakeholders, to hear from folks about what they think would work well for British Columbia. In that process of consulting on the regulation, we'll also work with our colleagues across the country to identify what's working well in their particular regimes, what isn't working well and what learnings are to be had from other jurisdictions.

Kiel Giddens: Actually, that's a helpful response. I think I made that comment in second reading debate as well — that I think B.C. should look across Canada as much as we can. So I fully agree with the minister on that basis.

Of those specified circumstances, the short-term basis is also going to be, probably, an important one for stakeholders to consider. Is that something, fully, that is part of the consultation process, or is that something that's already contemplated or defined in some way?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think what we've really heard from health care professionals is a concern about appointment times being taken up and time being spent writing administrative notes when there's no meaningful medical intervention or clinical intervention that can be made, such as with somebody who has a bad cold or a bad flu. Really, they just need to be at home resting, not exposing other patients in a waiting room to a potentially contagious disease or going to work while they're sick.

It really is targeted on those circumstances that are of a very short duration and on situations where there's no clinical intervention that's going to be helpful for the individual, not circumstances where medical information is required to assist in a return-to-work process or in determining what functional limitations may be necessary in cases where there's an accommodation.

You know, I think there's sort of a line to be drawn across where there is, very appropriately, a health professional's involvement in determining and providing information to an individual and, potentially, their employer, but this is not meant to be those circumstances. Again, I think we'll get to this during consultation on the regulation piece.

[3:15 p.m.]

Kiel Giddens: I guess it may be important to note that at second reading, this is where perhaps we differed a little bit on that need and the benefit of sick notes overall. It is that chance to engage with the primary care provider, where just the act of getting that sick note may also help with an undiagnosed illness. It may help with the prescription that may be better for the long-term health of that patient. We do want the public to have good access to our health care system.

In a moment, I'm going to turn it over, just for a few questions, to our Health critic. Before I do, just want to

make sure that the public understands the government's overall intent in the Employment Standards Act amendment, as it is.

Under section 49.1, under the original act, it states: "The employee must, as soon as practicable, provide to the employer reasonably sufficient proof that the employee is entitled to leave." Then it goes, really…. Sick notes have become the normal course of doing this, of course, but medical bracelets, as an example, and some other proof have been used as well.

In drafting this amendment to the Employment Standards Act, the government intends to ensure that a sick note is not required as proof of illness. In effect, employees are able to provide their own statement of illness — or, in other words, their own attestation — without needing medical evidence, in most cases.

Is that a fair characterization, that employee attestation is sort of the default, going forward?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think our starting place for this provision is to assume that people are conducting themselves as reasonable adults in the course of their work life and that if they say they're sick, they're sick.

Anna Kindy: Just looking at this bill in the context of patient safety, I see the intent is to basically decrease administrative load of primary care providers. We also have to think of patient safety.

I just was wondering what percentage of doctors' notes were related to respiratory illnesses. Then, what percentage of the sort of flu-like illnesses progressed to other diagnoses — for example, pneumonias? What percentage of people requiring doctor's notes ended up progressing to hospitalization?

[3:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I just want to stay focused on really what the intent of this legislation is. This is enabling legislation that is removing the ability of employers to require, as proof of illness in order to pay an employee for sick leave or to grant sick leave, that the employee has gone and seen a doctor, requested a sick note and brought that sick note to the employer. This is not about an individual's access to health care. Of course, if people are sick and they need the care of a doctor, they should absolutely go see a doctor.

Kiel Giddens: I just want to recognize my colleague. The member for North Island was a family physician for 38 years and has been a physician for a long time so is quite used to this system and has helped me with just understanding how physicians look at this overall.

I can understand what the minister has said about treating people like adults. That's fair. Obviously, other forms of mechanism for verifying short-term illness would be problematic. I wouldn't agree with something like just employer discretion or something like that.

Were there any other mechanisms that were considered by the ministry besides this, as government was looking at options? Again, perhaps there could be other methods that other provinces might be doing that I'm not aware of.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Again, I would just say that this is a fairly narrow change. It is a response to what we have heard from health practitioners, who have said that from their perspective, sick notes for illnesses of a short duration, where they can't really make a clinical intervention or provide any meaningful medical information, are not helpful. It clogs up the system, it takes up appointment time, it's unnecessary, and it contributes to an administrative burden.

Really, what we're seeing across the province is a shift to just take this issue out of the realm of employers to be able to require of employees, so that we are contributing to both the reduction of an administrative burden for health practitioners and also just easing the burden on people who are sick; who need to be at home getting well; and who need to, often, not be paying out of pocket for notes. That is often the case with respect to doctors, physicians — charging for such notes.

[3:25 p.m.]

Kiel Giddens: Thank you to the minister.

Again, my colleague, as the Health critic, wanted to make sure that….Obviously, I would assume the Ministry of Health has been consulted and any of their concerns have been addressed and all that.

Perhaps a simple question: can that be verified, that the Ministry of Health was fully consulted?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Yeah, absolutely. We're working very closely with the Ministry of Health on this issue. Of course, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Jobs, Economic Development and Innovation will also be involved in the consultation as well.

Kiel Giddens: Thanks very much to the minister for the verification.

Reasonably sufficient proof is still, obviously, language that exists in the act, as it would be amended in this case.

I'm wondering if the ministry can confirm it will be issuing regulations, guidelines or templates to help employers to understand what constitutes reasonable proof under the new framework.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: There are, in fact, guidelines currently on the employment standards branch website to aid employers in this regard. It points to things such as prescription receipts and hospital bracelets.

Kiel Giddens: Just for stakeholder benefit, would those guidelines be updated with some of these new rules? Would it be clarified, under the new circumstances, what that reasonable proof would look like? Is that something that needs to be updated at all with this change, would you foresee?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think that the updates would be to clarify the circumstances under which an employer is not able to require proof of illness.

Kiel Giddens: Obviously, we'll get into it later in the bill when it takes into account…. Royal assent isn't until it comes into force by regulation, but I'm wondering.

The minister did describe trying to get this accomplished before the respiratory season. Is there any clarity for folks, just so they have an idea of the dates we're looking for…? I guess a little bit more granular in that window of time that the public can expect this to take force.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: We've already done some preliminary work around initiating consultation. The intent would be to have that conducted over the spring and early summer, and then make recommendations to cabinet for passage of the regulation. Again, our intention would be to have this in place in advance of the respiratory season in the fall of 2025.

Kiel Giddens: Maybe just moving on. I've got a number of questions that were passed to me by various stakeholders, so I'm just going to go through a few.

[3:30 p.m.]

Under what circumstances will an employer still be able to request additional proof beyond an employee's own statement of illness — for example, in the case of suspected abuse or pattern absenteeism?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Again, the regulations would prescribe the circumstances in which an employer cannot require a proof of illness. Anything beyond that would be subject to the employer's discretion.

I would just note that there's nothing in this bill that prevents the employer from…. They have the right in law to manage attendance, and nothing in this bill changes that.

Kiel Giddens: Maybe an example. Could an employer make a distinction between first-time absences versus repeated short-term absences when it comes to allowing further evidence? Is that something that employers…?

Obviously, not having sick notes is one thing. If there was some sort of repeat pattern — with that, I think they'd need just a little bit of guidance on what that would look like — is that something that is in their realm of possibility for managing their workplace?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Well, I would just say that I'm sure we're going to hear from stakeholders about this very point over the course of the consultation, about what number of days should be considered a short-term absence and how many instances it would be reasonable to expect over the course of a period of time.

Anything outside of that would be, again, subject to the employer's discretion. We'll know what that sort of threshold is once we've been through the establishing of the regulations.

Kiel Giddens: I think, some of the employers that were asking me the questions, the context of their questions is that, of course, B.C., within the current act and in regulation…. It's notable that we're one of the only jurisdictions that does have the automatic five paid sick days after 90 consecutive days of employment with an employer.

In terms of how these changes interact with that current policy, was there any analysis of how the amendments proposed would work in practice, with that current policy in place?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I would suggest that it's really immaterial whether or not the leave is paid, whether it's the five days paid sick leave or the unpaid leave that's covered by the Employment Standards Act or other leave that the employer provides. The issue here, really, is about establishing a threshold and identifying circumstances in which an employer is not permitted to require a sick note.

Kiel Giddens: Maybe another question that I received. We talked about specified circumstances earlier — the definition — and those are important in terms of the regulation-making in this case.

[3:35 p.m.]

Just so I'm clear, presumably, certain specified circumstances could also be exempted by regulation. Could we add regulations in place that would enable sick notes in a certain circumstance prescribed by regulation in that case, if there was a certain specified circumstance?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: The answer is yes. There is specified in clause 49.2(1) the definition of a health-related leave: "In relation to an employee, means leave or other absence from work that is related to the health, illness or injury of the employee or a prescribed individual, other than the leave in sections 50, 51, 52.1 and 52.11 and a type of leave or other absence from work specified in regulations."

Essentially, what we wanted to do is allow for a circumstance in which a physician or a health professional might say: "Yes, in this circumstance, it would be appropriate, in a short-term illness." I'm not sure what that would be, but health professionals will know whether there is a circum-

stance wherein it might be appropriate, so there is a provision to allow for the capturing of that in the regulations.

Kiel Giddens: I do think that's helpful, that that health-related leave section is where…. If folks do have questions about that, that's a good point in the regulation-making where that could be a sufficient part for that discussion, so thank you for clarifying. I don't have exact examples in mind, either, so I'm not going to get into hypotheticals back and forth here.

So maybe just moving on, another question I had from employers: has the ministry assessed how this change may affect small and medium-sized businesses that rely on predictable staffing?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: In part, really, that's the whole point: to take measures to ensure that it's sort of another tool around stable and predictable staffing, because if people know that they can actually take sick leave, that they're not going to have to pay out of pocket for a note, they hopefully are going to stay home and not put at risk their co-workers by coming to work sick and potentially bringing a contagious disease into the workplace.

[3:40 p.m.]

I think that these very sorts of questions, with respect to how the very nitty-gritty details of this regulation will work, are precisely why we'll be wanting to hear from business and employer organizations, as well as everybody else, when we're in the consultation period.

Kiel Giddens: Thank you to the minister.

I think part of it is, obviously, businesses are trying. We have 98 percent of the businesses in B.C., obviously, that are small businesses. I think they're just particularly interested.

Managing, when you have a smaller overall workplace, has a relatively larger impact. I think they're just trying to make sure that they understand the rules. Again, they want their employees to come to work healthy. I fully agree with that. They also want to make sure that they can still run their businesses and that there are not going to be disputes or things like that.

I'm wondering if the employment standards branch or WorkSafeBC had any specific comments on the bill that would be relevant for the public to understand at this time as well.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think the role of the employment standards branch is really important, as we had a chance to canvass in estimates last week, with respect to supporting both employers and workers on their respective rights and obligations under the Employment Standards Act.

I just want to note again, with respect to sick leave, that we're definitely evolving our views and our understanding about sick leave. That has advanced significantly from our experience during COVID.

We know, through studies that have been done, that paid sick leave helps to increase productivity. It reduces absenteeism by preventing outbreaks and the chance of workplace closures. That was a report that was done by the Ontario COVID-19 science advisory table.

In our own province, the B.C. seniors advocate reviewed COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care and assisted living and concluded that the amount of paid sick leave in those worksites had an influence over whether those outbreaks were large or small.

We know, with all the concerns that we all have around predictability and stability, that it's important to have clear rules in place with respect to how much time constitutes a short-term leave, how many instances. Of course, the employment standards branch will be there, once the rules are clear, to provide support and guidance to employers and employees in ensuring that those rules are applied.

Kiel Giddens: We discussed at length in estimates that the employment standards branch is a critical tool for employees and for employers to be able to go to. I'll have a couple of questions on that in a minute.

[3:45 p.m.]

This timing of the consultation is going to happen pretty quickly here. We're in the spring, and the spring is going to turn into summer, and then we'll be getting ready for this. I just wanted to maybe ask a little bit more in depth the breadth of the consultation in which labour and employer groups will be included.

Is that able to be specified so that groups know…? Is there a list? How they are going to be contacted? That type of thing, or do they have to put up their hand? Should we be letting them know? I think it would be helpful to understand what that process is going to look like if it's well underway already.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: There are a number of organizations. There are public sector employer groups, and that will largely be coordinated through the Public Sector Employers Council.

There are unionized work organizations, which I know the member is familiar with: the B.C. Federation of Labour; of course; in particular, health care unions who represent workers who may be in a position of actually producing some of the sick notes; obviously, the colleges; the health-professional representative bodies; the Employment Standards Coalition; the local government groups; Union of B.C. Municipalities; Business Improvement Areas of B.C.

There are Indigenous partners, business associations, BCBC, the chamber of commerce, CFIB, the boards of trade and a number of industry-specific groups that we

have ongoing relationships with and that I know have a keen interest in this.

I'm happy to provide the list that we have for consultation to the member, if there are other organizations that he thinks would benefit from having us contact them. I'm happy to do that. Likewise, any of these organizations can reach out to other groups that they think should have an opportunity to weigh in.

Kiel Giddens: I appreciate that fulsome list. I think that's exactly what I had in mind. I was just making sure that that was clear, and it would be appreciated if the minister's office could provide that to me as well.

Maybe if the minister would indulge me on this one, because I do represent a northern, rural riding. There are unique employer-employee relationship challenges there. I'm just wondering if the government would consider northern chambers of commerce — for example, the Prince George chamber, being probably the largest in northern B.C. They have a good network. I was former president of the Prince George chamber.

They could help collate information from the chambers of commerce across the North. Would that be something that the government could consider?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: The B.C. Chamber of Commerce group, as a provincial organization, is on the list. I assume that they will reach out to their members and provide their members with an opportunity to weigh in. Yes, of course, absolutely.

Kiel Giddens: I'll let the folks in the North know about that. I appreciate it.

Getting into a little bit more, we talked about the employment standards branch and its role here. I just want to make sure that there's an understanding of how the amendments might work with the branch and how they're preparing for this.

There could be employees coming to complain about an employer if they don't follow the rules. That's one scenario. There could be employer disputes of an employee's attestation of illness. Those happen currently. I fully agree.

[3:50 p.m.]

There could be some around the semantics of the changes here. I'm just wondering if there will be any changes for the way the employment standards branch resolves these disputes. Will it be the regular mechanisms, complaints and appeals and all that process that is in effect currently?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: It will be the regular mechanism. There isn't going to be a separate mechanism set up for these changes to the ESB. I certainly hope that the regulations that we develop and draft are drafted in such a way that they are very clear and don't lead to confusion out in workplaces.

Kiel Giddens: I do agree that the regulation-making is going to be critical for making sure that clarity exists.

So with that, will employers…? I'm assuming employers will still be required to keep any form of documentation to protect themselves from potential employment standards complaints related to sick leave. That would be standard. Is that correct?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Yes, that's correct.

Kiel Giddens: Did the employment standards branch raise any particular concerns about their own capacity in any way? I mean, we've already canvassed that in estimates, so I'm not going to get into it. But was there anything that they're trying to mitigate? Was there anything with this change in particular that they raised that they had wanted to mitigate as part of that?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I'd say no. Again, it goes to the benefit of having very clearly worded regulations and also the role of ESB — and the role of all of our stakeholders, really — to ensure that everybody is aware of what the rules are so that we minimize any opportunity for confusion and complaints at the board.

Kiel Giddens: As we talked about in estimates, I think we all want to try to work towards the employment standards branch reaching their target of 80 percent of cases being resolved within 180 days. So yeah, we'll keep looking, keeping an eye on that one, for sure.

We're monitoring for the sake of the employment standards branch, who have to manage any complaints. We don't want any flood of new complaints coming in, as the system is already a bit stretched.

Could, perhaps, the ministry, as an example, require some sort of anonymized reporting on employer requests for documentation to ensure the system is not abused by either side, actually, employee or employer? Is that something that the ministry could perhaps collect data on to ensure the system is functioning as it's intended?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I would just note that there are no reporting requirements currently for any of those provisions under the employment standards branch. So it would require the creation of a whole new system, the staffing of a whole new system — you know, staff to analyze whatever data came out of that system — and I'm not frankly sure really to what end.

[3:55 p.m.]

I mean, our objective here really is to reduce administrative burden. We wouldn't really want to be replacing

one administrative burden with another, brand-new administrative burden.

I would also just note that we have an opportunity. We certainly canvassed the question of sick leave very, very thoroughly during the development of the paid sick leave provision.

In our consultation reports, I didn't see a huge emphasis on concerns around sick leave being used appropriately, and in fact, 70 percent of workers who had paid sick leave indicated that they didn't even use all of their entitlement during the year. I think we have to be very careful about making sure that we're not replacing one administrative burden with another.

Kiel Giddens: Overall, I just wanted to get clarity on monitoring for effectiveness. I agree that we don't want to create bureaucracy and red tape that's unintended, but monitoring for effectiveness is something that a policy within the ministry does, obviously. Maybe a simple answer: is there effective capacity for the ministry to monitor this for effectiveness, going forward?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I would say we don't have the data systems or the mechanisms to do that. Those have not been built around the current provisions. It would require the development of an entirely new system to do that.

Kiel Giddens: I guess part of it is…. Again, I'm going to go back, maybe, to the differences at second reading that we perhaps had.

As I talked about it, I'm of the view that it's a reality that this bill is needed, because of access problems to primary care in the province. It's very difficult for people to access our health care system, so those notes are very difficult to get as it is. It is a reality that this change needs to be made. Of course for doctors, the reality for them is that the bureaucracy is just too difficult for them at the moment. I think taking away that paperwork burden is important.

Is this something that the ministry and the government would see as a permanent change? If the conditions of primary care improved, is this something that the government would consider reviewing at some point?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: This bill really is not at all about conditions in our primary care system, in the sense that the estimate is that 1.6 million sick notes were written last year. That's the estimate from the Canadian Medical Association and the Doctors of B.C. That is a significant amount of administrative time taken up for no clinical purpose.

What we have heard from physicians is that the writing of sick notes, when somebody has got a cold or a flu or something of that order, to take to their employer in order to prove to their employer that they're sick when they say that they're sick, that they're sick and they need to be at home resting, is a poor practice. It's just a poor practice. It puts other patients at risk in their waiting rooms. It takes up an appointment time that they could be spending on somebody who actually requires a clinical intervention.

No, this is clearly what is emerging across the country as a best practice, not only of the efficient use of primary care but of how we actually work to keep people safe. It's to keep workers in place and to keep workplaces safe, so that people aren't showing up to work sick because they can't get in to see somebody for a note or they can't afford to pay for a sick note.

[4:00 p.m.]

This is a best practice that is evolving and how we are treating the reality that we live in a world where there are very nasty, contagious, respiratory bugs and other sorts of conditions that mean that people need to take short-term sick leave.

Kiel Giddens: Again, this is a point of difference of opinion on this portion of the bill. I think that monitoring the effectiveness of this and monitoring this is something that is reasonable.

With that, I just want to move a proposed amendment to the bill, put forward by the opposition.

[**Clause 1,** ***by deleting the text shown as struck out and adding the underlined text as show:***

(2) Without limiting sections 52.12 (5) and 52.13 (6) and subject to the regulations, if the specified circumstances apply to an employee's healthrelated leave,

(a) the employer must not request that the employee provide a specified health record to the employer in relation to the healthrelated leave, and

(b) the employee is not required to provide a specified health record to the employer in relation to the healthrelated leave~~:~~ , and

(c) ~~and~~ the Minister responsible for this act is required to review section 49.2, through public engagement and consultation, once every two calendar years after Royal Assent is granted.]

The Chair: Member for Prince George–Mackenzie, do you wish to make any short remarks on it?

Kiel Giddens: I do, yes.

This amendment would really require a formal review of the effectiveness of this and require a period of "public engagement and consultation, once every two calendar years" once this bill is approved in royal assent.

As I said previously, I do think this is a necessary step to take, but it's a challenging one to take because we are removing a step with people's primary care provider. That relationship with a family doctor is absolutely critical. And I agree, we don't want to burden family doctors at this time with extra administrative burden. We don't want to cause that. We need to find ways….

We also need to make sure people do have adequate ac-

cess to our health care system. That relationship with your family doctor is personal. When we remove that extra engagement, there is a cost to that, to the system overall.

I think that continuous relationship with family practice, in particular general practitioners, allows us to ensure that we are looking at those cases of an undiagnosed illness. If there are things that are a pattern over time, a family physician can more easily diagnose an issue if they're seeing their patients more frequently.

In this case, I just think that as we look at our health care system, we all want to see improvements. We all want to see our primary care improving in this province. I think it's reasonable to say that once every two calendar years, this is something that, through more consultation, we could take a review of — this particular section of the act — to see if it still meets the needs of employees and employers in British Columbia.

I think that's all I'll have for comments today, but I would encourage all members to consider this as an option for amending this bill.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We will take a short recess while we go and see if the amendment is in order.

The committee recessed from 4:03 p.m. to 4:25 p.m.

[Darlene Rotchford in the chair.]

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

After reviewing the proposed amendment, the placement of paragraph (c) under section (2) renders the clause unintelligible. For this reason, I find the amendment to be out of order.

Amendment ruled out of order.

Kiel Giddens: Madam Chair, yes, I realize the amendment has been ruled out of order. That's fine. I guess the point in making the amendment is that the opposition only has so many tools at our disposal. This one was obviously not executed too well in this particular case, but the point is that requiring consultation overall is one of the only instruments that the opposition has for impacting the legislation.

Overall, I think the idea of reviewing this every couple of years, particularly the regulation side of it, is something that is entirely in the government's control. It's something that we, as the opposition, won't necessarily have the opportunity to do.

If there's not going to be a review clause in the legislation, that's one thing. If that's not going to be the case, would the ministry consider a review of the regulations within two years, or some defined time?

It's so that as we look into things that we discussed — like health-related leave in specified circumstances and specified health records, all these things that are going to be really meaningful in that consultation that's going to take place — we're going to have a robust consultation and lots of employer-employee labour interest in all this.

Is it something that the minister would consider, to have this reviewed within a specified time frame? My suggestion would be two years. If the minister could answer that, that'd be great.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I guess just to reiterate, with respect to the concerns that the member has raised, this bill doesn't inhibit individuals from connecting with their primary care practitioner. That's not the objective of the bill. We would strongly encourage anybody, of course, if they are sick and they feel like they need to see a doctor or a nurse practitioner, that they should do that.

This again is emerging, clearly, across the jurisdictions, as a best practice for public health reasons, in addition to limiting and trying to help reduce the administrative burden on front-line health care providers. The employment standards branch is routinely working, both with employer organizations and with worker advocates and worker organizations — monitoring, in that sense, through the complaints process under the act, how things are going.

There are opportunities to look at all provisions of the act in the regular course of business, but no, we wouldn't be looking to implement, in just this one particular clause out of the entire Employment Standards Act, a review process that is different and doesn't exist for any other provision in the act.

Kiel Giddens: I guess my point is that when there's a change to the act, monitoring the effectiveness is going to be important to do, I would think. If there's not going to be any dedicated…. Is there going to be any broader review of employment standards in the next two years so that these various groups would have a chance…?

[4:30 p.m.]

They're going to participate in this consultation happening this spring and summer. Then is there any broader consultation that might be happening? I say that being that the typical practice of amendments to the Employment Standards Act over the past number of years has been similar to this one — these small amendments, but not with a broader consultation.

Would that be the place where labour and employer groups would go if there were any such review of employment standards, the regulations and the act, going forward?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: The approach, I think, of our government has been weighted more in favour of in-

cremental changes, in part because our approach has been quite prudent, in the interest of maintaining stability and trying to work towards predictability where we can. We are in a very volatile period. We've come out of a global pandemic, which was a great disruptor, and we are now in a whole other kind of very volatile crisis.

In terms of the mandate that I have received from the Premier to ensure that our workplaces are supported to operate in a modern economy and address changes that are coming, we'll be working through those issues with a lot of check-ins with workers and employers with respect to how things are going for them in their workplaces. Again, I'd suggest that a prudent approach will continue to be the order of the day. We'll be doing everything we can to ensure predictability and stability for folks.

Kiel Giddens: Part of the reason I'm asking is that employment standards are really the baseline for that relationship between employees and employers in the province. This is a critical piece of legislation in the province, overall, guiding the workplace.

This consultation will happen this summer, on the regulations. I just want to confirm that this will be the only consultation process on this change that we're making to the Employment Standards Act that will take place and that there won't be any review two years from now, or any defined period. Will this be the only one? Is this the only chance for an employees' or employers' group to be consulted on this change?

[4:35 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: With respect to the process, through the Employment Standards Act, we have made a series of regulatory changes to adapt to new circumstances and emerging sectors of the economy. When we do that, we hold an in-depth consultation, which is what we will do in this case, and then we develop regulations. Of course, the branch is continually working in collaboration with employers and worker groups, and with individual workers, with respect to how those changes roll.

The intention is that we will have an opportunity for an in-depth consultation on these changes, and then those regulations will become part of the way that our workplaces are operating.

Kiel Giddens: Yeah, I'll take the minister's point there. I will be following that consultation this summer, and I want to understand what's going on. I'll be trying to do my best to reach out to various groups who are engaging.

Again, I appreciate that the minister agreed earlier to provide that list of who's participating. If I do have any suggestions or other ideas, absolutely, I'll bring those forward after the fact as well.

With that, I have no other questions for this particular clause.

Clause 1 approved.

On clause 2.

Kiel Giddens: It was a quick one there, for sure, but don't worry. I don't have too many questions on this clause, so it's not going to take very long.

I'm wondering. I see this as, obviously, a housekeeping amendment here. Can the minister confirm that this change is just purely technical and doesn't alter any substantive rights or obligation regarding COVID-19-related leave in the province?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Yes, I can.

Kiel Giddens: Thank you. That's helpful for the public.

Are there any professions now captured under the Health Professions and Occupations Act that were not previously recognized under the Health Professions Act for purposes of COVID leave documentation?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: For the purposes of COVID leave, the recognized professions were physicians, nurse practitioners and nurses. Those are the same three health professional occupations that we've identified proactively through this legislation so far. Of course, there could be more, potentially, through regulation, if identified.

Kiel Giddens: This clause is still a substantive clause in the act overall. Just updating it to apply, to be modernized with the rest of government's legislation, I understand that.

I'm wondering if government has any message on the intention to eventually sunset 49.2 entirely at a future date, given that it was created in response to the pandemic but that we're at a different time right now.

[4:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think the member is referencing the provisions at section 52 on COVID leave, if I'm correct. Just with respect to the COVID provisions in the Employment Standards Act, no, there is no timeline for reviewing those yet.

Kiel Giddens: Thank you to the minister for correcting me. I've got the act in front of me, and in my notes, it looks like I made an error. I appreciate the correction there.

Thank you for the clarification.

Actually, sorry. I have no further questions on this clause.

Clause 2 approved.

On clause 3.

Kiel Giddens: All right, clause 3. We're working our way through this quickly now.

I'm just trying to understand the aim in this particular clause. Why was it necessary to expand the types of health practitioners who could provide documentation for these leaves that we're talking about today?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: This change to 52.12 makes this provision now consistent with the earlier proposed changes to the act. The COVID leave provisions would be the same as the leave provisions that we've introduced. It changes it from the physician, nurse practitioner and nurse, which were the three identified for COVID, and updates that language to be consistent with what we're proposing earlier in the bill.

Kiel Giddens: Yeah, we talked about this a little bit in clause 2 there. But just so that I'm clear, the other specified health practitioners…. Is there anything in clause 3 that would indicate that government has any intention to be more prescriptive, or is that still just to be prescribed by regulation, as we discussed earlier?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: No, it's intended to have the opportunity to hear from stakeholders and from health care professionals with respect to if there are other health care professionals who ought to be identified in this process. It's a matter of having the two provisions in the act the same.

Kiel Giddens: Just so I'm clear, with the consultation overall, this will include consultation on these specified health practitioners at this time, the same as…. The consultation that happens for the paid sick notes — will that include consultation on this clause as well, and the specified health practitioners, or is that in a separate consultation process?

[4:45 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I think I've got it now.

If we go back to clause 1, clause 1 provides a definition of "health practitioner," and you'll recall that clause 1 lists (a) to (d): (a) is a medical practitioner, meaning, essentially, a doctor; (b) is a person who is authorized under the Health Professions Act to practise the designated health profession of nursing, so those are the nursing folks, not including licensed practical nurses; (c) is a person authorized to practise a designated health profession within the meaning of the Health Professions Act that is prescribed for the purposes of this definition; and then (d) is all of those folks but who are in other jurisdictions. Correct?

This clause, which amends section 52.12 as related to COVID leave, is consequential in that it refers back to the definition in clause 1. But as you'll note here, it says: "In this section and section 52.13, 'specified health practitioner' means a person referred to in paragraph (a) or (b), or in paragraph (d) as it relates to those paragraphs, of the definition of 'health practitioner' in section 49.2(1)" which is the first clause, which is the definition of health practitioner.

Essentially, what that means is that for sick notes generally, it's (a) through (d) including, potentially, other designated health professionals. For COVID leave, it remains doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners — period.

Clause 3 approved.

On clause 4.

Kiel Giddens: I appreciate the minister's fulsome response. It was a game of mental gymnastics there for the minister and I, just trying to figure that out. So I appreciate the clarification. I think that's useful for the public, just to understand how this all works and how the definitions all align and work in practice here.

Under clause 4…. These clauses work in tandem, obviously. I understand that. Does this particular amendment apply retroactively to leaves already underway or only to new requests, going forward?

[4:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Again, with this amendment, this is sort of consequential to the earlier language change. It doesn't change the intent, it doesn't change the practice, and it doesn't have any impact on cases that are currently being dealt with by the board.

Kiel Giddens: The only reason I ask…. I think as I was coming up with that question, I was picturing the types of questions that HR departments come up with and these types of things. That's sort of the realm of where this stat would fit.

So I'm just wondering. Just to clarify, what transition guidance would be issued to companies' HR departments, looking at this, to adjust their leave forms and practices accordingly? Employers will have to update all their policies and things like that, so they may want to have a reference point.

[4:55 p.m.]

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I note that on the ESB website, which is really the primary tool that parties have for interpreting the act, there's the legislation, there's what's in the law, there's policy, and then there is often a bit of a discussion, with examples that are offered to try to help employers understand how a particular provision applies.

In a case like this, where this will be a broad change that will affect all different kinds of workplaces, there would clearly be an update to the website and guidance with respect to how this applies. We would also look to all of our provincial partners to help transmit that message so that your HR department in whatever sector, or your small business person, will be able to have access or know

where they can go to understand the application of any of these changes.

Kiel Giddens: Just to help that transition period…. I appreciate the employment standards branch website, hopefully, will be updated. If there is any opportunity for a frequently-asked-questions component, I think it is always useful for HR departments.

Maybe a final question on it. The minister mentioned using those partner organizations to spread the word, I guess. I think that's a very helpful thing to be doing. I'm wondering if, just as a suggestion, that could be some sort of an education campaign that could involve those partners that are involved in the consultation, just to make sure that that message gets out there properly and that there's not conflict in that early-stage transition period.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Yes, of course. Should this bill pass and once the regulations are then determined, we'll want to ensure that everybody is clear about what the new rules are.

The employment standards branch is very adept at communicating changes such as this. It might be by…. Certainly, we would look to go back to the partners who were engaged in the consultation. I think an FAQ is a really good idea. I think making sure we've got that kind of tangible: "Here's how your local HR department should be interpreting that…."

[5:00 p.m.]

We can certainly look at what kind of materials would be helpful in that regard.

Clause 4 approved.

On clause 5.

Kiel Giddens: I appreciate the previous response from the minister. Obviously, it will be a busy summer to get this in place before the respiratory illness season. So that consultation this spring and summer will be on getting these regulations in place.

As part of that, I'm wondering if that will end up with producing some sort of a report that comes out of that, or is that just a closed consultation with those key stakeholders? Is there anything publicly available kind of after the fact in that consultation?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Given that these proposed changes are quite narrow compared to some of the other regulatory changes we've made to the Employment Standards Act, it is our expectation that the nature of the consultation will be, again, sort of targeted to the list that I provided earlier and anybody else, of course, who would like an opportunity to weigh in. I would expect that that will primarily come in the way of written submissions.

What I think we would do would be to provide, when the regulations are announced, certainly, a highlight, like who we talked to and what the highlight was. We weren't anticipating that there would be a really sort of lengthy what-we-heard type of report on this, given how narrow these changes are.

Kiel Giddens: Again, I'm just trying to understand the process, going forward, of how this is going to work as it's being implemented by the ministry. Obviously, we have a concentrated consultation process that's going to be happening now. Of course, in the power to make regulations, those can be changed at a later date as well.

[5:05 p.m.]

I'm wondering if there would be consultation with groups if significant change were to come forward at a later date as well.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: If I'm understanding the member correctly, yes, we would always have a consultation. Any time, really, that there is a change to the act or to the regulations, if we decided that there was something different that needed to occur down the road, based on what we were hearing from employers and workers, then we would want to have a way of canvassing again the opinion of those who are directly affected by those by those provisions.

Kiel Giddens: I appreciate the response. I'm trying to understand, again, just how, on a go-forward basis…. We do want to monitor how this is working in practice and if there need to be any updates, just making sure that the regulations keep pace with what that employee-employer relationship is looking like over time.

Maybe just one or two more. I'm just looking at, again…. We talked a little bit about the definition of a short-term basis for sick leave being prescribed in regulation.

I guess, will there be different thresholds for different industries or work types in that? Every workplace is different, so a leave in one industry may have relative impacts, but is it kind of standard across the board? I just want to understand how short-term leave could be prescribed by regulation. Is it going to be uniform, or is that something that has to be sorted out?

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: Just with respect to a sectoral approach, we don't see that kind of regime in other jurisdictions that have a limitation on sick notes. That being, as we've canvassed….

We have Ontario, which just defines that employers, period, are not permitted to require a certificate from a qualified health practitioner. In Quebec, an employer cannot require an employee to provide a document. In Nova Scotia, it's a general act. Employers may not require a sick note with respect to the employee's absence from work

due to illness or injury. Then it prescribes a threshold and circumstances, therefore, where they can.

[5:10 p.m.]

In New Brunswick, again it's a broad requirement. In Prince Edward Island, the employer….

I don't see a sectoral-based approach taken in any other jurisdiction. I think that we would quite likely be limited in terms of the regulatory authority to do that, in this case.

Clause 5 approved.

On clause 6.

Kiel Giddens: We're at the end of the bill here, so I just want to take an opportunity to thank the minister for answering my questions on behalf of the official opposition. I want to thank the ministry staff for your diligence and your hard work in preparing this legislation and also the work you're doing every day on behalf of British Columbians.

I appreciate being a part of this process in healthy democratic questions, and the transparency, I think, is important for the public to understand. It certainly helped me but, hopefully, members of the public as well.

With that, I don't have any questions, Madam Chair.

Clause 6 approved.

Title approved.

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside: I move that the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The Chair: This committee stands adjourned.

The committee rose at 5:12 p.m.

The House in Committee, Section C.

The committee met at 5:35 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

Committee of the Whole

BILL 13 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

The Chair: Good afternoon, Members. I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, to order.

On clause 1.

Ward Stamer: Thanks to the minister for being here. We have a few questions, and I believe the process is to go clause by clause in relationship to the Wildfire Act.

Looking at the list…. Just for context, my caucus member and myself had the pleasure to be online in a meeting with the minister's staff on an explanation on some of the things that they were originally putting forth. A lot of it was streamlining and cleaning up, and those were the some of the discussions that we had.

We have some specific questions in regards to timelines, specific questions in regards to what the regulations look like now through sections 25 to 28, I believe, and then all the way down to section 33. Just trying to make sure that what's in the existing regulations, with some of the concerns that we have, are still there.

It's one thing to be talking about streamlining the process and updating the language that's in it. Right off the bat, in 24.1, there's a discussion on an increase in the timeline between a maximum of three years now to go for an additional 18 months, at the discretion of the minister and the ministry, for a longer time to investigate a fire and the potential causes to that fire.

We have a few questions right off the bat, if we may. Question No. 1: who did the minister consult with in this process in determining why we needed the additional 18 months? Possibly the minister can give us examples of why he believes it's necessary.

[5:40 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Good afternoon to everyone. Thanks very much for the opportunity to be able to speak about the forest service's component to this important legislation.

Before I provide some remarks on the question posed by my colleague across the way, I do want to welcome two outstanding members of the forest service who are joining and supporting me in providing answers to the opposition. We've got David Greer, who's the acting assistant deputy minister of the B.C. wildfire service, as well as Kathleen Werstiuk, manager of wildfire risk with the Ministry of Forests.

I just want to thank them and all the staff for the incredible work they do. It's a busy time in the midst of wildfire season. I know that there's a lot of work that they put into this piece of legislation. I'm glad to have them as part of the team being able to provide support to me in answering questions here today.

Thanks to the member opposite for the first set of questions. I would say in relation to the question, maybe just at the outset, I think the member opposite will agree, especially in his time as a mayor, that we are seeing complex wildfires and have for the last decade here in British Columbia. "Complex" is probably an understatement in terms of the word to describe that.

This legislative request for change through the misc bill very much is an administrative function, but it recog-

nizes how complex wildfires have become, how it involves multiple jurisdictions. An example that I could use would be if you have a cluster of fires and, potentially, arson is talked about. There's an investigation. There's a potential for RCMP to be involved. I know we'll get into it in the questions coming forward, but this tool that we're talking about in terms of this legislation really is to be used in extenuating circumstances.

The member asked about consultation. I would say much of the consultation that drove the need for this change happened within the forest service and, specifically, the B.C. wildfire service. They're the ones that are investigating the cause of the fire. Then, obviously, the natural resource officer service, previously known as the comply and enforcement unit, within the Ministry of Forests provides support in regards to that.

We've seen parties in all determinations request an extension about 30 percent of the time, so that was enough for us to be able to give some consideration to needing to make this change.

In addition to the consultation we did within the forest service, we engaged with the Ministry of Attorney General, Minister of Citizens' Services, Minister of Jobs, Economic Development and Innovation and sent out notifications to all the First Nations as well.

[5:45 p.m.]

We received some feedback and followed up with anyone who provided feedback to us as part of this process.

Ward Stamer: I thank the minister for his answers on that line of questioning.

Now, we know that we're going to be going clause by clause, but in the first part of it, in the introduction of section 24.1, there's going to be an elimination, in sections 25 and 26, under the "opportunity to be heard." I'd like to be able to ask the minister, probably, a couple of lines of questions in regard to that whole premise of the opportunity to be heard.

Through the regulations, it talks about significant timelines, but it doesn't say specifically when notification of the investigation of the fire is even taking place. We have some concerns on this side, right off the bat, on clause 1, on the opportunity to be heard, and we may even be proposing an amendment.

How is that opportunity actually going to be going forward? As the minister alluded to, fires are becoming more complex. It seems like in the regulations right now, the onus is on the Ministry of Forests and B.C. wildfire to be doing the investigation. There doesn't seem to be any opportunity for a third party to be able to do any evidence-taking on behalf of a proponent, whether a proponent that is the landowner or a proponent who happens to be the licensee — or, let's say, a logging contractor, and there's a fire that occurred on an active cutting permit.

Where do we have that opportunity to discuss, when you have a fairly vague line on a new, streamlining set of regulations, where it says "opportunity to be heard," but there's really not a specific way of actually doing that? I'm wondering if the minister has a bit more to add on what he sees going forward in those opportunities. Looking at the language, it can go almost three years before the minister even gets the opportunity for an extension, and at that time, this doesn't really specify when this opportunity to be heard takes place.

It says further on that when there's an order, there is an opportunity to be heard, and there's an opportunity to appeal, either through 37 or 39. There are two ways of going through that appeal process. One is through the forest commission, which is an independent body, and the second one is through the Forest Practices Board. Then that can even go up to the Supreme Court, if necessary, depending on the amount of the award that may be brought forth by the ministry.

Can the minister explain a little bit more on what this opportunity to be heard really involves? Nowhere else in the regulation does it specify exactly how that's supposed to take place.

[5:50 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Maybe a couple of pieces. Thanks very much to the member opposite for the question.

Around the limitation period within the Wildfire Act, that is time that the government has to issue an order of contravention or require payment of costs related to wildfire suppression, damages to Crown resources and/or an administrative penalty. Under the Wildfire Act, this period is three years from the date that an official becomes aware of a wildfire or a contravention.

I just want to clarify for the member opposite in relation to his question that the housekeeping change that we're making doesn't actually remove the ability for one to be able to provide that feedback. In relation to his question about the limitation period being amended, the proposed change will actually strengthen procedural fairness by providing more time for persons of interest to prepare their defence.

The changes will also improve cost recovery for government, and may actually deliver more resilient decisions and may provide government with more time to investigate and determine amounts for cost recovery, particularly complex fires.

The change, I would argue, actually strengthens the ability.... There's, obviously, a lot of work that goes in, in terms of that investigation — each part. That binder is collected and prepared and is provided to an individual, who can then provide feedback and provide their submission.

I think this change also ensures consistency with other natural resource statutes — FRPA, a change that was made a number of years ago — by having the three-year

term expire with the notice of the OTBH, rather than the determination order itself.

I'll just also share that the OTBH is a quasi-judicial process that allows government and the person who is the subject of the proposed order to present their information to the decision-maker, including any extenuating circumstances that may affect the determination.

I think we are now strengthening that process by allowing it, so by no means does this legislation remove the ability for one to be able to provide their submission to the decision-maker. In fact, I think the changes that we're proposing actually strengthen and create quite a clear process that aligns with other statutes within natural resource changes — again, FRPA being the most recent for the Ministry of Forests.

I think the amendment regarding section 25 and 26 is quite consequential to the addition of the new section, 24.1, which sets out the requirements for giving notice and providing an opportunity to be heard.

Ward Stamer: Thanks to the minister for his answers to that. The minister alluded in his comments to some of the things that are actually in section 25, and we can probably discuss that more when we get to that portion in clause 2.

Again, when you look at the wording on the key amendments to this…. I appreciate what the minister said about those opportunities to be heard in the process that we already have. He's saying that it's not being changed in this legislation, and that's good to hear because then we hear all sides of the story.

But we would like clarification, if we may, on the word of an official. Again, throughout the regulations, it talks about the certificate issued by an official, and we'd like clarification on: exactly what is that official, and what responsibility is it? Is it somebody who is employed by the Ministry of Forests, B.C. wildfire service? Is it a third party? Is it a contractor, a specialist? What is the determination?

Again, this all hinges on the evidence that's going to be taken and compiled in this case. And again, the ministry is asking for an extension because of the evidence-gathering. We would just like a better clarification because nowhere can we see it in the definitions of what that official is and what the certificate actually represents.

[5:55 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: The question the member opposite asked with regards to the definition of "official" hasn't changed. It's the same definition within the act. So "official" means a person "employed in the ministry of the minister responsible for the administration of the act, who is designated by name or title to be an official by the minister for the purpose of a provision of this act or of the regulation that is specified in the designation." Just to clarify, that hasn't changed.

I just want to build off my last answer and remind all members of the work that goes into preparing the binder, the OTBH binder. I'll get that accurate at some point. It's not just the origin of the fire. There's, obviously, a short window to be able to find that out. I know there's a fire investigator right across the way who's gone through that process, I'm sure, himself.

It's also all of the associated costs. It's calculating the suppression costs. It's calculating the damage to Crown land. So all of that factors into the binder. Of course, the natural resource officer service does their investigation as it relates to contraventions as well.

I just wanted to add that piece and, then, of course, just clarify that the definition for the word "official" is the same as touched upon within the legislation.

Ward Stamer: Thanks very much to the minister on the explanation.

Can the minister explain just a little bit more? When we are looking, again, back on 24.1…. I'm not trying to drag this out, because when we get to the second clause — that's 25 — there are some specific questions that we have in regards to the current regulations and some of the aspects of how this extension will work. But can the minister elaborate a little bit more…?

[6:00 p.m.]

When he talked about the opportunities for gathering that information during a fire…. I think we had this conversation with his staff before, and it comes back to the heart of the order — not necessarily the origin of the fire, but when it specifically talks about (a), under section 25(2), "in respect of a person who the minister alleges has caused or contributed to a fire or the spread of a fire."

Can the minister explain where that responsibility lies when, as a scenario, you may have a small fire? It may be on private land. It may be…. Again, it might be a licensee or a community forest. There could be a fire on the site. There are industrial operations that are occurring. The workers stop, make sure it's safe. They're fighting the fire. B.C. wildfire service comes along and then takes responsibility for the fire.

In that process and in that scenario, where does the responsibility begin, and where does the responsibility stop on that fire? I can offer up, as an example, where the person that's fighting the fire can believe the fire is under control. The B.C. wildfire service comes along and does what they can. Next thing you know, for example, there might be a recommendation for a back burn. The wind changes direction, and it takes off.

In that determination on that order and responsibility…. Where does that decision, made in those levels of responsibility, when you're actioning the fire and then that

responsibility is taken away from you…? How does that work in that determination?

[6:05 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite for the question.

As soon as the B.C. wildfire service is called in and takes responsibility for the fire, we're immediately working, as part of our suppression work, to determine the origin of the fire as well.

Interjection.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Big fine over there.

Just to clarify, as soon as BCWS takes responsibility for the fire, then we're working as part of that. We have a centralized program. The fire centre works with our central HQ as part of that.

I think the example the member shares speaks to the complexity of the fires that we're seeing. As part of that investigation process, it can be, often, that the RCMP may get involved. I'll share with the member that it's only under extenuating circumstances that the B.C. wildfire service will make a request for an extension. That's why we're creating this process through this legislation, because fires are getting complex, and the investigations are getting complex.

Again, when you have multiple entities working together — in this case, the B.C. wildfire service; the NROS, the natural resource officer service; as well as the RCMP — it just sometimes can provide us more time to be able to ensure that there's a fulsome investigation, that, again, the OTBH binder is prepared, and there's an opportunity for a hearing to occur as part of that whole process.

That was a good question.

Macklin McCall: Just a few questions here. I want to go back a little bit here to the start of subsection 24.1(1). Just for clarity, it does say in that section: "The minister must give written notice of the proposed order."

Can the minister clarify how notice will be given, specifically? Is that an email? Is that via registered letter or something to that effect?

[6:10 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite for the question.

We would be sending an official letter.

Macklin McCall: My next question is…. Well, earlier today during question period, the Attorney General spoke of Jordan stays. My understanding of that, having been a police officer and an investigator, is that the Jordan decision — which came out by the Supreme Court of Canada and which ensures that an investigation is presented to the courts, to Crown, and charges are laid in a timely fashion so a person's Charter rights aren't breached — applies to both civil and criminal, as per the Supreme Court, and precedence is under the Charter and Canadian law.

Now, the question in question period was specifically about criminal charges being dropped because of stay of proceedings because of Jordan decisions, because it was taking too long and the whole case was thrown out and the victim didn't have the opportunity to actually face the suspect and have their day in court.

With that said, I'm very curious about the section. I'll read it here, subsection 24.1(3): "The minister by order may extend the three-year period referred to in subsection (2) by up to 18 months to a maximum total period of four years and six months."

My question is: how does the Jordan decision apply to this section?

[6:15 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite for the question.

This is an administrative function, and Jordan doesn't apply to administrative proceedings.

I'll share with the member across the way, noting that he had raised some concerns in his second reading speech on this legislation, that it's important to recognize, in this instance, with the change being proposed by the government through this legislation, around the extension, that it's the minister that's ultimately responsible for making this decision; it's not a delegated decision-maker.

The minister will retain the authority to grant extensions. This ensures that the persons undertaking the investigation or making the determination cannot extend the timeline. The minister plays no role in the investigation, and the delegated decision-maker has autonomy in making the determination. Thus, the minister has no influence in the outcome.

The minister, as a third party, will make a decision that takes into account both parties' interests. This approach maintains the integrity of the process and upholds procedural fairness. Further extensions will be granted through ministerial orders, which, again, are published on the B.C. government website. Given the increasing frequency and scope of B.C. wildfires, of course, B.C. wildfire service's zone interests are very clear to resolve investigations quickly, so that evidence is fresh.

I just want to clarify to the member. As I've said before, the intent of providing the minister with this tool is for it only to be used in extenuating circumstances. Again, the government, through the B.C. wildfire service, has every intention of trying to wrap up investigations in the time allotted, because of evidence being fresh. Of course, it depends on the complexity of the fire as well. This is around providing the minister the tool to be able to make the decision themselves whether an extension should be granted.

Macklin McCall: Thank you for the response from the minister. I do have quite a few questions after that, but I only have so much time. I clarified, in all this stuff, with what was said, that it would take a while, but I do appreciate the response. I don't fully agree with everything that you said there, but we'll move on. I have other points to make.

Firstly, going to the next point, in the same section, dealing with an investigation…. Outside of this, you would deal with the Statute of Limitations. All different statutes have something defined, and specifically, I went looking for this. For the Wildfire Act here in British Columbia, we would have the Limitation Act. I didn't find something specific for the Wildfire Act, but I did see, I think, that a general rule of thumb is two years under the Limitation Act.

Essentially, the same sort of question. I'm just wondering. My question is: what steps have the ministry or the government taken to ensure that this is compliant with the Limitation Act? Specifically, if it's a two-year Statute of Limitations under the act…. Currently, under this Wildfire Act amendment, it's three years for investigation, but it could be extended up to 4½ years, potentially. I just would like to know, for the government and/or the ministers, how this applies to this subsection.

[6:20 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Currently, section 33, the limitation period that the member refers to specifies that administrative remedies involving orders must be made within three years from first knowledge of the facts that led to the determination that the person caused or contributed to the fire or contravened a provision of the act.

To get into the piece around the authority to extend the limitation period, currently, with the act in its current form, there is no authority to extend the limitation period for administrative actions under the Wildfire Act. This has resulted in situations where the province has not been able to pursue administrative revenues like cost recovery as part of that. I hope that answers the member's question.

Macklin McCall: I appreciate the response. It doesn't exactly answer it.

Correct me if I'm wrong, just for clarity's sake. I think that the response was more in line with the wildfire amendment act that we're speaking of. I was referring to outside of the three-year, extended to 4½-year, which is currently what we're discussing. Is it consistent with the current Limitation Act?

For example, if the Limitation Act says you have two years to investigate something under that act and this is already at three years but it's being proposed that at a minister's discretion, based on whatever, it can be extended to 4½…. Was that consideration made, and does this act…?

Is there something in the Limitation Act that ensures that this is compliant with the Limitation Act and is not outside the statute of limitations?

[6:25 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Just at the outset, I also want to clarify something. Maybe I wasn't very clear on the first answer to the member for Kamloops–North Thompson, who asked the first question.

The party of interest can also request an extension too. This is not just a circumstance where the natural resource officer service or government is asking, making a case to the minister for an extension. It could be the party of interest as well. In 30 percent of cases, that has happened. Of course, we don't have a mechanism in which we can allow that right now.

To the member's question around the Limitation Act, in 2017, changes were made to clarify that the Limitation Act period doesn't apply to the Wildfire Act.

Macklin McCall: Thank you for the clarification, Minister.

My next question…. Under this section, currently — before this is passed or any changes are made — there's a three-year period to conduct an investigation and do all the work. With that said, obviously we're talking about, potentially, up to a 1.5…. So four years and six months to conduct the full investigation.

I'm wondering if the minister might be able to provide examples that show the government needs an extra 1.5 years added on to the three already current.

[6:30 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: To the member's question, I will share a couple of examples that I think would be relevant to help give some life to what the member is looking for.

I would say at the outset, the request that we're bringing forward and the change that we're bringing forward, section 24.1 that the member refers to, is about really creating a safety valve — that's kind of the analogy that we're using — that allows the minister at the time to be able to hear out and make a decision.

By no means are we trying to say that every investigation should be extended. Again, I just want to reiterate that extenuating circumstances…. That's why we've left that accountability up to the minister to be able to hold that decision and not someone else.

The member asked for a couple of examples, and I'm happy to share. In 2016, Progress Energy Ltd.… B.C. wildfire service responded to a fire in an oilfield where oil and gas infrastructure was at risk. The fire control costs were nearly $100,000. Fire origin and cause was found to be burning materials from a flare stack or possibly from a hand-held flare.

A violation ticket was issued to the company involved for the contravention of the Wildfire Act. Cost recov-

ery proceeded under section 25 but failed because it was found that the nature of the interested party's tenure was not eligible for cost recovery under section 25. Cost recovery under section 27 could have proceeded, but was prevented by the limitation period. So no costs were recovered because of insufficient time to proceed in a way that ensured procedural fairness.

I'll share another example. This is from 2016. There was a series of wildfires, including two on the railway tracks near Lytton — this was five years before the town burned down in 2021 — and others near Burns Lake, Boston Bar and Houston. The wildfire origin and causes were found to be rail activity. Suppression efforts controlled these fires before they could do significant damage.

The investigation involved seven fires spread across three fire centres between April and September of 2016. An extension was requested and granted for the person of interest, and timelines became very tight. The ministry chose to drop one of the fires from the order because the limitation period expired, and this one was pretty significant — over $200,000.

A number of examples that I could provide the member, again, where the government, the ministry in this case, has had to drop investigations just because we simply ran out of time. So again, that's why we're here before you making the case for, under extenuating circumstances, the ability for the minister to be able to provide an extension.

Macklin McCall: I thank the minister for the answer there. I appreciate the detail and those specific examples and the detail within it.

It does kind of go back to my first question or my second question where I was talking about the Jordan decision. It's nice to have that balance of having the investigation and doing the work. But of course, these investigations or any investigation can't go on indefinitely, obviously. The government that's recouping loss and stuff from a citizen or from a company…. You keep moving the goalposts, so to speak. So it's good to hear that there are examples. However, that's why we have questions here today, to make sure that that balance is maintained.

[6:35 p.m.]

The next question I have, really quickly, just to expand onto the previous here: how many fires are currently…? When we look at the number of fires we had last year, let's say, in the last 24 months from today, for example….

We obviously have numbers every year of what the statistics are. If we go back to three years from today, how many fires were there from three years to 4½ years? Does the ministry happen to have that number, by chance?

[George Anderson in the chair.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: We have got a new Chair in the House. Welcome, Mr. Chair. I better be on my best behaviour now.

The Chair: I think so.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: I'm really nervous.

Based off of some of the comments that the member made during second reading, we were wondering if he may have gone during this line of questioning. I've got some data for the member that I hope will be helpful.

We've got some cost recovery figures for fires for the last ten years. I'm just going to read out for the member determinations written under the Wildfire Act sections 25, 26 and 27, between 2015 and 2024. These were covering fires between 2012 and 2021.

[6:40 p.m.]

B.C. wildfire service has written 147 determinations, covering 207 fires. So 58 of the determinations were under section 25, and three determinations under section 25 did not meet the requirements for cost recovery under that section; 89 of the determinations were under section 27, and 16 determinations under section 27 had a finding of no contravention or successful defence by the interested party; 128 determinations had the costs or penalties invoiced, which totalled approximately $41 million.

Following decision, 34 determinations were appealed to the FAC. Now 27 of the determinations have complete FAC decisions, and seven are still in progress.

At the FAC, six appeals succeeded. This is an instance where the BCWS order fully overturned. Ten were allowed in part, and 11 were denied.

Six of the determinations were further appealed to the B.C. Supreme Court. Three of those six…. Three were withdrawn, one was sent back to the FAC for a new hearing, and two were further appealed to the B.C. Court of Appeal.

I hope that provides the member some data that he was looking for.

Macklin McCall: Thank you, Minister, for the detail in the response there. That is really great to have that detail there.

What I was really wanting to hash out was, just in the course of a year, how many fires there are not related to what's being…. I'm not going to ask you this again, but just to clarify, which will go into my next question.

In a year, for the sake of the argument, let's say there are 1,000 fires in the province. You look at the last three years. Well, you could say that there were 3,000 fires over the last three years. What I was wondering…. This might be an error on my part, not clarifying it, but from the three-year mark to the 4½-year mark, I was wanting to know how many fires there were in British Columbia. For the sake of the argument, let's say there were 1,500 over

the time. That's not an accurate number. I'm just saying it for illustrative purposes.

My next question, then, is: whatever that number is that would be between the three year and the 4½ years as per 24.1(3)…? My question is: will any of those concluded investigations or not-started investigations be reopened or started if this legislation passes?

[Interruption.]

The Chair: I just remind members that they should have their cell phones on silent.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: This question pertains to clause 7 of the legislation.

[6:45 p.m.]

I'll share with the member that the transition period is legislated to ensure a smooth transition from the existing administrative remedies provisions to the amended provisions proposed by this legislation, this bill. Specifically, any pre-existing administrative proceeding where a person of interest has been given the notice of an OTBH will be managed under the existing act, with the timeline adhering to three years for an OTBH and determination order issued following royal assent.

If this legislation passes, new administrative proceedings will be managed under this amended act.

Macklin McCall: Just so I'm clear on what you said…. I appreciate the answer. Thank you for that. What you're saying is that if someone has already been notified, up until the three years, they are on the old system. But once this gets passed, if there is a fire three to 4½ years ago, this changes, achieves royal assent, as you said, they get issued a new order as per the act, and the investigation will start at, like, 3½ years.

Is that correct? Am I understanding you correctly?

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member for the question.

He's right. Anything that, as I noted in my previous answer, has been given notice falls within the current existing pieces within the legislation. Anything that is currently being investigated but a notice hasn't been given would fall within the new changes to the act.

Donegal Wilson: I have kind of a newbie question. I was just going through and reviewing that we are working on division 2 of part 3 of the Wildfire Act. When I pulled it up, the numbering seems odd, because 24 is actually in division 1. I couldn't find any other instances where we actually start something, like, in one division and then continue the numbering of 24.1 in a new division.

I'm just wondering the rationale around the numbering, or if that is normal practice in the drafting of legislation. Just to be clear, 24 is about peace officers accompanying, and now we've gone into a new topic.

[6:50 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member for the question.

These are the sorts of questions that I always find a little bit exciting because there's always something new. I'm not a lawyer. The Chair is a lawyer, so this can be, sometimes, in his line of business. But for those of us who aren't lawyers, these are the things that, when we're reading through legislation, you always wonder. So thanks for the question. It's a great question.

From the advice from staff, it's a normal practice. It's why we're amending. The amending text specifies that we're adding this to division 2, so it gets in the right division.

Thanks for the question.

Ward Stamer: I don't think I have anything further to add on clause 1.

Clause 1 approved.

On clause 2.

Ward Stamer: Okay, No. 2…. Again, it should be fairly straightforward. So No. 2 talks about the recovery of fire control costs and related amounts. I have a few questions in relation to that. I think the minister has given us the opportunity to discuss orders and the parameters around some of the orders. I'd like the opportunity to ask a couple of questions specifically in regards to the process, in as much as the opportunities to be heard, as we mentioned first in clause 1.

The Forest Practices Board recommended in 2014 that the province create a process where fines are made public. In the statement, the ministry said: "The recommendation is being considered in light of legislative reform to the Forest and Range Practices Act." They reissued the appeal in 2019 for greater public disclosure, and from what we can understand, the only ones that are published are the ones that are, basically, fought.

Again, we'd like a little bit more clarification, because there are going to be some changes in the language on 25. Is the ministry currently looking at adopting those suggestions, even by their own ministry, to be able to publish that information on the fines and the information regarding those orders?

[6:55 p.m.]

Point of Order

Rob Botterell: Is that relevant to consideration of the language of clause 2? I understand it's an important policy

issue, but is…? I don't see how it's relevant to the consideration of clause 2.

Clause 2 very clearly sets out the removal of the reference to "the opportunity to be heard" and then makes it clear about the obligations for disclosure of orders as they're related to this amendment and this clause.

So the point of order I'm raising is whether it's relevant to be discussing further policy and legislative options that aren't covered by this clause.

The Chair: Members are able to ask quite a broad range of questions. But at the end of that question, it is up to the minister as to whether or not they're going to answer that question. However, that being said, I will pay closer attention to questions that are being asked and make faster determinations on relevancy.

Debate Continued

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite. A couple of things just to clarify.

The Forest Practices Board is an independent body that makes recommendations, and the member knows that. In relation to his question around publishing fees, it is something that we're giving consideration to.

Ward Stamer: Okay, so now looking at the notes that we were provided in clause 2, it says right here: "The minister must give a copy of the order made under subsection (2) to the person who is the subject of the order, and then the amounts payable, the reasons for the order and the right to review under section 37 or to appeal under section 39."

That's part of the reason why I asked that line of questioning on the publishing of it. It's because we have two separate entities in that adjudication process after the decision has been made, correct? So we have the commission, and then we also have the Forest Practices Board. Is that correct? Aren't there two? Section 37 or appeal 39 — isn't it two separate entities? One is the forest commission, and the other one is under the Forest Practices Board. Can I have clarification on that?

Hon. Ravi Parmar: It's the Forest Appeals Commission. The Forest Practices Board wouldn't be involved in this.

Ward Stamer: Thanks to the minister for that answer.

So looking at the changes and trying to read through what was originally in the regulations and what was not, down in section (3), at the bottom, it says: "The minister must not make an order under subsection (2) unless the minister, after giving the holder, occupier or owner an opportunity to be heard or after one month has elapsed after the date in which the person was given the opportunity to be heard, determines that the holder, occupier or owner causes or contributes to the fire or spread of the fire."

[7:00 p.m.]

Now, in the numbers that we've got here, isn't part of that being removed, or is that the same? It's not exactly the same in that section, is it? I'm just trying to get clarification. Are we still keeping the intent of the regulations, or are we altering that?

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite for the question.

The amendment regarding sections 25 and 26 is consequential to the addition of new section 24.1, which sets out the requirements for giving notice and providing an opportunity to be heard.

The previous reference to "one month" in those sections allowed the government to make an order, even if the person did not take advantage of the opportunity to be heard, as long as government provided a one-month window to respond. Government was, therefore, able to quickly make a determination.

The purposes of the limitation period were not impacted by this one-month requirement. The current limitation period requires that once a matter comes to the attention of an officer, the matter must be determined by the minister within three years.

This limitation period does not align with other limitation periods, as they are meant to ensure that an action is commenced and not determined, as is the case in the current WA provisions.

In practice, the B.C. wildfire service has not taken advantage of the ability to make an order if only one month has elapsed since the offer of an OTBH. Instead of pursuing an early avenue to ensure the impacted person participates in the process, the amendments to the limitation period ensure the government is not constrained by the need to have an order made before the limitation period expires, therefore providing as much time as is required to a person to ensure they can receive a fair hearing and removing the references to making an order after one month after the person is given an opportunity to be heard.

Also, as I touched on earlier, it aligns with the provisions with amendments to FRPA limitation periods made in 2023.

Ward Stamer: Can the minister remind me what those FRPA 2023 limitations were? I'm just trying to understand. He had a good reason why this portion was going to be removed, but I think it's important that they had that one-month notification period in there. If we're going to be expanding the opportunities of the order to go to 4½ years, should that portion expand as well, or is it just a stop date?

Can the minister clarify to me exactly what occurred in 2023 and those limitation periods?

Hon. Ravi Parmar: So two parts.

Firstly, the question around the FRPA changes in 2023. Those were to align with other natural resource statutes.

[7:05 p.m.]

That's why the decision was made pertaining to amendments to FRPA in 2023.

To the first part of the member's question around the one month, the reason why we remove it is it becomes redundant. It's covered within the new 24.1.

Ward Stamer: Okay. Then when we looked under here, too, even on the notification side of things, part of it's going to be dropped. I think it says: "Including the address to which a request for a review or appeal may be delivered." Is that being changed as well, or is that still part of the act?

[7:10 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to the member opposite for the question.

The reference to providing an address wasn't seen as required anymore. We already had her address, so it was just no longer needed. It's more around the process of ensuring that we have the ability to be able to contact the individual to provide them the information they need around an appeal.

Ward Stamer: Looking in our notes that were provided, it ends up giving us a bunch of reasons why we're doing this — No. 2, amendment to section 25. The section is updated to ensure that any order includes the reasons for the decisions and informs the individual of their rights to request a review under section 37 or to appeal under section 39.

When we were talking through this whole process so far about the orders and the reason why in clause 1 it was necessary to extend it another 18 months in…. Extenuating circumstances is what the minister has mentioned.

I'm proposing an amendment to the bill. Where do I do that, on section 2, Mr. Speaker?

The Chair: Do you have your amendment?

Ward Stamer: Yes, I do. What is the process?

The Chair: Well, perhaps you can read your amendment.

Ward Stamer: Okay. Now, do I get an opportunity to explain?

The Chair: I will give you an opportunity to explain.

Ward Stamer: Thank you very much for that.

Basically, what the amendment is, is on section 2, to add the underlined text as shown:

[**Clause 2,** ***by adding the underlined text as show:***

(5) After giving a person who is alleged to have contravened a provision of this Act or the regulations an opportunity to be heard, or after 90 days has elapsed after the date on which the person was given the opportunity to be heard, the minister by order may determine whether the person has contravened the provision."]

Basically, the amendment is giving a safety check or safety valve when the minister gives the order. The minister has mentioned many times that….

The Chair: Member, we'll take a short recess, make sure that it's in order. If it's in order, then you can give your explanation as to your amendment.

Ward Stamer: Absolutely. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Great. The committee shall take a recess of five minutes and return at 7:18 p.m.

The committee recessed from 7:13 p.m. to 7:25 p.m.

[George Anderson in the chair.]

The Chair: I'll call the committee back to order.

Having reviewed the proposed amendment, the amendment is in order.

I will now recognize the member for Kamloops–North Thompson should he have any remarks.

On the amendment.

Ward Stamer: Again, to try to explain where the process of the amendment came from, if the ministry is going to extend the period of time for an order, whether it's exceptional circumstances or not, there is no identifiable timeline on how long that order can take.

Now, we've heard that there's that opportunity to be heard, and those were concerns that we had on our side on what exactly those opportunities are. We talked about notification and how that notification takes place. We talked about opportunities for third-party evidence, because we asked for clarification on what an official is, and the minister mentioned that official is a person that works in the ministry.

This is an opportunity to allow, pretty much, a safety check or safety valve on that order. We can make another amendment, going forward, on another clause in regards to length of complying, because we have questions on determining, when we get to that point, who is actually going to be doing work when it comes to reclamation, rehabilitation. If we start taking pieces out of this existing legislation, is that going to still be there, or is it going to be removed? So we have some questions on how these orders are going to actually be implemented.

Again, there isn't any specific timeline on when these orders will actually be determined by the minister. This

is an opportunity for 90 days for complying on that order and possibly an opportunity to work it backwards.

I'd like the opportunity for the minister to give us his take on having the opportunity for more time, if we're going to be trying to get this done right — that when the order is made, we have 90 days before that comes into effect.

[7:30 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Speaking on the amendment to clause 2 here, we won't be supporting the amendment. It's not necessary. The 90 days would be inclusive of someone's OTBH and would get us, I would argue, in a worse position than where we started. It might take 90 days to run the OTBH, so I'm not entirely sure of the purpose of the member's amendment. I don't think it's required, and I'm not entirely sure what problem they're trying to solve.

I would reiterate that there is an appeal process after a determination is made as well, and that suffices for any individual that would want to entertain that.

Rob Botterell: I understand the policy intent of the amendment and the sense that we need a 90-day elapsed time to allow the decision-maker to make a decision. But the opportunity-to-be-heard provision of the clause allows the minister or whomever is providing the opportunity to be heard on behalf of the minister….

The Chair: Member, may I just interject? I would request that any member who is in this room right now ensure that their devices are silenced.

You can continue. Go ahead.

Rob Botterell: So giving notice of the opportunity to be heard allows the minister or whomever is acting on behalf of the minister the flexibility to follow through the process in a reasonable manner, in reasonable time frames and does not set an arbitrary period of time.

Some of the matters are going to be complex. Some will be simple. So actually, it's important to maintain the flexibility that is encompassed in this amendment. For that reason, I will not be supporting the amendment.

[7:35 p.m.]

The Chair: The question is on the amendment to clause 2.

Division has been called.

[7:40 p.m.]

Before putting the question, I remind all members that only the members of Section C or their duly appointed substitutes are authorized to vote.

The question is on the amendment to clause 2.

[7:45 p.m.]

I will also indicate that Minister Brar is not a voting member.

Amendment negatived on the following division:

YEAS — 5		
L. Neufeld	Paton	Stamer
Wilson		McCall
NAYS — 7		
Neill	Parmar	Higginson
Routledge	Sharma	Boyle
	Botterell	

The Chair: We should take a brief moment just so the staff can come back in. We'll take a five-minute recess.

The committee recessed from 7:46 p.m. to 7:50 p.m.

[George Anderson in the chair.]

The Chair: I'm calling the Committee of the Whole back to order.

I believe there was a question from the member for Kamloops–North Thompson.

Ward Stamer: Still on clause 2, this is the last question I have. The minister was talking a little bit about the order and the opportunity for the flexibility in the process of determining if there was a contravention in the regulations in the fire or the fire that was caused. That was one of the reasons why the minister didn't support my amendment. He believed there was enough time in the process, that it wasn't necessary for the 90 days after the order was taken.

I'd like a little bit of clarification. I'm just looking at the key amendments in the section. This section is updated to ensure that any order includes the reasons for the decision and informs the individual of their rights to request a review under section 37 or to appeal under section 39.

I'm wondering if the minister could give us an explanation of the difference between those two sections and how it refers back to the opportunity to appeal the order.

[7:55 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: To answer the member's question, section 37 is an internal review process. It's listed quite clearly in the legislation that "the person who made the order or another person employed in the ministry and designated in writing by the minister must review the order, but only if satisfied that there is evidence that was not available at the time of the original order." That's the internal.

Then section 39, as the member referred to, is the ability, once a decision is made, for one to appeal the decision to the Forest Appeals Commission.

Clause 2 approved.

On clause 3.

Macklin McCall: My question here for clause 3 probably could have come anywhere, really, and I think it's probably more appropriate here.

I want to ask a question regarding the "opportunity to be heard," as it is verbatim in the amendment here. Specifically, it's in clause 1, clause 2, clause 3, clause 4. I think even in clause 5 it's referred to as well.

My question really is…. With that opportunity to be heard, I'm just wanting to better understand exactly what that is referring to. I know there was…. It's referred to currently in the act. It's referred to prior to this amendment, actually, and it has been removed. Removed is a reference of opportunity to be heard.

What I'm wondering is…. Prior to the amendment that we were just discussing today, the Wildfire Act in its current form, I guess as of right now…. What is "opportunity to be heard" understood to be currently in the context of this existing Wildfire Act?

Should I clarify that? Did that make sense?

Interjection.

Macklin McCall: Okay, yeah. What I'm wondering is…. We have "opportunity to be heard" in the amendment that we're discussing, but it was also in the prior act. I'm just wondering. In the prior act, what is the context of that? What does that mean, basically — the opportunity to be heard? The difference between the two would be a great response.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: There is no difference.

Macklin McCall: Great. Thank you, Minister.

So there's no difference between the two.

What I'm wondering is…. Opportunity to be heard — I just want to better understand what that means specifically. It's pretty broad. The minister must give written notice…. Oh, wait. Sorry. I'm reading the wrong thing. Opportunity to be heard is what it was amended to. It was removed from these other clauses.

When we're referring to opportunity to be heard, does that mean just for someone to write a letter to the minister and vent that they're unhappy? Does that mean going before a judge? What does that mean, opportunity to be heard? If you're a person that's essentially under investigation under this act, what can a person do to be heard, with the proposed amendment?

[8:00 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Like I said in my previous answer, the opportunity to be heard doesn't change. What essentially happens is the evidence binder for the opportunity to be heard is provided to the individual. This includes the origin of the fire, the NRS investigation and the cost of fire suppression, as well as damages to Crown land.

Then the individual, who has now been provided the opportunity to be heard, has the ability to be able to request that of the decision-maker and to meet in person or by telephone.

Clause 3 approved.

On clause 4.

Macklin McCall: I want to go to subsections 28(4)(a) and (b). It's referring to a document purporting to have been issued by an official, certifying the date on which the facts referred to in subsection (2)(a) "first came to the knowledge of an official." My question, just for clarity on this…. I know this was somewhat touched on; I just want to expand on that. What official is being referred to here?

I have a follow-up question with that. Can I just leave the question there for the minister? I know it was briefly touched on; I just want clarity for the next question. What official is being referred to here in this section?

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Mr. Chair, we're looking for some clarification. We're just struggling to find out where the word "official" is referenced within clause 4.

Macklin McCall: I see the concern from the minister there. I think the section number and name may be inaccurate, but we did talk about it in the past.

Actually, hold on; we're on a different clause here.

[8:05 p.m.]

Okay, well, we'll go on to a different question. I can't find it in the current section we're speaking of, and I don't want to waste everyone's time here. I'll go on to the next question, so scratch that.

The other question pertaining to this clause…. This time I'll read it from there. This is, I believe, subsection 25(4), what I'm referring to. It says in this section: "(4)(a) is admissible in an appeal under section 39 from the order, without proof of the signature or official character of the individual appearing to have signed the document, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary is proof of the matter certified."

My question is pertaining to what I just read, specifically the part that says: "in the absence of evidence to the contrary." Is that a reverse onus issue there, in the sense that when I read this, I didn't think that the government that's investigating would be finding exculpatory evidence for the accused person, the person being investigated?

My concern was if the investigation is being conducted by, we'll say, the government or whoever they've hired to do the investigation, is it on the person that's being investigated to provide the absence of evidence to the contrary, or is it on them to then provide the evidence to dispute the issue?

The Chair: Members, I just ask that you please keep your voices down so we can hear the minister.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: I'm struggling with the member's question because I don't see it in clause (4) in section 27. But just to be clear, with an opportunity to be heard, evidence is provided, and then as part of that process, if they so choose, the individual can provide their evidence to the decision-maker and any rationale that they provide as part of that.

Ward Stamer: Looking at our key amendments on clause 4, which is the updates to sections 27 and 28, it talks about associated costs, an individual's liability — I believe under section 130 of the Forest Act — and their rights to review and appeal. Again, I think we asked earlier and the minister…. I'd like a little bit more clarification on that in regards to publishing of that information.

The second part of the question: is there anywhere in this section on these penalties where it talks about non-compliance? Is that part of this section, or is that in a different section? Non-compliance meaning industrial.

[8:10 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Parmar: No changes to the intent of section 27 other than to provide clarity.

As for the second part of the member's question around non-compliance, section 27 is the provision allowing levying of penalties or cost recovery after contravention is determined, after section 26.

Ward Stamer: I thank the minister for his answers on that.

When we talk about the information about the costs associated with those contraventions and the individual's liability under section 130 of the Forest Act, does it specify in that, when we talk about the liability side of things, how that's going to be paid?

Also, the opportunity for…. I believe it's in another section, in a description of remediation opportunities and…. With extending the length of our order period from three years to 4½ years, is that going to expand the opportunity during the order to be able to look at non-monetary portions of the order? Or is it going to be similar to the mechanisms that we have now? What opportunities will there be, with the person that is being charged with the order, to be able to lessen those liabilities with that order?

Does that make sense? All right.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Nothing changes.

Clause 4 approved.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: I move that the committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The Chair: The committee stands adjourned.

The committee rose at 8:15 p.m.

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